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MODEST ABLAZE

Don't be fooled by the unassuming air of Marianna Kennedy's latest home, a humble Huguenot dwelling and sometime slum near the more palatial place that she and husband, Charles Gledhill, formerly shared in Spitalfields. Yes, at first glance it's small and so sparsely furnished as to be almost puritan, but it also feels unexpectedly expansive, packs a fair few surprises inside and – not unlike the owner herself – has a zesty side to its character. Text: Daisy Garnett. Photography: Simon Watson

Modest is the word artist and designer Marianna Kennedy uses most when talking about the house on Elder Street, Spitalfields, that she and her husband, the bookbinder Charles Gledhill, moved into six years ago. 'Modest', she repeats about their shared vision. 'We wanted it to be modest and austere and modern,' she says of the Venetian extension designed by architect William Smalley. Likewise, she explains, they chose their second architect, Christopher Williams, to help with interiors, because 'he's good at doing modern work in a historic environment, and he likes things restrained and pure like we do'.

Two architects and a Venetian extension doesn't sound all that modest, it's true, but Kennedy is precise. Her work – mercury- and tinted-glass mirrors with carved-wood frames, resin lamps, painted emblems, and more – is founded on meticulous research into historic techniques and materials and rigorous execution. It is also singularly imaginative and full of wit. She uses language carefully and it often features in her pieces. So she is not wrong.

The house – its size, its scale – is modest, its decoration austere and pure. But it's also kind of wild. A trick of a house, a place that exudes stillness but is also transportive, taking you back in time while also propelling you firmly into the future.

Elder Street isn't a large house. One of the reasons the couple moved from their previous address on Fournier Street (a touchstone of a Spitalfields house; *Wol* Feb 2011) was to downsize. There is no grand reception room here and just one bedroom and bathroom. The kitchen is in the basement. The house is painted almost entirely in shades of white and grey and is furnished sparsely; ditto objects, treasures, artworks and books. They are all here, each one special, but not in profusion; not in excess. And yet, enter the house through either of its two entrances and it feels palatial, as generous and expansive as any space could, but also immersive and uplifting, like a church or chapel.

The top floor is given over to Gledhill's workshop. 'We always have a workshop in a house,' Kennedy explains, adding: 'We

Inspired by the Blue Bedchamber at Strawberry Hill, Marianna Kennedy painted this room with blue verditer pigment mixed with distemper. The 'Noir AD' carved and gilded mirror, 'Rustic' vase, resin candlesticks and hand-painted sign on the shelf below them in the niche are all by her



Above: in the basement kitchen, a trio of 18th-century feather-edge pearlware platters from Beedell Coram sit on a shelf above the fire opening. Opposite: a 17th-century lantern clock by Robert Crucefix, a Huguenot who worked in Spitalfields, perches on a shelf made by Studio Zanon in Venice. The Regency chair's squab cushion is covered in a horsehair fabric from John Boyd Textiles



The bookcase was designed by local furniture-maker Jim Howett and made by Stephen Hunter of Norwich. In front of it, bearing two neat piles of books, is one of Kennedy's bronze 'Turtle' tables, which has a porphyry top bought from Alessandra di Castro's antique shop in Rome. The side table came from Townhouse in nearby Fournier Street





CAIGO

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Opposite: the metal-and-glass shelves in the bathroom are another Jim Howett design, this one executed by Studio Zanon. The floorboards are original to the house. Above: the bed is inspired by one in John Wesley's House in London and is flanked by various Marianna Kennedy tropes – antique-book-cloth blinds, 'Calyx' lamps and trellis window screens

are in Spitalfields,' to make her point, that the entire area was founded to service the silk-weaving industry. Though unlike some of the larger houses in this part of east London, built for wealthy Huguenot silk merchants and master weavers, Elder Street, which dates to 1724, would have been inhabited by artisans and, by the mid-19th century, become a slum dwelling, the backyard a cluster of tiny workshops.

Ah, the backyard. It's hard to claim that the Venetian extension is the house's ace card when every inch of it is so considered (the dining room in particular, with its panels of blue-verditer pigment on walls made from layers of handmade paper and stretched linen, is nothing short of breathtaking). But still, this is no ordinary extension. It's ostensibly a glass cube: a showroom, where Kennedy can display work to clients now that her studio is half a mile away. A carved, burnished black-gesso and black-glass mirror hangs there. Another piece, one of her 'Rustic' vases, made from cast plaster with a blue Murano-glass

insert, sits atop a carved 'Falcon' table with an antique-marble top.

You enter the showroom through its own dedicated front door, which opens on to an arched passageway with a stone bench running along one wall, a lead sink in the far corner and the pale limewashed walls illuminated by one of Kennedy's carved candle sconces. It's like stepping off a Spitalfields street into a Venetian alley. Ascend two stone steps at the end of Elder Passage, however, and it's as if past, present and future have conflated. The transition from the alley of yesteryear (the couple dug down to find the original flag stones) to the cube of the here and now comes via a large glass-and-metalwork door, designed by Smalley and made in Venice by Carlo Scarpa's smiths, brothers Paolo and Francesco Zanon. One of Kennedy's painted emblems hangs on a Scarpa easel made by the brothers. She is self-effacing when it comes to discussing her work in the house, glossing over the fact that she mixed every shade of paint (using



Brouns & Co linseed-oil paint), and that many of the paintings, lamps and pieces of furniture are hers. She becomes animated, though, when talking about the artisans who contributed to the build and decoration, a project that took two and a half years. 'It's been a group effort,' she says. 'That's what is important,' she adds. 'Working with someone like Paolo, who is in his eighties but in the studio every day making things. That's who we have to celebrate.' Gledhill echoes this. 'There's a reason the extension doesn't look clinical,' he explains. 'It's because every bit has been handmade by artisans, with materiality being key. It's why the metalwork has a lyrical quality: it's Zanon's interpretation of what William [Smalley] wanted. That's how Francesco worked with Scarpa too. They had a symbiotic relationship. It's a very creative role, that of the artisan.'

Everywhere you look in the home, you see the hands of these craftspeople. The external wall surrounding Zanon and Smalley's door was built by conservator

Emma Simpson using 15th-century bricks salvaged from an archaeological site across the street. The internal walls were made with lath and plaster, then limewashed, softening the clean lines of the glass box and lending dimension and texture.

So yes, historical methods of execution have been important and employed with care. But what makes this project so unusual is that it's in service to a forward-thinking sensibility – the magic that happens when clever artisans work with visionary commissioners. Kennedy helps herself to the past, materials and methods both, but her ideas are never less than fresh and original. The result is a house that is uncompromising, authentic and beautiful; rooted in the past, pure and austere, even modest in its way. But also startlingly modern, propelling its residents and visitors into the future ☺ 'Supersonic Mediæval', an exhibition of works by Marianna Kennedy curated by Tilda Swinton, is at Christie's, 9 Ave Matignon, 75008 Paris (00 33 1 40 76 85 85; christies.com), 5–11 May

Above: glimpsed through the door of William Smalley's cube extension is a jasmine trained against a courtyard wall. Opposite: in the hall, a gelatin silver print by Lucinda Menzies-Douglas details the portico of Hawksmoor's Christ Church Spitalfields, which stands opposite the owners' previous home



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