

Specialist

BLOTT KERR-WILSON

CLAIRE BINGHAM visits the Norfolk-based shell artist, who is known for her intricately assembled artworks and embellished follies

Back in 1993, Blott Kerr-Wilson entered a competition in *The World of Interiors* for which readers were invited to design a dream room. To her amazement, she won. 'Overnight, I became rather like a Kardashian and was mobbed by the press,' she says with a wry smile. 'The power of publicity at that time was so strong – I received calls asking if I was the shell lady and if I could do this or that.'

The prize-winning room was the bathroom of Blott's south London council flat, which she transformed into a rococo heaven embellished with shells. 'After the great storm of 1987, I drove down to Margate to load up my three-wheeler with the flotsam that had swept up on the beach. The car leaked salt-water all the way home to Peckham,' she remembers. 'I had no money and realised I could gather all this material for free.'

Blott's passion for shellwork comes from a childhood spent visiting stately home gardens. The shell grotto at Goodwood House, plus the work of the late grotto designer Diana Reynell, caught her imagination. She studied art at Goldsmiths College from 1987 to 1990, but shells were not included: 'In those days, shellwork was considered craft – and craft was a sin.'

Times change, as do perceptions. Today, Blott is a successful artist who, after living for 20 years in France, is now back in the UK and able to enjoy swimming off the north Norfolk coast. Her studio there is stacked with the materials she uses to create wall pieces and grottoes for architects, interior designers and private clients. These include the likes of Martin Brudnizki and the Weiland family at Belcombe Court in Wiltshire. She is represented by Guided by Charlotte Bowater, which specialises in sourcing material-led artwork, as well as art consultants Linda Bird Ltd and Peter Millard & Partners. Blott recently flew to Hawaii to work on a private house with Paul Wiseman of interior design studio The Wiseman Group and she has pieces looking resplendent on permanent display at Chesneys showrooms in north London and New York.

Shellwork involves a lot of sorting, testing and rejecting of shells to create pieces, such as the elaborate murmuration resting on her easel when I visit. For this she has used only *Haliotis asinina*, the ass's-ear abalone, the mother-of-pearl interiors of which shimmer in the light. This single shell repetition is particularly compelling. 'I'm not interested in individual shells,' she explains. 'Shells are my material – it's what I can do with them that counts' □ To discover more of Blott's work, see *The New Naturalists: Inside the Homes of Creative Collectors* by Claire Bingham (Thames & Hudson, £25), which is reviewed on this month's 'Books' page: blottkerrwilson.com



ABOVE Blott sorts *Haliotis asinina* for her mesmerising murmuration piece on the easel. BELOW CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW LEFT The exquisite shell cottage at Adlington Hall, Cheshire, restored by Blott in 2013. Her shell-lined display case. The shell house at Belcombe Court, featured in the December 2020 issue of *House & Garden*. Blott's workspace

