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DOMESTIC TAKEOVERS

Displaying pieces in her home laid the foundations for Nathalie Assi's eclectic design hub. By *Aimee Farrell*

get to see them and share them too," she tells me as I try to figure out where the gallery ends and the home begins.

The idea for SEEDS took root when Assi, who formerly worked in finance, set about renovating the property before moving in five years ago. She deliberately stripped back the interior architecture to its simplest form in order to create a more harmonious backdrop for the work. "The space is also designed to be easily reorganised," she explains, deftly sliding shut a series of pocket doors that separate the sitting room from the hallway and adjacent glass-walled office to illustrate her point.

The concept was cemented when it came to deciding on decoration. "I didn't want to just fill it with commercial pieces," she explains. "I realised that there's so much that can be done with experimental designers, who are very happy to create unique, one-off pieces. For me, these handmade objects carry so much more meaning than machine-made objects. Before I knew it, I was commissioning."

What began with the odd vase or piece of glassware rapidly segued into large-scale stone sculpture, lighting and furniture. As Assi's relationships with the community of artists and makers evolved, SEEDS grew into an incubator for experimental design to be exhibited, commissioned and collected.

Assi, who was born in Beirut and lived in Paris and New York before settling in London almost 20 years ago, views herself as a conduit between the wealth of global creativity in the city's design scene and those with the means - but perhaps not the know-how - to collect it. "So much can happen when you bring the right people together," she says. "Every piece is made by somebody that I know personally. I can spend time explaining the concept, the material and the experimentation behind each work. It creates this close connection between the audience and the maker that otherwise just doesn't really exist." ▶

Nathalie Assi at her family home in London, which is also a showcase for the experimental pieces she commissions

It's all very calm," says Nathalie Assi of the pristine five-storey townhouse where she lives in a secluded corner of Kensington. On the sitting-room wall hangs a creamy tapestry by Soojin Kang, the mantelpiece is lined with 3D-printed earthenware ceramics by Olivier Van Herpt and, nearby, giant daffodil lights by Pietro Russo, reminiscent of floral disco balls, glint in the afternoon sunlight. The dazzling quality and sheer quantity of the design on view is remarkable, though the room doesn't feel stuffy or museum-like.

It's also immediately clear that this is no ordinary family home. Since 2016 it has doubled as a showroom for SEEDS, the design gallery established by Assi. "I live with the objects, and my husband, children and friends



Left: Aldo Bakker jug and cups on display in Nathalie Assi's home. Below: a mask by Bertjan Pot for the 'Masters of Disguise' exhibition; close-up of Bakker's work



'The collection worked so well with the interiors it was difficult to differentiate [the residents'] own belongings from the new pieces'

Fabienne Mauny, Diptyque CEO

◀ Collectors often come from close to home. It's not unusual for neighbours who are upgrading their own properties to pop in to see what design they should buy - they'll put Assi in touch with their decorators to commission anything from a lamp to a dining table. "I think that the soul of the pieces comes through stronger in a home than in a gallery setting," she says. "When things are displayed in a dry, white, boxy environment, people can find a lot of design too experimental for their tastes. Seeing objects on a domestic scale enables them to envisage them in their own homes as part of their own collections - the possibilities can come alive."

Not that the days of the retail design gallery are dead. "You ideally need both platforms," says Assi, who still sees fairs and larger-scale pop-up shows as an essential route to widening audience reach. "A home can never be a completely public space - everything has to be carefully controlled and managed."

During London Design Festival this month, SEEDS gallery will temporarily inhabit the festival's Brompton Design District when it hosts the exhibition *Masters of Disguise*. Twenty artists and designers - including Martino Gamper, Jochen Holz, Bethan Wood and Nathalie Du Pasquier - will create masks and contribute a decorative object or piece

of furniture to instil the show with a more domestic feel. There'll be Sabine Marcelis chandeliers, Soft Baroque seating and James Shaw tables - just don't expect any chintzy wallpapers. "I don't like a space to feel too decorated," says Assi. "I'm more interested in the objects than decor."

SEEDS' domestic approach is being applied throughout the world of luxury design and interiors. During the Milan Furniture Fair this year, the French fragrance and candle brand Diptyque hosted its "Diptyque Bazaar" inside the neighbouring apartments of the jeweller-turned-furniture-maker Osanna Visconti and the fabric and wallpaper designer Idarica Gazzoni, using the eclectic interiors to debut its forthcoming line of home decor.

"The collection worked so well with the interiors it was difficult to differentiate their own belongings from the new pieces," says Diptyque's CEO Fabienne Mauny. And that's precisely the point: in a nod to the brand's original roots as a fabric purveyor, the bohemian backdrops imbued the presentation with an authenticity that couldn't readily be replicated elsewhere (Diptyque is currently ▶



From left: pendant by Attua Aparicio; experimental material by M-L-XL; Nathalie Assi and James Shaw plan for the 'Masters of Disguise' project



◀ on the lookout for a space to host its London pop-up next year).

For Luis De Oliveira, co-founder of the Portuguese furniture firm De La Espada, which specialises in elegantly crafted solid wood, such domestic takeovers are the answer to a challenging market where it's increasingly difficult to capture consumer attention. In 2018, De La Espada moved into the former Stockholm apartment of the one-time Abba manager Stig Anderson, staging a performance piece; this summer, a space in Lisbon became the site for cello performances and art happenings among its newest designs.

"There is something quite special about the idea of moving in with someone. It brings an intimacy and an honesty and the chance to communicate more directly with our customer." In the run-up to LDF, De Oliveira and his wife and co-founder Fatima De La Espada decided to take things one stage further, opening their own west London home for a series of private tours and talks from curators, designers and academics. It is, he says, the chance to see how their creations can be lived with in a much more personal way. De Oliveira quips that the next step is sleepovers.

"The more digital the business gets, the more personal the presentation

becomes," observes Isabelle Dubern, the former head of homeware at Christian Dior. In 2015, Dubern set up the digital-first platform The Invisible Collection with Anna Zaoui to sell hard-to-find bespoke furniture and decor from a global roster of designers that includes Vincent Darré, Marc Ange and Pierre Yovanovitch. Last year, it opened an appointment-only showroom inside a private 19th-century apartment on a residential Belgravia street - and there are plans for a similarly cosy set-up in New York.

"The current generation of buyers is informed and knowledgeable, they want to feel the experience that goes with buying collectable design," says Dubern.

"People need to live an experience," agrees Marco Campardo, co-founder of the Venetian design studio M-L-XL and the curator behind the forthcoming SEEDS show. "After all, design is about things that are made to be used, touched and experienced."

The message for the design world is clear: when it comes to luring consumers from their brightly lit digital feeds, there's no place like home. **FT**

"Masters of Disguise", Sept 14-22; londonfestival.com/event/masters-disguise

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Marco Campardo, co-founder, M-L-XL