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URBAN *flair*

Designer Louisa Rowland's family home is a blend of beauty, colour and practical detail

Words: LEO BEAR
Photography: GEORGIA KUHN



Louisa Rowland, creative director of boys' brand ABC123me and mother of two, is a delightful mix of contradictions. She lives in the Royal Borough but hangs out with skateboarders and young offenders. She went to several different senior schools yet has a masters in modern languages and speaks fluent French. She surrounds herself with beautiful objects yet calls herself a tomboy. She won't go anywhere you can't wear trainers, and when she entertains, it's a homemade Indian curry or chicken-to-go from Rotisserie Bute Street. A born-and-bred Londoner, she thrives in the city but spends every moment she can in a wildly isolated cabin by the sea near Bordeaux, France.

Creativity is Louisa's strong suit. She left the world of television as a casting director shortly after she had twins (Elodie and Hardy, now seven), trading in *Wife Swap* for hoodies and skateboards with the launch of ABC123me, a boys' fashion label now in its second season. Targeted at mothers on the go, the pieces are low fuss, high colour and smart enough to throw a jacket over for any occasion. "I couldn't find any unbranded, cool, 'non-itchy' clothes for boys. There was so much choice for Elodie but nothing for Hardy," explains Louisa.

Tailoring is in the blood. Her family have a shop on Savile Row and following a short course in fashion at Central St Martins, colourful vintage-inspired looks started flowing onto the page. She runs the business from the kitchen table of a four-



bedroom apartment in Earls Court, which she shares with her husband. Occupying a large mansion block built in 1904 from red brick and Portland stone, the property benefits from something every Londoner would kill for – access to a large communal garden. With her other half, Pray, away filming most weekends (he's a lighting camera man), apartment living suits Louisa down to the ground. "All my friends had kids and moved into houses but I never really wanted that. I like the security of living in a flat and after living in the area for ten years, I have a lot of friends here."

When we meet in her London home on a drizzly autumn morning, hip-hop blasts from the stereo (Eminem, Jay-Z, Jurassic 5, Nas and Kendrick



The embroidered teddy bear was a gift from Louisa's sister, Anda, when the twins were born – it was hand-embroidered by women artisans working in deprived areas of Africa; many of them are affected by HIV/AIDS and are part of 'The Forward Group'

Lamar are household favourites), and Louisa is reprimanding Mimi, her Siberian cat, for wet paw marks on her white resin floor.

This is the way Louisa rolls – part perfectionist, part rebel – and her décor is a direct reflection of that – part minimalist, part riot of colour. Every wall, surface and shelf presents something personal (a keepsake, a family photo, a kid's drawing), something to intrigue, and somehow, despite a collision of different styles and colours, it all hangs together in splendid balance.

When they found the place in 2011, they were living in a smaller apartment in the block next door. This one instantly caught Louisa's attention because it lent itself to an eat-in kitchen. They snapped it up and set about completely gutting it to create the perfect family home.

"I have a close group of good friends who have husbands in similar lines of work so it's a bit like a commune on weekends with kids (age five to eight) running around the house... In summer, when the doors are open to the garden, I often find kids (ones I know and plenty I don't) in my living room. The smaller ones are often looking for Mimi – they all know her and are completely obsessed with her."

To get the look she wanted, Louisa made mood boards, mulled over French design magazines and scoured Parisian flea markets to find the right combination of vintage and contemporary pieces.

Elodie's bedroom is painted in Dulux blossom with a mural hand-painted by Thomasina Smith, a British artist. The illustration is based on an old photo Louisa spotted of designer Liza Bruce's home

in Jaipur. Smith also hand-painted the ducks in Hardy's room – a modern take on the classic flying ducks from 1930s.

One of Louisa's favourite pieces is the Noah's Ark tapestry in the playroom (pictured over the page) which she bought from The Rug Company before her children were born. "They're a bit old for it now," she reflects, "but I'm not ready to part from it yet. I love the fact all the animals are two by two like the twins."

How would she describe the overall look? "Colour explosion' is probably the best description," she says. "At least that's what most French mothers say when they come here. I love colour. You can see that in my home and in my clothing line."

Barring a Philippe Starck table in the living room, the apartment is void of designer pieces. She doesn't follow trends, hates chintz and, above all, thinks a living space ought to be cosy. Everything is hand-chosen, much of it from Le Marche Paul Bert Serpette, an antiques market in Paris, or sourced online from Etsy. There's a strong element of English heritage combined with superfly Californian touches and a dash of eastern flair – a result of Prav's Indian background.

Exquisite details abound, for example the silk wallpaper in the master bedroom hand-painted by Fromental juxtaposed with striking photography by Richard Mosse, an Irish photographer-cum-documentary maker who uses 16mm infrared film to capture the mood of soldiers in the Congo. Elsewhere, vivid colours are offset by melancholy prints of derelict warehouses in Detroit by the talented Parisian duo Marchand and Meffre.



The enormous tiger in Hardy's room and the panda in Elodie's room are Melissa and Doug – gifts for their sixth birthdays. "Just when I thought they were coming out of the soft toy stage – I found it really touching that these were what they really, really wanted," says Louisa

Elodie's bedding is 'Soul Mate' by Roommate, a Scandinavian company, and the pink cover is by a French/Italian company called no. 74 – who make the softest throws ever



Ultimately, everything has been designed to fit with their lifestyle. From the wide parquet hallway ideal for scooting up and down, to the wipe-clean Ferm Living wallpaper in the playroom, it's all geared towards family. The children's birthday parties are held at home, and when it comes to entertaining grown-up friends, it's an equally relaxed affair. "People just spread out in the kitchen or spill out around a table in the garden. There's no standing round with a glass in your hand in this house. Nothing formal. I can't bear all that, it's just not us." After all, she is the queen of laid-back luxe. Just don't leave any marks on her kitchen floor...

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