

phyllis richardson
contemporary **natura**
photographs by **solvi dos santo**

ames & Hudson

A photograph of a rustic dining room. In the center is a dark wood dining table with a white tablecloth, surrounded by dark wood chairs with curved backs. On the table are several colorful glass vases in shades of purple, blue, yellow, and green. A large, multi-paned window in the background looks out onto a lush green landscape with trees. The room has a wooden ceiling and walls. The text 'ames & Hudson' is visible in the bottom left corner.



blott kerr-wilson, a shell artist who specializes in mosaics, began with the design of her own small bathroom and was soon commissioned to create her shell fantasies for numerous clients. She lives with her husband and two young sons near La Rochelle, France. The mill, built in 1870, and the house have been completely refurbished by the couple.



Right: a hall in the mill building with a ceiling rose created by Blott Kerr-Wilson visible against the wall. When they bought the mill it was 'a mess', recalls Kerr-Wilson, 'full of grain sacks, rats and rat droppings'. Now, much improved, the mill is used by the family during the summer, as it has no heating.

There is a danger in calling yourself a shell artist, as most people will immediately be beset with visions of conch ashtrays and sand-dollar wind chimes. But Blott Kerr-Wilson has been braving the aesthetic frontiers ever since she first created a total shell environment in her own bathroom in a council flat in Peckham, London, which won an interior design award. Since then, the commissions have come in so thick and fast that you would think she no longer worries about the state of her art, but she does.

'You have to be very careful working with shells,' she says referring to the kitsch factor that has haunted the material, most noticeably since the 1970s. She keeps to designs that are true to the character of the shells and avoids the figurative. Still, when she was studying for her art degree at Goldsmiths College in London, she was forced to keep her real artistic passion to herself, while she studied the more acceptable medium of sculpture.

'They were horrified', she remembers of the faculty when they learnt of her work with shells. 'Even though I'd already won this competition doing the shells, it was never discussed at college. What I did there was completely different.'

Like any hidden passion, Kerr-Wilson's desire to work with shells survived the scepticism, and she continued to work with the material that she adores. Her preferred shells are mussels – 'the best shell in the world because they work so well in the light and offer such strength of colour' – clams, cowries, scallops and the unfortunately named 'asses ears'. The vocabulary expanded as news of her work spread and people began sending her shells, either so she could create something for them, or simply because they thought the shells would interest her.

Kerr-Wilson's present occupation with this material came from a knack for gathering elements that interest her into a workable whole. 'As a child,' she

blott kerr-wilson





recalls, 'I always loved grottoes and follies, any secret place in the garden. And then I went to cookery college and my interest in shells, gardens, food all came together.'

When she says that the shells 'lead the way' in her designs, it is not just romantic fancy; the shells dictate not only colour, but direction, as bivalve shells, such as mussels, have a left and a right half. The resulting compositions give an illusion of movement, shells sweeping in one direction and then reversing, all achieved through careful placement of left and right halves. One of the most startling aspects of some of Kerr-Wilson's work, and one that helps to define her art, is the graphic quality she manages to achieve using, for example, a circle of purplish-blue mussel shells next to waves of miniature white abalone. From a distance, the effect is striking; only on nearing the piece does the viewer discover the medium, but even then, so carefully have the shells been arranged to effect changes in motion, that some doubt remains as to what you are actually seeing. 'It's the light,' she observes, 'it's all to do with how the light plays on the piece.'

In the home that she and her photographer husband have made with their two small children in a disused nineteenth-century mill near La Rochelle, France, light has been restored, with windows reinstated and

heavy equipment dating from the 1960s taken away. Here, Kerr-Wilson has ample room to experiment with colour and patterns, which are inspired by natural elements, such as leaves, but also by her collection of books on tapestry and knitwear. 'Fabric is important,' she explains, 'how it's woven into patterns; knitting fascinates me.' When she first started out, Blot Kerr-Wilson had no choice but to use a material that was, as she says, 'free' – shells and sometimes pebbles, which she collected on English beaches. Yet, even today, as an established artist with her work in high demand, she is not tempted to search for more exotic or elevated materials, and she never uses coral or rare shells. As well as an increased quantity of shells (which she now orders ready cleaned from a supplier) she also uses a greater variety. And though they all need to be in good condition, she does not feel the need to alter what she considers is an already finely crafted piece. 'I never varnish or paint them,' she says, 'I just leave them.'

This, however, belies the perfectionist who will not hesitate to tear down an unsatisfactory wall of mosaic and begin again. But her sense of perfection is aesthetic rather than regimental, and like any good cook, gardener or artist, she knows instinctively when to coax her materials along, and when just to stand back and admire them.

Blott Kerr-Wilson created one of her dynamic wall mosaics using mussel shells and miniature white abalone in the orangery. The structure had been used as a repair workshop for industrial machinery, such as tractors and JCBs, and required a lot of cleaning up, as well as the installation of new windows.







Left: the large, bare walls of the orangery beckon one of Kerr-Wilson's creations. The solid, circular wall design is composed entirely of purple mussel shells, which Kerr-Wilson favours, she says, because they have a left and a right half and 'by changing the direction of the shells, you get a different pattern and texture.' A few pieces of patio furniture make the room a pleasant spot to relax on a sunny afternoon, with space enough for the children to ride their tricycles.







A bedroom in the small millhouse features an intricate shell window surround. The family live in the millhouse during the winter and move into the more open spaces of the mill building (above left and right) in the summer. A spare bedroom in the mill building displays a shell bedspread and painted wall clock. Right: a cosy corner has been created in the mill building with a shell-decorated curtain, a colourfully dressed wrought-iron day bed and a brightly patterned rug.



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