

IMPROVE

London's most colourful home: a makeover masterclass with Mad Atelier

Brits are going loco for the fun, vibrant style of the Mediterranean boutique and design practice. We pay a visit to the founders at home. By Hugh Graham



Chantal Martinelli and Julien Desormeaux

British homeowners are rethinking their relationship with Europe. Not the ramifications of Brexit on their renovation project — that's a whole other subject — but which part of the Continent influences their design style. And it isn't the usual muted Scandi aesthetic that is on the rise — the grey backlash has been gathering momentum for a while now. On the contrary, it's the colourful and playful designs of the Mediterranean that are having a moment.

Mad Atelier, a new boutique in buzzy Clapton, east London, is full of quirky and surreal furniture from Spain, Italy, France and Portugal, and was specifically opened to meet a rising demand for this niche. And the east London home of its owners, Italian native Chantal Martinelli and her husband, Frenchman Julien Desormeaux, resembles the set of a Pedro Almodovar film: it has a cherry-red kitchen (Farrow & Ball it ain't), paired with an acid-orange fridge and an Italian dining table topped with a bright-red mobile from Madrid. It's more Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! than House of Hackney; Martinelli confirms that the films of the flamboyant Spanish director were her muse.



The pair have decorated their east London flat in the vibrant, playful style they showcase in their boutique
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“When I was doing my master’s, my tutor looked at my sketches and said, ‘You like very strong colours, you should research Almodovar movies.’ He opened a completely new door to me. I watched them all, and would press pause on certain scenes, and look at the combination of colours, patterns and materials, and take what was relevant to me.”

Martinelli, 39, even looks like a character from an Almodovar film, with her sparkly pleated skirt, funky trainers and unusual golden earrings shaped like hands. And she speaks like one, too, in passionate and heavily accented (albeit Italian) tones. “The red wall came first. Then the orange fridge. I wanted two warm colours. I wanted to accentuate emotions and vibrations, and have colours representing spices and taste and life and conviviality. The red is like a pomegranate, a Mediterranean fruit. It’s a fruit of life.” It’s hard to imagine Kelly Hoppen talking like this.

This playful side is on show throughout the two-bedroom loft apartment, in a former leather factory in Hackney; the couple bought it in 2009, and have just finished doing it up. There’s a groovy blue Formica table, shaped liked a diamond, by a Barcelona craftsman; kitsch palm-tree wallpaper by Barcelona designers Batabasta in the children’s bedroom (they have two young kids); a Cassina chair in primary colours; an abstract red and yellow 1980s Memphis floor lamp by Ettore Sottsass, and a painting by Miro. “We have Dada in our mind and spirit,” Martinelli says.

