

A lush garden scene with a white chair, a mosaic path, and dense foliage. The background is filled with green trees and a stone wall. The foreground features a white wooden chair on a mosaic path, surrounded by various plants and flowers.

Strange wilderness

Hidden away down an almost-secret alleyway surrounded by foxes and birdsong, artist Emily Wolfe's London home feels delicately removed from the city around it.

TEXT / *Sam Eichblatt*

PHOTOGRAPHY / *Emily Andrews*

Left The back garden is a tumble of foliage in the form of ivy, climbing roses, wisteria and hydrangeas purchased at the nearby Columbia Rd Flower Market.

Below Emily in the main bedroom. The illustration of laburnum and iris flowers fastened above the repainted Ikea dresser is a Spitalfields Markets find.



Below left Emily's father Richard built the desk in the study. Overseeing the proceedings is a gathering of figurines collected from charity shops in Northern Ireland.

Below right The artist sits in the living room on an Ikea sofa with cushions she made using vintage fabric. A Bestlite floor lamp by Robert Dudley Best for Best & Lloyd completes the picture.



A London cabbie once told Emily Wolfe that he'd never been able to find her street. Despite having studied 'The Knowledge', the training course that teaches drivers of the city's famous black cabs how to navigate the 25,000 streets within a six-mile radius of Charing Cross, the tiny neighbourhood that lies through an archway off Mile End Rd in Stepney Green had remained a mystery to him.

The first time Emily visited, she'd meant to go to a vet nearby and walked down the alleyway by accident. "It was like *Alice in Wonderland*. There were little cottages, and hollyhocks growing over people's fences. All the neighbours were out talking to each other – it wasn't like being in central London." Emily – an artist who did her undergraduate studies at Auckland's Elam before moving to the Slade School of Fine Art in London for her Masters degree – and husband Ian McBride, a history professor at London's King's College, had been house-hunting for 18 months. A couple of weeks later, a friend called to say there was a property for sale in the hidden cul-de-sac. The house was almost untouched, save some late-addition 1960s stained glass windows, and had been in the same family for four generations.

"It's charming in an unusual way. It's hard to find places in London that haven't been really done up, and there's not a lot of variation in Victorian terraces," says Emily. "There was something about this place that had

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the feel of my childhood: that slightly hippy-ish 70s feel – gypsy caravan meets English cottage. It had a funny wood-burning stove. We didn't know we were looking for it until we found it."

The couple moved in five years ago with very little in the way of furniture, just before their daughter, Iris, was born. Now five, she shares her name with the quintessentially British, 1940s Woods Ware 'Iris' china that Emily bought shortly after Iris was born. Renovations were limited to painting the house and plastering a wall, and Emily's writer father Richard Wolfe (her mother is artist Pamela Wolfe) built the desk in the study, the shelves and cupboards downstairs,

Panes of stained glass dapple the front entrance with kaleidoscopic colours. Along the hallway, a narrow staircase leads to the study, bedrooms and roof terrace.





Left Though situated in the heart of London, the brick-clad home is tucked in a hidden cul-de-sac and seems a world away from the city's hustle and bustle.

Below 'Parlous Land' by Irish artist Elizabeth Magill reflects the view from the dining room window. A vintage glass light fitting is suspended over a table bought at auction and chairs from Old Spitalfields Antique Market.



Below Artist Gavin Hurley, a friend of Emily's since their days at Elam, created this artwork of her father. The hutch dresser was acquired at auction and resides alongside a timber chest from Portobello Market and a green stool purchased on eBay.



and did the paintings inside them. Columbia Rd, with its antique shops and weekend flower market, is also “dangerously close”, says Emily, which ensured the house and garden were quickly stocked with bargains.

The street itself lies in the middle of the oldest Ashkenazi Jewish cemetery in the UK – the headstones mostly date back to the 1700s. Visiting is by appointment only, so aside from the odd walking tour, the neighbourhood is, says Emily, “a strange wilderness” of foxes and birdsong, not overlooked by other buildings yet just off an urban arterial route.

Once you know all of this, it's almost impossible to avoid making a connection with Emily's paintings. There's the same muted palette, diffuse light and sense of stillness. The setting is always domestic and indoors, a diorama of a small, self-contained world in repose containing facsimiles of nature: old lace curtains with a bird pattern, peeling wallpaper printed with flowers or trees, chipped ceramic figurines.

“It's not a conscious thing, but I work a lot from photographs, which I often take in the house – and the front room has a very particular light,” she says. “I've always been interested in painting things that are somehow worn, decayed, redundant, or just things that are overlooked and seem to have a potential for subject. They're scenes of something that's about to happen, or has happened, but they're not part of a narrative.”

