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HOUSE AND HOME

The eerie interior universe of Abigail Lane

Alison Beard meets an artist for whom furnishing and décor is all about insects, lizards, stuffed beasts, skeletons and volcanoes

Halloween and home furnishings don't fit together naturally. Yet here I am, in a temporary retail and exhibition store, looking at black wallpaper decorated with skeletons, a chair upholstered in fabric of the same design, and 1960s end tables with close-up photographs of skulls under glass.

There is a black sofa with skeleton print cushions and blankets, and a glass case on the wall housing blown eggs, painted black, decorated with fake diamonds and skulls and perched on tiny pedestals.

Welcome to the weird world of Abigail Lane, a Young British Artist, and of Showroom Dummies, the interiors and fashion range she launched three years ago with Brigitte Stepputtis, head of couture at Vivienne Westwood, and Bob Pain, owner of Omnicolor, the printing company.

"I like Halloween as a festival. I like the aesthetics of it," Lane says. "So why not use the event to take one division of what we do—the skeletons—quite a lot further?"

"I'm not expecting everyone on the street to want it. It's a specialised market. But my premise for what I make is to design things that I would want in my own house."

She points to the skeleton wallpaper—"I have that"—and the skull-picture table she calls "Modern Man". "I'd be amazed if it doesn't sell but I'd be very happy to have it back," she says.

I'm strangely attracted to the tables, somewhat less sure about the wallpa-

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per and chair, and perplexed as to how it would all work in an actual home.

"I don't live in a completely regular house," Lane acknowledges. But we agree it might help if I visit her the following day to see what has become a "testing ground" for Showroom Dummies' furniture and accessories.

Lane spreads her work and living spaces across a barely converted industrial loft in as-yet-ungentrified Hackney Wick in east London. It's a few streets away from the rail station (where she meets me with her Staffordshire terrier, Ethel), above a workroom ("These guys do furniture stuff. They lacquered the tables for me") and up a wide, rusty staircase to the top floor.

"I used to be able to see to North Greenwich," she says, waving at the new flats blocking the view. "When I moved here it was tumbledown. Now it's becoming flashier but I really didn't think it would happen so soon."

She opens the door and we walk into a working studio: white walls covered in pictures, white tables littered with books and papers, two women at work on a skull print, a man at a computer.

One is covered in paper depicting a true-to-life tropical forest with thin tree trunks and bright green foliage. Opposite, in the same large scale, is a black-and-white photograph of smoke clouds coming from an erupting volcano, surrounding a simple, boxy fireplace framed in wood and lined at



Dark star: Lane has turned her attention to macabre wallpaper, fabrics and furniture, with the striking results on view at her expansive loft conversion

the back with skeleton tiles.

Lane turns to the tree paper. "This is an old 1970s print and I love the idea of getting this big slice of the world in your house. But I don't like the retro kitschy thing. So [when Showroom Dummies started making wallpaper] we decided on black-and-white images. It's more filmic, more glamorous."

Also rather dark. "It could be a bomb," Lane nods at the volcano clouds. "As a student I was making wallpaper out of bloody images from crime scenes."

But the point is not to shock. "It's getting you to think instead of just look."

In fact, her aesthetic does not revolve around death at all. It stems from a fascination with history museums and the things in them: stuffed animals, true-to-life dioramas, collections of artefacts, skulls and bones. (Magic and the circus are also "key" interests.)

"My drawers are full of things," Lane says. "I like curiosity."

The line-up on her mantle is a case in point: a white porcelain head with black lines and words outlining different parts of the brain; a figurine of Atlas, painted black and with arms raised to hold up a world that isn't there; a lizard skeleton; a jar of pickled eggs; a small skull painted cornflower blue and dotted with clouds.

We move on past a chair that has a black paper mache cat clinging to its back, a stuffed black dog with an ear falling off (apparently Lane's living cats and dog had a fight over him), and a wooden speaker adorned with large white bones and a black cow sculpture.

Still, as we move into the main living area, the flat starts to look more normal. Yes, there is the skeleton wallpaper on one wall, and a black-and-white folding screen picturing two stuffed horses touching noses (entitled "Kiss-

ing Asses"). But there are also three regular couches, threadbare and in faded colours: cream, light blue and red. The first faces a coffee table and a TV. The latter is draped with a red-and-olive blanket decorated with stars and what Lane tells me are insects made for Mulberry. "They refer to it as the monkey blanket, but it's not," she says. "It's a magic blanket."

