



Light & SHADE

AN INTERIOR DESIGNER TURNS A DISCONNECTED EDWARDIAN HOME INTO AN EMOTIONAL SANCTUARY FOR HER GROWING FAMILY.

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STYLIST FIONA RICHARDSON

Owner Fiona Richardson's youngest son looks out to a Jack Merlo-designed garden through a bay window in the rear living room extension of her Melbourne home. A 1950s portrait of her grandfather-in-law and an Edwin Tanner artwork pop against walls painted in Dulux 'Juvenile', while a vintage chair is upholstered in Christopher Farr's 'Peonies' fabric from Ascraft and window-seat cushions are covered in Maharam cotton velvet from FY2K. Dulux 'Silkwort' modernises a table set with a Moller chair from Great Dane Furniture. In the foreground, 'Claude' sofas by UK designer Russell Pinch are upholstered in Linara in Shadow, from Romo. **Details, last pages.**





THIS IS A 'RENOVATION' THAT CONFOUNDS ALL IDEA OF

WHERE THE ORIGINAL STRUCTURE STARTS AND STOPS



I'm not sure exactly when 'style' was suffixed with 'ist' such that shopping puffed up into a profession, but the few deserving of the title 'stylist' champion individualism and charisma over novelty and commerce. For them it's a business of layering fantasy on fact such that unique persona (not a back catalogue of brands) can be legible in colour and form. They strike the emotional chord that evinces a desire that leads to an exchange of money and for this they have become integral to the design industry.

Let me introduce you to Fiona Richardson, a former public relations officer with a precocious talent for putting things together and a house that shouts it out. Richardson's decorating tips are neither dear nor derivative, but rather aid in extracting real personality from a place.

But first a little history on her inner Melbourne home, a formerly sad, single-level Edwardian replete with detached out-houses that she and her then fiancé bought from Barbara Blackman, the former wife of artist Charles Blackman, more than 11 years ago.

They considered it a long-term proposition — one in which to fashion design dreams and have a family — but knew that making a home out of a house carved into four different addresses would incur major alterations, additions and a short-term residency in each.

The plan was to stage the works once the services of a suitable designer had been secured (Stephen Akehurst Associates struck the empathetic chord), but first there was a wedding to plan, followed

ABOVE LEFT: the under-stair area is filled with a sideboard from Geoffrey Hatty Applied Arts and a deer head found at auction. **ABOVE:** Richardson hung a wire sculpture by Kate Hendry (2009) above an antique Chinese chest. **LEFT:** the rear living room features fireside chairs coloured in the scribbles of her sons.

by a honeymoon in Paris where the purchase of a piece of "his" French provenance would top the souvenir shopping list. "Can you believe my husband bought door hardware?" asks Richardson, eyeballs rolling at the recall of lugging long door bolts back from France. "He's a Virgo and he knows what he wants... but I have to say, they do add to the 'always been there' atmosphere of the house."

This 'borrowed' historicism has been expertly continued by Akehurst — in big skirting boards, bevel-edged joinery, gridded bay windows, half-timbering, pendant lighting, even the reused red bricks of the demolished student digs — across a large rear living extension and a new second storey. The result? This is a 'renovation' that confounds all idea of where the original structure starts and stops.

On this clean canvas, Richardson set to work, consulting her interior design sister, Sally Richardson, "on almost all" decisions. "We grew up in the country and, by virtue of our isolation and boredom, became obsessed with interiors," she says of a shared passion then put into play with the compulsive rearrangement of bedroom furniture. "But nobody ever encouraged me down a creative path. I guess beyond nursing and teaching there was nothing else for a country girl to do. It took Dad 20 years to get his head around the fact that I worked in public relations. He's a farmer and has never heard of anyone working as a stylist."

What that time in the vortex of no visual stimulation did afford was a working knowledge of how to transcend circumstance with colour trickery and the 'prop-store' play of old farmhouse object and art. >

ABOVE: a French farmhouse table is preferred to an island bench in the kitchen and is set with hand-me-down Thonet chairs and a new Le Corbusier version from Thonet. **RIGHT:** a schoolhouse bench from Ici et Là and Long Tom Tjapanangka's *Red Serpent* artwork furnishes an entry hall painted in Dulux 'Silkwort'.