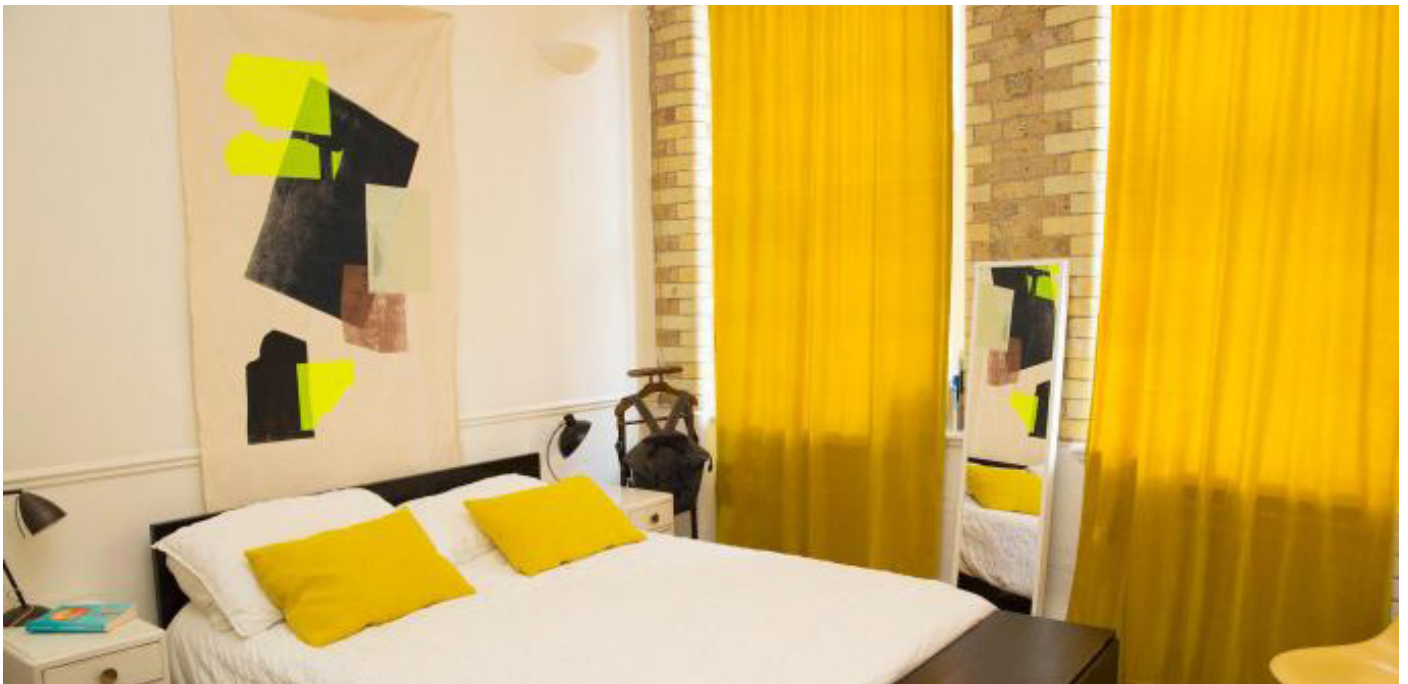
Then there’s that bright red mobile, bought in Madrid at the Reina Sofia museum shop. “We wanted to have something above the table that was more sculptural than a bare lamp,” says Desormeaux, 37. “The poetry was meant to nourish conversation around the table.”



The yellow sofa is Nomade by Didier Gomez for Ligne Roset, £2,754; chaplins.co.uk, covered in Steelcut Trio 0446 fabric; kvadrat.dk
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Desormeaux describes Mediterranean design as “bold colours and interesting shapes”. But it’s also a philosophy, Martinelli adds: “What we mean by Mediterranean design is a lightness and sense of relaxation and enjoyment, the opposite of the formality you get in a typical British sitting room. We want to introduce elements of this into a British context.”

And the Brits are lapping it up. Martinelli, an architect who runs her own studio from the Mad Atelier shop, got her start in London nine years ago working for Foster + Partners. Having opened her own practice in 2013, she began to notice clients were coming to her out of the blue after being struck by her distinctive work on the Riba website. “They didn’t know me, they asked for references, so I said, ‘Why me?’ They said they wanted to create a holiday feel. A sense of freedom. They made me notice things in myself that I hadn’t noticed.”



The master bedroom features 'turmeric-coloured' drapes
AKIRA SUEMORIA

She and Desormeaux, an infrastructure project financier, decided to open the Mad Atelier boutique in an abandoned pub in Clapton in 2017, and make Mediterranean design their USP. "In Britain, it is mostly Swedish or industrial. Nothing against Scandi design, we love it and are very proud of our neighbours," Martinelli says, "but there is no alternative. When I was furnishing houses for British clients who asked for Mediterranean design, I struggled to find it. There was a gap in the market."

Desormeaux, clad in a tongue-in-cheek Batabasta dress shirt adorned with skiers, chimes in: "I think the locals appreciate it's not yet another Scandi design shop. We're trying to encourage people to get slightly different things in their homes."

