



# Performance living, where

A vast space at the top of a Victorian commercial building is now a home, artist's studio, hairdressing salon and theatre. **Mary Rose Thompson** visits the mistress of ceremonies

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAX JORDAN

"I COMPLETELY fell in love with this place, but I only had £78 in the bank," says Abigail Lane, looking round the vast studio/home that she moved into three years ago. "I'd creep in at night through an unlocked door – there was no security at the time – and I'd scheme and scheme for ways to afford it. Before I knew it I'd cooked up a plan. Maybe I was due to change my life anyway, but it all hooked round this place."

A slight, energetic woman in her early thirties, Lane is one of the Brit art pack who graduated from Goldsmiths College in the late Eighties – Damien Hirst is a contemporary. Charles Saatchi has bought her work and her sculptures, installations and prints have appeared regularly in exhibitions around the world.

But however glittering her reputation, renting 2,000sq ft within a stone's throw of the City is a big financial commitment. "Living here," she says, "I'm on a knife edge all the time, and I've found that's where

I thrive. I've had to reinvent myself totally to have this. If anything, it has made me more creative." The studio occupies the top floor of a handsome five-storey Victorian commercial building between Liverpool Street and Old Street stations in London. It is owned by a property company which lets out the space to graphic designers, fashion designers, artists and craftsmen.

When Lane used to steal in and gaze up through the skylights at the night sky, the huge vaulted space was used only for access to the roof and to the lift machinery when it needed servicing. Now it is drenched in music from a rave-sized sound system and light blasts in through the uncurtained windows that run along both the front and back of the studio, and from skylights in the pitched roof.

At night, large metal photographic tripod lights and clip lamps, which Lane buys for a few dollars every time she goes to New York, give it a theatrical air. Various





# n all the world's a stage

living areas have been arranged around the walls. Opposite the entrance is the kitchen, a makeshift collection of essentials, and behind it a narrow slip of a shower room. In a corner to one side is a huge, noisy – and very effective – space heater, and in front of that are a table and chairs.

Under the front windows is a high-sided sofa, its worn cover partly concealed by a crocheted blanket. Opposite, along the back wall, is the office area with a long desk and computer. Next to that are a run of bookcases, filled with an assortment of reference books on subjects as diverse as oncology and film noir that Lane delves into all the time for her work.

There is evidence of her work everywhere: on a wrought-iron garden table (she found it abandoned in the street) a model of a dog, which she had stuffed for a show a few years ago, is being stripped down to its Perspex mould. In a corner are stacked boxes full of

props – mannequin limbs, a pair of elegant brown shoes – that may catch her imagination at some stage.

It is all very different from her previous home, a tiny housing association flat in south London in which she had lived with her boyfriend since student days. Each day they left to work in a studio shared with other artists. It was cheap, which meant she never had to take on part-time jobs to subsidise her work, but the routine was frustrating. "When I was at the studio I wanted to go home," she says. "When I was at home I wanted to be at the studio. And I wasted so much time trudging between the two."

Then she split up with the boyfriend and was forced to rethink her living arrangements. She decided to look in Shoreditch for somewhere to work and live, and heard about this studio through friends.

But, being used to a peppercorn rent, Lane needed courage to take on the financial responsibility. Her ▶



Main picture:  
Abigail Lane's  
vast studio/home.  
Left: inspirational  
objects