

NOVEMBER 2001 £3.60

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS



HIGH RENAISSANCE

The art salon is enjoying a revival in the hands of multimedia artist Abigail Lane, who lives and works with her partner in an east London eyrie. Celia Lyttelton overcomes her vertigo and pays a visit. Photography: Alex Ramsay



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THE INSPIRATOR

A MENTAL GUEST PRODUCTION

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and then from NOWHERE

HE RETURNED

The squirrels in a bell jar were a gift from Guy Healy, the hairdresser who worked with Abigail on a performance work called *The Salon* from 1995-99. The posters depict *The Inspirator*, part of Abigail's current show at Victoria Miro's gallery



ABIGAIL LANE is a great party-giver, a passionate cook and an acclaimed multimedia artist. Over the years, she and her partner, Paul Fryer, a musician and singer, have held legendary evenings and events: Complete Arthole auctions; a dinner followed by a show performed by Stromboli, the great fire-eater and sword-swallower; and post-Turner Prize parties for Sam Taylor-Wood and Gary Hume. After graduating from Goldsmiths, where her contemporaries were the now-famous generation of YBAs, Abigail first lived in a warehouse near Liverpool Street. It was very much a salon where they all gathered to rave and work, but eventually the rents rose and Abigail and Paul had to move on.

They decided they wanted to live by a canal and needed more space, so they went further afield. Paul started cycling along the towpaths until he chanced upon a vacant top floor of a warehouse in Stratford Marshes in a wasteland of canals, railway tracks and grimy depots.

On the day I visited, I walked along gritty deserted roads and, at last, down an alleyway through an arch. I sighted Abigail waving at me from the top of a very high and rusty fire escape. 'Come up,' she said. I climbed gingerly, feeling very shaky by the time I reached the tomato plants curling up the railings.

Abigail ushered me into a vast light-flooded expanse, which seemed to hover over the east London skyline. The first space is Abigail's studio, which changes all the time according to what she is working on, whether making billboard film posters which are hand-painted in Bombay (for that authentic Bollywood look), wax casting, printing, constructing fibreglass fountains with mirrored tiles or making dreamlike video loops on DVD. Abigail has a fascination with the uncanny and the morbid, and likes to construct 'scenes of crimes' as if she is playing at being a private detective. Whenever she exhibits, the spaces are transformed by her installations into elegant domestic interiors. This is true of her home, too. 'I want to keep the place uncluttered with just a few pieces that I like, such as my natural-history specimens,' she says. The centrepiece in her studio is her cherished baby grand piano, which was a combined present from 20 friends. Abigail's petite appearance and huge innocent eyes belie a strong personality and a keen sense of how things should look. 'The space allows us privacy. Paul and I were always at war with each other, falling over each other's mess, and it is my priority to make things look aesthetic and pleasing.'

A dress designer, Sue Foulston, is tucked away in a far corner pinning up dresses in big floral prints, while Abigail is wearing a dress in a material she and



This page, from top: Abigail's beloved baby grand. The chairs are from a 1995 installation, *Broken Heart*; cushion covers made from offcuts of fabric designed for Fendi menswear last season; the light-saturated living room. Opposite: the forest coat was made by Showroom Dummies, the collaborative trade name of Abigail and Brigitte Stepputis







The 'forest library' with its kitsch wallpaper of sylvan scenes, a present from friend and fellow artist Sarah Lucas. The framed picture on the right is an inkjet print made by Abigail in 1997, entitled *It Was on the Tip of her Tongue*



Paul designed for last season's Fendi menswear collection, patterned with butterflies; she sinks back on cushions covered in the same material. I remark on the similarity between their butterflies and Damien Hirst's, and it turns out that Sue's associate in the clothes label Mother of Pearl is Maia, Hirst's partner. This is typical of how Paul and Abigail work, exploring that space where fashion, music and art continually overlap. On any day (or night) Paul might be composing a soundtrack for a Fendi fashion show and Abigail might be editing her videos, which are ambiguous and suggestive of the supernatural.

Paul and Abigail moved in over a year ago after drawing up a lease with the landlord. They discovered that the warehouse had previously been used by Burberry, but instead of finding old raincoats and buttons, they had to get rid of mountains of rubbish. But out of the debris they managed to salvage the huge stainless-steel sinks and white bathroom tiles. They did the main bulk of the building work in just eight weeks and raised the cash for it from their Complete Arthole auction, held at their former residence with an auctioneer borrowed from Sotheby's for the occasion. Such is the success of their combined venture that their bank account is called Complete Arthole.

Paul's sound studio is swathed in black curtains, and what they call the 'forest library' is covered with wallpaper of kitsch sylvan scenes given to them by the artist Sarah Lucas. The library leads into a vast living room furnished with capacious Biedermeier sofas, a long dining table, old wooden church chairs and a utilitarian kitchen at the far side. There is a spare bedroom, complete with a mini bar, and toilet cubicles were ripped out to make a white tiled bathroom with a roll-top bath bought through *Loot*. 'For the first time in my life I have a dressing room,' Abigail enthuses as she shows me round their bedroom; she then elaborates on a fantastic mirrored chest of drawers: 'It's actually rather tacky, but it was a real coincidence because I first saw it in a show at the Riverside, with other mirrored pieces; then a friend of a friend stored some stuff with us. We had a flood so had to open up the crates to check for damage, and we found the chest and nobody has come forward to reclaim it.'

I was hoping to see Abigail's famous wallpaper made from inkblots of impressions of bottoms – she has wallpapered several galleries with buttock prints – but they are all rolled up in storage somewhere.

'So when is the next party?' 'I want to get Complete Arthole up and running again,' she says, 'and I am hoping to hire a big casino table for a gambling night, with bunny girls and croupiers; then I want to take the casino table to a beach and make a film.' Knowing Abigail and Paul, they will no doubt pull it off ■

Abigail Lane's show 'Tomorrows World, Yesterdays Fever (Mental Guests Incorporated)' runs at Victoria Miro, 16 Wharf Rd, London N1 (020 7336 8109) until 10 Nov



This page, clockwise from top left: the fire escape offers a spectacular view of the east London skyline; lead nose casts made by Paul and Abigail in 1997; kitchen bench and the *Lead by the Nose* poster made to accompany the casts. Opposite: view into the bedroom with the mirrored chest of drawers, now serendipitously in Abigail's possession

