



STAGE RIGHT

Colourful and eclectic, this penthouse on the Southbank was the perfect blank canvas for the owners' bespoke furnishings and unusual art collection. By **Kate Salter**

Photographs **Bruce Hemming**



STRONG ACCENTS

A bespoke David Seyfried sofa and a red Barcelona chair from Knoll in the main living room. The large drinks cabinet is decorated in a Freya Cumming design, the folding screen is Maison Christian Lacroix for Roche Bobois



POWER PLAY Above: A portrait of Thomas Cromwell hangs in one of the bedrooms Above right: The dining table made by Tom Faulkner and the chairs from Ben Whistler sit below a chandelier from Vintage Wonderland Chandeliers Below: Birch next to Rosalind Lyons' painting of Desdemona

For many people, thoughts of retirement might involve a move to a quaint country cottage, pottering in the garden and coffee mornings at the village hall. Not Kate Birch. Although not yet at retirement age, Birch and her husband Dominic decided to prepare themselves for the next stage of their lives by moving to an airy modern penthouse slap bang in the middle of the Southbank.

They bought the apartment three years ago. She describes it as “a retirement flat we found earlier than we need – we’re moving in very gradually”, so the terraced house in Balham where they have lived with their two children for 20 years is still the official family home. Birch, who grew up in Toronto and describes herself as a city girl, says the location is perfect. It is a short walk to the City for her husband, who works in reinsurance, and for Birch who publishes an online poetry

magazine, *Ink, Sweat and Tears*, it is within easy reach most of London’s theatres and galleries. “Everyone talks about moving ‘in’ to Chelsea or Fulham,” she says. “We wanted something a little different.”

The apartment sits on the top floor of a Victorian warehouse. There are three double bedrooms (so plenty of room when the children want to stay), but the main attraction is the huge open-plan living space which is flooded with light from the floor-to-ceiling windows. From her marble-topped island in the custom-built kitchen, Birch has an uninterrupted view of the Thames, at its best today with the sun glinting on the ripples of water created as a Clipper passenger boat passes by.

In a nod to its industrial past, there are exposed steel beams and columns, but rather than choose an obvious design scheme – minimalist industrial chic or pared back mid-century





JAZZ BIRDS Above: The bird sculptures made from reclaimed steel and sheet metal by artist Peter Sales; behind them is a wall mural from photowall.co.uk



SCARLET FEVER Above: The cloakroom's deep red walls and mirror from Vintage Wonderland Chandeliers Above right: A Shamsian Nizwa sideboard from Bethan Gray underneath Rosalind Lyons' painting of the fairies from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; the bookcase was made by Henderson & Redfearn

modern — Birch has filled the space with a riot of colour and texture. “I didn’t want it sleek and modern,” she says, “I wanted it to be incredibly comfortable.” To demonstrate she makes me sit in one of the oversized David Seyfried armchairs.

After so long living in a Victorian terrace, the amount of space is a novelty and has given Birch the room to accommodate a range of large, playful pieces of furniture and art. As well as the giant armchairs, there is a huge lacquered drinks cabinet featuring red hummingbirds, a glossy folding screen covered in turquoise and emerald palm trees and bookcases so tall they needed their own bespoke ladder. “I wanted the space to have an Alice in Wonderland feel,” Birch says.

The fairytale feel continues with Birch’s bird jazz band, a collection of large sculptures by the artist Peter Sales. There are hummingbirds strumming a

jazz bass, a bongo-playing penguin, and two 6ft flamingos on vocals. “Before we bought the flat,” she says, “there was a baby grand piano in this corner and after some thought we decided the birds would be perfect here.”

While her home in Balham is more “Farrow & Ball neutrals”,

walls feature a number of Lyons’ portraits of Shakespeare characters including Puck, Juliet and Desdemona. There is more literary-inspired art over the doors to the terrace with a series of works by Jean Mould-Hart whose pieces are inspired by the Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy.

family in Newcastle Upon Tyne.

Birch credits the success of the space to her interior designers, Francie Readman Interiors, who brought the space back to life from the rather tired state in which they found it. It was Readman who suggested Birch commission pieces from David Seyfried, Stuart Scott and Tom Faulkner and the bespoke kitchen from Henderson and Redfearn.

Birch’s home may be full of colour and life inside, but part of the appeal of the flat, she says, is being able to watch life going on outside: the school parties on their way to the Globe, tourists eating ice cream on the river bank, office workers catching the boat to work. On a sunny day, it shows London at its best. Does it lose some of its appeal in the colder months? “Not at all,” she says brightly. “I love this river in the winter.” Besides, one look at that bird jazz band would brighten up even the dullest day. **L**

Birch studied Shakespeare as part of her undergraduate degree and is a lifelong fan, the apartment is not far from the Globe

the walls in the flat are all white, so despite Birch’s eclectic taste, it doesn’t feel cluttered. The white walls are the ideal backdrop, too, for her collection of paintings by Rosalind Lyons. Birch studied Shakespeare as part of her undergraduate degree and is a lifelong fan, while the apartment is not far from the Globe. The

Birch’s love of colour has resulted in a blood-red cloakroom complete with a jewelled mirror (gigantic, naturally) and the whimsical Freya Cumming wallpapers in the bedrooms. Like Peter Sales, Birch discovered Cumming at the Biscuit Factory in Newcastle, the art, craft and design gallery, when visiting