



THE PLAY HOUSE

An old antique shop turned into a family home then filled with painted feet, hidden toilet flushes and a headless Jesus: enter the unconventional world of **Adam Calkin**

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The only common factor is unconventionality,” wallpaper designer and decorative painter Adam Calkin tells me in his kitchen. It only takes a quick glance around the room to know that he’s hit the nail on the head. Colours compete, as do stripes and zigzags, and transform the space into a kaleidoscopic melange of ideas. You’re just as likely to see a family portrait by one of his four children as you are a giant archery target; it’s impossible to know quite where to focus as your eyes flit from one object to the next. Step inside this family home in a quiet Wiltshire village and you’re transported somewhere magical.

I continue my tour and patterns start to emerge. Whether made from metal or wood, a painting or section of wallpaper (including Adam’s own signature design for Lewis & Wood) I get a sense that every single piece is unique. I press Adam on whether he has any particular design heroes: “I really admire the anonymous craftsmen, especially from the 18th and 19th century, who made furniture or clocks or anything else,” he tells me. “That is my greatest fascination in life; I’m excited by everybody else’s craft. Whether it’s a saddle maker or a clock maker, I find their whole lifestyle and way of working absolutely fascinating. Making something from nothing.”

These handmade objects, acquired by Adam and his wife Charlotte, jump out in every room – from small items like the angel-shaped candle sconce (now with added doll’s head) to larger pieces, such as the metal heart and arrow, both found in the living room. Many of them have been redecorated or re-assembled by

Adam, a craftsman who loves to dirty his hands on a new project. “I’m a frustrated architect really. My rule is you have to use hand tools, so that limits what you can do but, otherwise, apart from money constraints, you can do anything.”

A SENSE OF PLAYFULNESS

Another recurring theme is the sense of fun throughout the house – there is something in each room to make you laugh. Nowhere is this more apparent than upstairs, where tiny painted footprints tread across the landing, echoing wet feet marks left by their daughter Maddie when she was little. Every bedroom is booming with character; in one a Punch and Judy booth turns out to be an elaborately disguised wardrobe. The comedic pièce de résistance is the lavatory, hidden under a large wooden chair and with a flushing mechanism that is even harder to locate (spoiler alert: it’s the yellow jug). It brings a whole new meaning to the term ‘toilet humour’.

I can’t help but wonder if it’s possible to actually plan this decor in all its madcap glory. Did Adam and Charlotte have a blueprint all along? But I soon

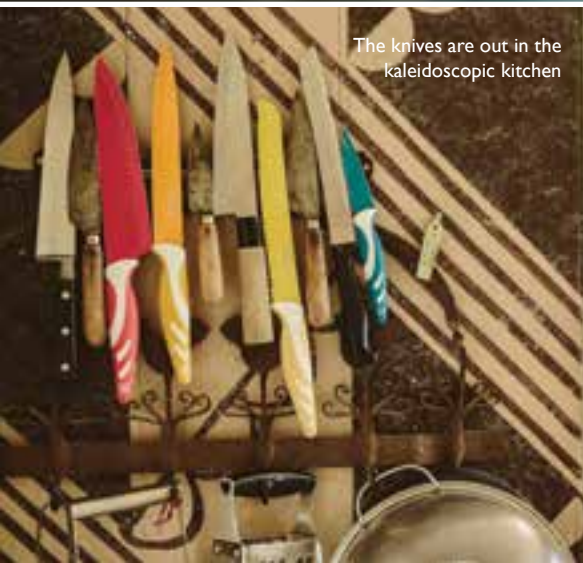
“TINY PAINTED FOOTPRINTS TREAD ACROSS THE LANDING, ECHOING WET FEET MARKS LEFT BY THEIR DAUGHTER MADDIE WHEN SHE WAS LITTLE”



“Who’s been walking through the house with painted feet!!”



The living room contains a cornucopia of iconography



The knives are out in the kaleidoscopic kitchen



Adam Calkin – a man with a unique vision

learn that it's the result of 30 years spent trawling for treasures in southern France with Charlotte: "We go every year for our holidays and that has been the most important factor. We always buy a few bits and pieces from markets or dealers we know down there. It went along in fits and starts whenever we had time and money, almost a room at a time."

LAYERS OF HISTORY

"The building was previously an antique shop, until the Calkins turned it into a home for their family, "I think it is more interesting; it's less formulaic in terms of the layout," Adam tells me. Passers-by often stop to peer through the old shop window, now dominated by a model spitfire: "It makes a fantastic storage space for all the things that I can't fit anywhere else. I can dump them there and they look great."

I ask Adam about the biggest challenge they've faced since moving in 20 years ago: "Nobody would give us a mortgage because it didn't have a bathroom. Fortunately the people we bought it from had trouble selling it, so they were reasonably accommodating. In the end we had to buy a bath and stick it in on the landing so the mortgage company would actually give us the money." It's this kind of inventive thinking that percolates throughout the house.

To say that Adam is passionate about his home would be an understatement, and when he tells me that he knows exactly where each object comes from, it's a challenge too good to refuse. It's also one he's more than up to. I point at the giant Yale key hanging

“THE HEAD WAS THERE SOMEWHERE BUT THEY COULDN'T FIND IT AND I PREFERRED IT WITHOUT ONE; IT BECOMES A LOT MORE AMBIGUOUS”

in the dining room: "I bought that in an antique market in Bath. I love signwriting and the symbolism that goes with it." We continue up the stairs and are greeted by a decapitated Jesus on the cross: "That came from a warehouse in Bermondsey about 30 years ago and it really appealed as a sculptural object. The head was there somewhere but they couldn't find it and I preferred it without one – it becomes a lot more ambiguous." If I had more time I'd ask him about every last piece of bounty that he's collected over the years. It sounds like each one has a story to tell.

As both a well-loved family home and a work of art, this really is a space to admire. It is a riotous blend of style and playfulness and the work of a genuine original. ●

Adam Calkin travels the world painting in beautiful houses, from murals and marbling to trompe l'oeil and fresco effects. In 2016, Adam and his daughter Clemency will be running courses on glass painting, wallpaper making and screen printing from their house; info@adamcalkin.com



Adam stumbled upon this headless Jesus 30 years ago and couldn't resist