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Abigail Lane surrounded by her own designs in the Charing X Gallery

# YB Abigail

Abigail Lane started out with Damien Hirst and Gary Hume. While they stuck to art, she branched out into design of just about anything. Now her Showroom Dummies label is a gothic indie hit. **Sophie Leris** talks to the skull mistress

Abigail Lane, 38, was one of the founder members of the YBAs. She studied at Goldsmiths in 1988 alongside Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, Mat Collishaw, Sarah Lucas and her former boyfriend, Michael Landy, and was part of the groundbreaking show *Freeze*.

Her work, which was very much in the spirit of the YBA movement, included wallpaper decorated with repeat patterns of her bottom, bodily fragments rendered in wax and hung from the ceiling, and a locked door from behind which came sounds of scratching and scraping. It was shown at top galleries such as the ICA and Victoria Miro and was acquired by international collectors like Charles Saatchi, Eugenio Lopez,

Mario Testino and The British Council, and museums including the V&A. *The Times* called her a 'superstar artist' and *The Independent on Sunday* talked about her 'glittering reputation'.

But despite her controversial and critically acclaimed oeuvre, Lane's fame and fortunes have never matched that of her contemporaries. This is not down to a lack of talent, as her friend Tracey Emin insists: 'Abigail could show the contents of her fridge and it would be fantastic. Everything she does has an artistic quality to it, whether she's cooking a meal or arranging a shelf. She can do anything from interior design to styling to making art; her problem, if anything, is that she's too good at too many things.' It is more to do with a lack of focus. Because, for Abigail, everything can be turned into a kind of art; from

the exotic post-Turner Prize parties that she gave for Jay Jopling's White Cube gallery, featuring magicians and sword-swallowers, to her latest venture, a design label called Showroom Dummies - launched in autumn 2003 - making furniture, clothes and wallpaper all featuring Lane's macabre designs.

Abigail, her dog Ethel and I are comfortably ensconced on her black satin sofa on the top floor of London's Charing X Gallery where her Showroom Dummies label has put on an exhibition called *Bone Idle* (this is the label's second show; its first, *Interior Motives*, was in King's Cross in 2003). The label comprises Lane, Brigitte Stepputtis, head of couture at Vivienne Westwood, and Bob Pain, founder of printing company Omnicolour, but Lane is the only

Photographs by **Johnnie Shand-Kidd**

full-time partner, and her eccentric tastes are very much at the core of the collection.

Abigail has long hoarded museum catalogues, and the images of craniums and other components of the human frame that are replicated on the Showroom Dummies cushions, clothes and wallpaper are all taken from this personal collection.

'I love the lack of sentimentality in these pictures; human bones are an exploration of the past, of who we are, but the punky fetishising of skulls and skeletons is great, too,' she says.

Lane's singular creative vision can be traced back to her unorthodox, yet artistically rich, upbringing. Her parents split up when she was four and she and her sister Esther left Cornwall for Bristol, where they lived with their mother and stepfather. 'My upbringing was unconventional,' she says. 'I went to a place called the Free School. It was set up by a millionaire friend of my mother's, one of whose children had special needs. He bought an old orphanage and started a school. There were no rules and no religion. I know this is where my nonconformist streak is from. There were no classes, just rooms full of children of different ages, and a café called the Bus Stop where the older kids smoked and you could watch them snogging,' she says. 'When I started grammar school, aged 11, I was amazed. I didn't understand authority, the rows of desks or the regimented learning and I'd never heard the Lord's Prayer.'

'We had absolutely no money,' she continues. 'My mother worked in the bookshop at the Arnolfini Gallery and we used to go there after school to help out, handing round crisps at private views. My stepfather also worked there in the evenings, so the gallery was pretty central to our lives. Our house was amazing, dripping in kitsch before anybody had ever heard of it. The living room had black carpet, blue walls, a Madonna (we were staunch atheists) and fake-fur throws.' She starts to laugh: 'Our bathroom was bonkers, covered in sticky-backed plastic with goldfish on and spider plants, but it was all steamed up and there was no heating. My grammar school friends would stay the night and never wash.'

The main thing her childhood instilled in Abigail, apart from a stubborn independence, was the knowledge that you don't need money to have style. 'The Free School was in a really grand building with marble floors, a sweeping staircase and gilt mirrors but was all rather dilapidated, which has been my



**Her childhood instilled in Abigail the knowledge that you don't need money to have style**



aesthetic ever since. I expect a certain sort of luxury in my surroundings, but it is to do with space and personal taste rather than brands or labels. Ha!' she catches herself, 'and here I am starting a label.'