The laundry is wallpapered in Fornasetti's 'Tema e Variazioni' print from Radford. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** picked up at a New York gallery on her 10th wedding anniversary, Peter Clark's *Good Boy* (2012) reminds Richardson of her predominantly male domain.





MEMORY-LOADED PROVENANCE CAN BE DECORATIVELY

POWERFUL WHEN COATED IN A SINGLE COLOUR OF PAINT



< “Paint is a great way to affect change without spending a fortune,” says Richardson, divulging that her own house-wide working of grey (Dulux ‘Silkwort’ up front, moodier ‘Juvenile’ at the rear) was not an argument easily won with her husband. “But doesn’t it transform the space? That old table, the kitchen splashback? We just glassed over it — less busy than tiles — and it’s such a beautiful backdrop for art.”

Extolling the virtues of living with a “legible history,” Richardson shares the secret of a 1950s portrait that presides over a living room colour-matched to its palette. “It is of my husband’s grandfather. He was an orphan who was mysterious about his past. When we watched [television series] *Mad Men*, we saw his parallel in [the character] Don Draper... look at the determination in those features. It wouldn’t fetch more than \$80 at auction, but its value is inestimable to us.”

Where any decorative effect is disconnected from her familial history, Richardson has seeded it into new personal narrative. Indeed, the seats that flank her living-room fireplace were gormless Victorian chairs until her three boys (aged eight, six and three) trained their creativity on the calico under-covers.

“As a child, [artist, John] Perceval was allowed to draw on the walls at home,” she says, explaining her up-ending of the parental missive to keep felt-tip pens away from furniture. “They love drawing on them and love getting their friends to.” It whiffs of whimsy but Richardson reminds that she and her husband have been very considered in all their design decision-making — he commissioned landscape designer Jack Merlo to build a Jenga-like, stacked-log cubbyhouse (shades of Sou Fujimoto) among the painterly textures of backyard shrub.

ABOVE LEFT: grey is the grounding colour that gives another portrait of Richardson’s grandfather-in-law, by artist Gil Jamieson, strong presence in the piano room. **ABOVE:** it also sets the tonal base for striped silk curtains in the study and, **LEFT,** creates a contemplative mood in the guestroom.

“You can’t be too precious about anything in a house full of boys,” she says, sliding her hand over a Victorian table made modern with 2-pac grey paint. “A scratch or scrawl is easy to fix. And until such time as I can put a Daniel Barbera table here, such old finds will do.”

Pointing to all the furniture and fittings that were found at the auction rooms at the end of the street — “I’m at Leonard Joel’s nearly every Wednesday” — Richardson proves that memory-loaded provenance can be decoratively powerful when coated in a single colour of paint or slip-covered in new cloth. But when she does buy something new, its selection is rooted in the recall of face and place.

“I spend so much time hanging over my Aga,” she explains of the eternally warm cast-iron English cooker that features in her very on-view kitchen bench. “It takes me back to a place of great happiness in my life — my grandparents’ farm and getting dressed as a child on cold winter mornings. Now I love seeing my own children sprawled in front of it.”

Likening the decorative removal of past lives to a lobotomy, Richardson, who works with business partner Belinda Hall under the name play, Richard Hall & Son, deliberately pursues the positive psychological state in all her style choices. Of course this presumes an emotional intelligence and lots of hard-earned insight into what makes for individual happiness.

“The answer will be different for everyone,” she says, affirming that such inquiry is akin to therapy. But it’s this assiduous mining of memory that makes for resonant content over cliché... and, dare I say, real style over thoughtless repetition. **VL**

ABOVE: the master suite overlooks a serene front garden that could not be further removed from the dawn-to-dusk activity of. **ABOVE RIGHT,** the home’s rear living room and, **RIGHT,** the boys’ practical but spacious all-white bathroom, also on the second storey. **Details, last pages.**