Bored with the same-old, same-old aesthetic in design magazines, the couple roam European cities to discover offbeat designers and makers. "Trade shows don't give us the same satisfaction. We like wandering around, digging in the backstreets and talking to people," Martinelli says. "We poke around Paris, Milan, Barcelona. We recently rediscovered Porto. In Barcelona we found that blue table in Antique Boutique, on a very small street. We came across Batabasta wallpaper by accident, in our hotel room. A few vintage pieces we found in a wine bar in Milan."



Given their expertise in all things European, I ask them to rate the design strengths of specific countries. “We like Portugal for tiles and ceramics, fabrics and textiles,” Martinelli says. “Spain has an innate sense of humour in design and fashion — we take that from there. Italy, particularly the north, has a long history of craftsmanship that is kept alive, from sofas to glass to wood. In France we have been particularly impressed with emerging designers: they keep up the traditions but reimagine them.”

For all the talk of European design, there is some British in their flat. The living room has a G Plan desk and the walls are painted Oval Room Blue by Farrow & Ball. “It’s a vintage blue, and is very British, from Victorian times,” Martinelli enthuses. “But also you could find this in Florence. This room is north-facing. I love the way the blue reflects the north light. It has a bit of grey but somehow a bit of warmth. On grey days, this room has a magical light-blue atmosphere that goes with the relaxing feel we want to achieve.”



A mobile bought in Madrid hangs over the Mauro Lipparini dining table

The master bedroom has a warmer ambience, with mustard-coloured velvet drapes. “The design magazines are calling it turmeric,” says Martinelli. “I like that turmeric has sun inside, it has heart. It’s energetic when you wake up.”

But they spend most of their time in that red open-plan kitchen, seated around the walnut dining table, made by Mauro Lipparini for Ligne Roset. “In Mediterranean culture, we spend many hours just sitting there after meals with wine and biscuits. Having the big table, and the ability to host as many people as possible, is very important.”

As EU citizens in Britain, and flag-bearers for European design, are they concerned about the heated rhetoric surrounding Brexit? “The cultural exchange between Europe and Britain is so strong we are not worried about a label called Brexit. We just hope it will be easy to carry on from an operational point of view. The bonds between this island and the Continent have built over centuries. This is a blip in history. It is also a relevant moment to remind people of how Mediterranean design can be striking in a British context. That’s what we show by operating Mad Atelier in an old pub.”

It's a bold move. And as a gloomy and uncertain winter descends on Britain, it's hard to resist the allure of warmth, colour and Mediterranean passion. Bring on the era of the red kitchen.

GET THE LOOK

- ◆ **Kitchen** Pepper Red matt emulsion, by Dulux, £28 for 2.5 litres; dulux.co.uk. Fridge, Smeg FAB3ORF, £1,294; johnlewis.com. Vintage pendant lamps, Juno by Jo Hammerborg for Fog & Morup, from £325 each; pamono.co.uk
- ◆ **Dining room** Table by Mauro Lipparini for Ligne Roset: similar is Odessa, £2,687; chaplins.co.uk. Large Globe Squirrel Cage filament bulb (over table), £22; urbancottageindustries.co.uk. Mobile: similar by Volta, from £129; mad-atelier.com. White dining chairs, Vitra Eames DSW, £319 each; johnlewis.com
- ◆ **Living room** Walls in Oval Room Blue, £46.50 for 2.5 litres; farrow-ball.com. G Plan Fresco floating desk, £699; pamono.co.uk. Yellow sofa, Nomade by Didier Gomez for Ligne Roset, £2,754; chaplins.co.uk, covered in Steelcut Trio 0446 fabric; kvadrat.dk
- ◆ **Bedroom** Turmeric-yellow velvet curtains, £180, canvas above bed by Heretic Spectral Nation, £1,800; both mad-atelier.com
- ◆ **Chantal's top tips** We don't like things overdesigned. Oddity and imperfection are sexy. Strong colours enhance emotion. Red says the kitchen is on fire, but it works next to relaxing blond bricks. Red dining-room walls nod to Roman interiors and my roots. Orange stands for joy, enthusiasm, creativity and success.