Lane, who is single, lives and works in suitably faded grandeur in a 6,000sq ft warehouse conversion on an industrial estate in Hackney Wick, which she discovered in 1996. 'It was twice the size I needed but I thought, "Sod it, I'll rent bits out to friends."' Maia Norman, aka Mrs

Damien Hirst, has based her fashion label, Mother of Pearl, at one end of the cavernous space, while Terry, Lane's assistant, lives downstairs. When Lane needs to get away, she stays with her friend Sarah Lucas in Suffolk.

But for the moment Abigail is focused on London and Showroom Dummies' latest venture. Her short-sleeved wraparound dress in black satin, with a repeat pattern of small white skeletons, is very pretty indeed – a kind of punk couture. 'Mother of Pearl made it for me, using my material,' she says. 'This is the business version and they made a sexier one for *Bone Idle's* opening night.' The launch party was attended by hundreds of Lane's art-world contemporaries, with cakes by Sketch (she persuaded owner Mourad Mazouz to help over a cup of tea).

The cheapest item in the exhibition is a flickbook at £18 (juggling skeletons) and crockery starts at £30 for a cup and saucer. The deliciously soft skeleton blankets are a bit pricier, as is the furniture, which includes several lacquered Sixties coffee tables with pictures of skulls inserted under their glass tops.

'I couldn't help naming them,' she admits. 'Not to claim them as art, but because there's a story behind each image. One is called Mother

and Child because the skulls belonged to a dwarf called Mary and her baby. They look so touching together.'

Vintage leather jackets customised with diamanté studding, skull prints and more witty inscriptions hang next to one-off dresses by Vivienne Westwood, Yoko Brown and Mother of Pearl, vests and leather cuffs by Pam Hogg, men's suits by Tom Baker and ex-Fendi/Karl Lagerfeld designer Eric Wright, and a limited edition of 50 pairs of knickers by Agent Provocateur (£70 a pair).

'Because they're one-offs, the suits and dresses won't fit everyone, so the idea is Cinderella shopping – if it fits, it must

be meant for you,' says Lane. But given pride of place in this extravagant cornucopia are the plastic skulls Abigail asked her artist friends to customise: they were sold at a private auction last month but are still part of the show. Tracey Emin attached a rag-doll body to hers and called it *Baby 2005*;

Damien Hirst made his skull into a 3-D spin painting and propped its jaw open with a large screw; Gary Hume added a mask to create a spooky Winnie the Pooh; Sarah Lucas cast hers in concrete; Peter Blake covered his with the endings to his favourite books.

With a typically surreal backhand, Lane stuck wax ears on to her skull and called it *The Last Laugh*. This is just one of the ingenious sources for funding Showroom Dummies activities that Lane has come up with; she has no backing and is constantly having to find money for her ventures.

'It would be great to pay people a decent wage, let alone myself. I can only rely on favours for so long,' she says with a trace of fatigue. 'It would be nice to find a backer and perhaps set up a permanent shop selling Showroom Dummies products, such as huge folding screens with horses and wallpaper with photographs of storms. But I would need total trust from a backer – someone who just lets me get on with it as I am not good at following rules. They'd have to be a pretty interesting person.' Basically, she would rather be poor than compromise: 'Me compromised is a horrid person.'

And this refusal to compromise is perhaps the reason why Abigail Lane's name is not up there with her friends Hirst, Emin and Lucas. All of them started off as rebels, but ended up represented by blue-chip galleries, while Abigail Lane continues to plough her own, rather wonky, furrow: making tables decorated with skulls and lizards. Her work is bought by avant-garde home-owners wanting a bit of contemporary art on chair covers or curtain fabric.

'I am just being me,' she insists. 'My collectors keep asking when I'm going to make art again and I don't know how to answer; I'm doing what I've always done – having ideas and making stuff.' *Bone Idle* is at Charing X Gallery, 121-125 Charing Cross Road, WC2 (020 7287 1779) until 16 December. More details at [www.showroomdummies.com](http://www.showroomdummies.com)

From top: Lane's Mother and Child skull coffee table, knickers Lane designed for Agent Provocateur, and (left) Abigail in a Mother of Pearl dress