

THE MENAGERIE

Cicadas in bell jars, dried frogs in picture frames, swans nesting among vintage books and a polar bear in the bathroom: **Liddie Holt** has created a wild kingdom in her Somerset home



Liddie Holt, international supermodel turned artist and furniture maker, has been living in her Georgian wild kingdom in Somerset with her hairdresser husband Harry for eight years. As we sip tea, surrounded by her gigantic wolfhounds and deerhounds in what she calls the music room, I can't help but notice she's strikingly gorgeous, with a tangled mass of grey curls, smiley eyes and chunky rings on her fingers. She wears an ivory horn on a leather chord around her neck; a glimmer of the zoological wonders I'm about to see.

I glance around her music room and notice a huge set of bellows used as a coffee table, a jumble of classical French and Victorian furniture backdropped by speckled mirrors and layers of peeling wallpaper, and the sort of colossal Vishnu statue you'd find in an Indian temple. I find out later it is indeed a colossal Vishnu statue from an Indian temple. Working as a model in the 80s and 90s took her all over the world, and it was on her travels she discovered a penchant for collecting beautiful objects.

"I like anything old and falling apart," she tells me, "It's only in the last couple of years I've agreed to have an electric kettle. I don't own a TV because I hate the way they look. My husband and I watch movies on a projector."

I ask her if choosing a Georgian home was a conscious decision:

"Yes, definitely. It took us five years of searching to find this place. I love Georgian architecture. I love the room sizes; the height of the ceilings; the amount of light

“ I GLANCE AROUND HER MUSIC ROOM AND NOTICE A HUGE SET OF BELLOWS USED AS A COFFEE TABLE ”







that pours in. But I didn't want to restrict myself by filling it with Georgian furniture and objects. For me, it's a visual thing – I either like it or I don't. It doesn't matter what period it's come from."

“ THE ORIGINAL OWNER STUFFED THE CREATURES FOR HIS BLIND DAUGHTER, SO SHE COULD FAMILIARISE HERSELF WITH SIZES AND TEXTURES ”

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

We embark on a tour of her house. First stop: the CD room, as she calls it. Yes, granted, there are a lot of CDs, but oh, but oh, but oh so much more. A menagerie of stuffed birds in glass and mahogany cases are arranged on the wall, and a magnificent swan nests on a pile of vintage books, surrounded by butterfly-filled bell jars. A tiny battered leather stool with horsehair spewing out of it looks as if it's about to spring to life on its fragile deer legs.

"Here's Mr Fox and Mrs Badger," Liddie says proudly, giving their heads a stroke. "The original owner stuffed them for his blind daughter, so she could familiarise herself with sizes and textures."

I ask her if she practises taxidermy herself: "No, I can't stand blood. I just collect it. None of it is new, it's all Victorian. Some people don't like it, of course. One woman came into my shop in London, took one look at the taxidermy and said "I feel sick, I've got to get out of here." I said, "It's not for everybody. There's the door.""

Liddie's home is indeed not for the faint hearted unaccustomed to seeing wall-to-wall feathers, scales and skins, even a polar bear rug on the bathroom floor, but those in awe of the electric blue shimmer of a kingfisher's feathers, the metallic hues of a cicada and the intricate beauty of a cod's skull, would find Liddie's world truly exhilarating.