The floor of the flat is wooden, as are the long tables in the kitchen and dining areas. Sun splashes in through a wall of windows, onto a big cow hide rug, providing places for Ethel and Lane's cats to bask.

The high ceiling is mottled but cream-coloured, with painted-over pipes criss-crossing it. Across the back wall are stainless steel appliances and shelves—industrial matte, not show-kitchen gleaming—stacked with glasses, white plates and bowls, utensils and cooking ingredients. Amid the

tiles behind the sink is one with a detailed drawing of a fly—Showroom Dummies' slightly strange logo.

"When I moved in, this place was decrepit," Lane says. "We spent £50,000 sorting it out. But I don't really have any money, so I don't really buy things."

"I make the most of everything that comes my way. My sister gave me that sofa. I found those chairs on the street. The fridge arrived two weeks ago because a friend of mine was moving flats and he bought a new one."

The same friend gave her a glass case containing two stuffed squirrels reared up into lifelike positions around twigs and leaves. "He thought I would want the case but I've kept the whole thing," she says.

Lane's bathroom, which used to be full of animals, is mostly white, with a freestanding bathtub and, next to the sink, another case, this one full of old

bottles containing perfumes, lotions and elixirs.

Her bedroom is also a bit feminine, in spite of the "Electric Storm" wallpaper throwing lightning strikes around the back of her bed. There is an art deco mirror dresser and above it a sharp print of a blue sky and clouds, with that black fly in the corner.

This pattern was designed as a lining for Fendi's men's coats but when the company chose another Lane couldn't throw the idea away. Now it's her company's signature print and clients are commissioning it as a fabric to upholster chair seats.

The guest room is occupied when I visit but Lane lets me peek in. I notice white curtains embroidered with black flies. A new Showroom Dummies product? "Ikea," she says. "I was like 'Oh my god, I can't believe it.' If Ikea's doing it, there's no hope for me."

That's not to say she is interested in, or even capable of, becoming a home furnishings powerhouse. Showroom Dummies is more about blurring the lines between the artistic and the functional.

"Lots of artists do one-off things and when I moved into my house in Shoreditch I realised I liked house stuff," she says. "Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between my work and [the business], and I used to say 'if it's useful, it's Showroom Dummies.' But I think the boundaries are merging. My general feeling is not to limit myself."

The blown eggs at the Charing X Gallery exhibition space, for example, are what she and Stepputtis call "objects of obscure beauty."

"It all started with a turtle skull I found on a beach in Cuba," Lane explains. "It looks like a baby dragon skull and we were going to cast it in silver. But then we thought, what is it? So Brigitte came up with [the term]. We thought later it could be a paper-weight, but that was after the fact."

'Maybe someone will say, "I have a house in the country and, based on the things you've done here, I'd like you to come and think about it"'

Lane thinks her Halloween show (which also incorporates a film of a skeleton juggling, one-off leather jackets, themed Agent Provocateur knickers and skulls decorated by some of her friends, including Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst and Gary Hume) "will be a test of whether we can have our own shop."

"You can't have these things among the rest of the furniture at Habitat," she says. "So I'm hoping people will come to the exhibition and get involved and maybe buy a single roll of wallpaper, which they've never been able to do before, or ask about commission work."

"Maybe someone will say 'I have a castle in the country and, based on what you've done here, I'd like you to come and think about it.'"

Eventually, she confides, she wants her own country house: "Higgledy-piggledy buildings that are a place to live, a place to work, a place for people to come and stay and a museum. I want tunnels, a tree house, a burnt-out room with natty books in it."

And of all the items collected in her flat now, which would she most want to bring with her? Suddenly the artist, who wears all black and decorates with skeletons, insects and dead animals, goes warm and cuddly. No question, she says. Her dog, Ethel.

Abigail Lane and Showroom Dummies present *Bone Idle, The Shop* from October 31 to December 3 at London's Charing X Gallery, tel: +44 (0)20 7287 1778, www.showroomdummies.com