In contrast, her studio is intentionally “pretty ghastly”. It's in a building from the 1960s and contains nothing of aesthetic value except for her work – just paintings, books, a table and a chair. It has a window, but she'd rather it didn't: “I don't like distractions – I just want to focus on work. I keep it very separate from the way I live.”

The other obvious analogy is that Emily grew up close to nature in New Zealand, but has been developing her career over the past 15 years in London, where high-density living and built spaces are the constant backdrop to life. “How do I put this? I like being indoors, and the climate here is conducive to it,” she laughs. “I loved it from the moment I got here, and still think it's a magnificent city. Iris is five now and sometimes I think it's a shame that I can't take her to the beach, but I think this is an interesting place to grow up – it's endlessly interesting.”

And the cloud-draped days – or weeks – her fellow antipodeans complain about so bitterly? “It's an endless shade of grey, and it's so still – I remember walking around and loving that when I first got here,” she says. “It was like being in heaven. And then in summer London is magical, all dusty and sleepy. Maybe the stillness in my paintings is something to do with living somewhere where there's this constant city happening, and the chaos that goes on around it.” **H**

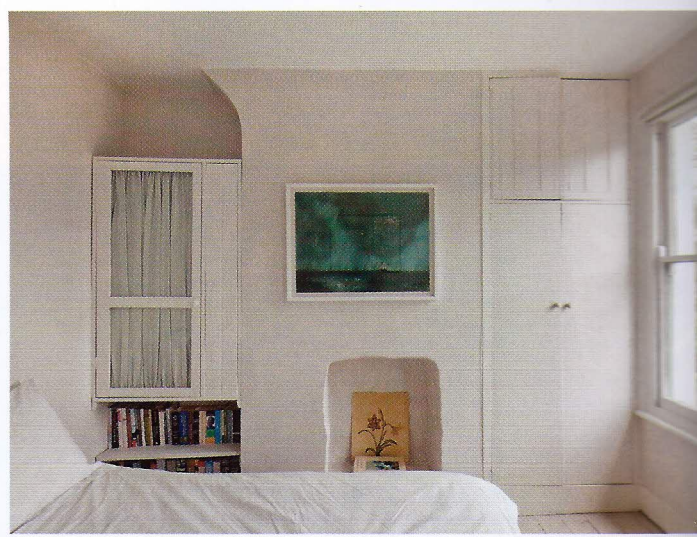
Top left A collage by Gavin Hurley decorates the landing, where there's a little gate Richard made to protect Iris from the perilously steep stairs. Says Emily, "It hasn't been used for years, but I've never got around to taking it down. I like the way it looks like an old picket gate."

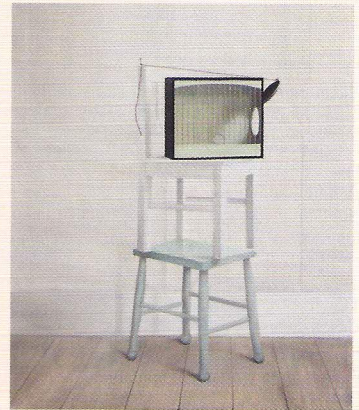
Top right In the main bedroom is an artwork by Emily's friend Sukhasiddhi and an antique botanical drawing from Spitalfields.

Centre A stained glass window over the old butler's sink in the kitchen.

Bottom left The bathroom is bathed in a watery green light courtesy of its 1960s window with Victorian frame.

Bottom right On the wall in Iris' bedroom is an illustration from *Mouse Opera*, a children's book authored by Emily's parents. This is the only room in the house that's carpeted; elsewhere upstairs the original pine floorboards have been painted, while downstairs, says Emily, "the floor is reclaimed wood, allegedly from one of the old newspaper offices on Fleet Street".





DESIGN NOTEBOOK

Q&A with Emily Wolfe

The New Zealand-born, London-based artist fills us in on her latest works.

What are you working on at the moment? I'm making paintings of shadows on walls – basically an empty room where nothing is happening. When I make the work here and see it in New

Zealand the colours look different; the colours seem more intense here but paler in New Zealand. My previous work is primarily paintings of objects – usually fairly worn or redundant objects like old bits of furniture and chairs, and figurines, just bits and pieces I pick up around and about.

How do you choose what goes in your home? It's a small house so obviously we have little in the way of furniture. A lot of it is found – Spitalfields Market was good for that, a couple of things off eBay, and a great auction house on Essex Rd called Criterion. It's good to be limited by size, because you can get literally anything you want here. I've always had an interest in ceramics and fabric, textiles. I grew up with that – my mother and my aunt both have wonderful collections of ceramics and old fabrics.

Above left
'The Escape', 2011,
oil on linen.

Top right
'Untitled (Swans)', 2011,
oil on linen.

Centre right
'Trap', 2011,
oil on linen.

Bottom right
'Evergreen', 2012,
oil on linen.

Images of artworks
courtesy of Melanie
Roger Gallery.