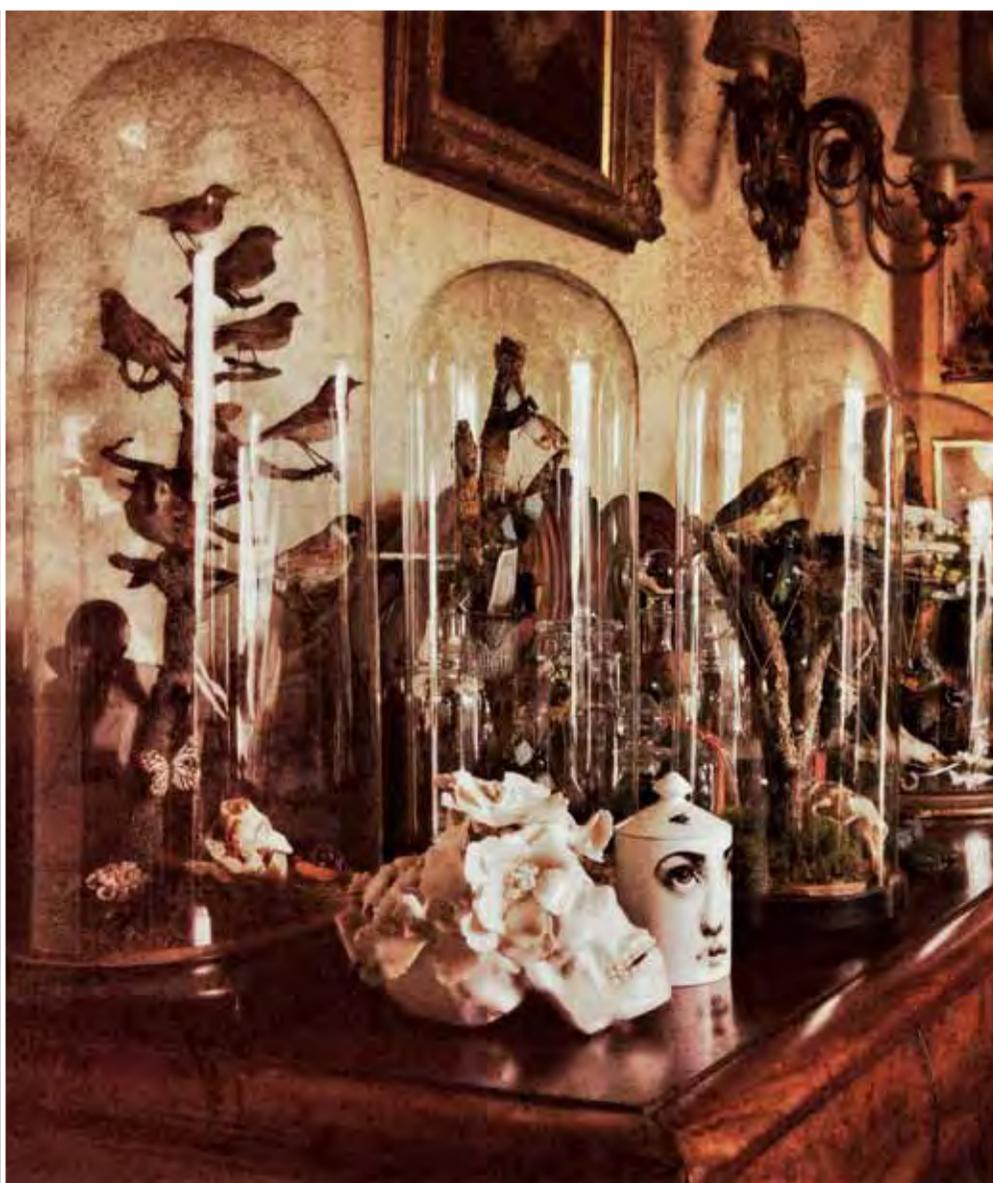
ART INSPIRED BY NATURE

But it's Liddie's work as an artist that I'm intrigued by. There's remnants of it everywhere; ink sketches pinned to the fridge, bird wings and vintage flowers arranged like a Philip Treacy fascinator on padded silk, mashed oil pastel pictures curling up in the sunlight and tribal ram's head pieces fixed on stakes with explosions of feathers round its neck. I pause to look at one of her bell jar sculptures: a bonsai tree, adorned with trinkets and surrounded by Victorian butterflies, encased in impossibly thin glass.

"That's one of my memorabilia domes," she tells me, "People have drawers full of absolute shite, which they won't let go of because it has sentimental value. I make them into domes. You can put anything in them: theatre tickets, foreign currency from a favourite holiday, your gran's old purse. Why keep it forgotten in a drawer when you can display it beautifully like this?"

I notice she's even made one for the top tier of her wedding cake. "I forgot to cut it because I was so drunk at my wedding, so I decided to preserve it in a dome. Luckily fruit cake preserves really well."

Worlds away from the delicate, whimsical intricacy of her bell jar sculptures, Liddie also makes bold, contemporary furniture, which she sells from her London shop. She shows me one of her benches in her workshop – a huge



slab of oak burr, balanced beautifully on chrome legs. "As much as I love old things, I do love contemporary furniture. It's a contrast, but it's a nice contrast, and I think they work together really well."

A good two hours was spent wondering from room to ever more sumptuous room, a couple of which I startled myself on more than one occasion when an animal I believed to be long dead either squawked and swung on its perch, or blinked and yawned at me. Maybe I was hallucinating. A play on Liddie's lawn with her alarmingly gigantic hounds jolted me back to reality.

On my journey home I pondered on what it was I loved the most about Liddie's home. Of course I loved that it was old and it was full of stories, yet despite the opulence and grandeur you'd associate with having deer heads on your wall, everything had a sense of faded elegance and wear and tear about it, from the peeling wallpaper and exposed plaster to Liddie's threadbare rocking horse. To truly appreciate Liddie's home is to avoid looking at it as a whole picture, but to draw your gaze to the little vignettes she's created; the playful juxtapositions of her stuffed creatures; the 3D still lifes that tell a story; the bell jars of cicadas and memories. ●

“ I STARTLED MYSELF ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION WHEN AN ANIMAL I BELIEVED TO BE LONG DEAD SQUAWKED AND SWUNG ON ITS PERCH OR BLINKED AT ME ”

