



room to breathe

A move from London to *St Leonards* in East Sussex was just what artist/designer DEBI ANGEL needed to refresh her work and her thinking. Now she lives among fellow creatives, surrounded by collections of carefully curated curiosities

WORDS *Jill Macnair* PHOTOGRAPHS *Jan Baldwin*

THIS PICTURE Debi mooches around Rock-a-Nore in Hastings, sketchbook in hand OPPOSITE Since moving to the coast, Debi has developed her painting and now exhibits her work



THIS PAGE, ABOVE LEFT The developer created a kitchen workspace using an old reception desk from Sky News. Debi's paintings are on the wall above ABOVE RIGHT The local shoreline provides a rich source of visual ideas OPPOSITE The bright painting studio is at the back of the living room on a mezzanine level – the roof above it opens up, enhancing the available light

Until 2009, London creative director Debi Angel had a caravan at Rye Harbour that she'd escape to on weekends to sketch, paint and 'get my artist soul back together'. During the six years that she owned it, she didn't fall out of love with London – she was a member of the Tate 'and all that stuff,' and saw every inch of the city's art scene – but, she realised, every time she hopped in her car to journey back home, 'I had a lump in my throat. So I looked at myself and thought, girl, just go for it.'

The 'going for it' meant moving to the Sussex coast full-time. Not something to be taken lightly if you've carved your career in the capital on leading magazine launch teams for *ELLE*, *ELLE Decoration* and *Red*, to name a few. Happily, these days Debi can still be found working on the latest logo, book or magazine redesign. Only now it is from her relaxed home-studio in St Leonards. The main difference is that she can also grab her

sketchbooks and paints, and be out capturing the landscapes of Winchelsea, Dungeness and the Sussex Downs just moments later. 'Now I'm painting the landscape rather than looking at it,' she says. And she's had exhibitions of her work to prove it.

THE PERFECT LOCATION

On the rare occasions when Debi's not immersed in work, she likes to mooch along the coast to the harbour at Hastings' Rock-a-Nore with a digital Panasonic around her neck, 'to see the fishermen coming in with their catch'.

She credits two friends with helping her find her new, much-adored locale. The first, artist Denise Lancaster, introduced her to the area. 'It felt like Portobello before it got famous, a bit run-down but with beautiful architecture by James Burton [and later, his son Decimus], who wanted to build a new



LEFT A mix of understated furniture includes a classic Barcelona daybed by Mies van der Rohe, which Debi found in Hastings, the white Marcel Breuer chair – ‘a copy from my neighbour’ – and an antique leather armchair. The birdhouse lamp is by Aardvark, the design duo who live nearby. Letter As (for Angel) can be found all over the apartment. The plaster-casts include John Keats’ death mask



THIS PAGE, ABOVE LEFT Debi in her trademark Panama hat ABOVE RIGHT The basement office where she focuses on her commercial work OPPOSITE The shelves in the living room are the focal point of the home. Belongings include a photograph of Cecil Beaton, an 18th-century convex mirror, black-spined sketchbooks, her own paintings and a vintage set square and ruler

London down here in the early 19th century,' Debi says. 'It grabbed me emotionally and I knew I'd meet like-minded people here.' The second, photographer Jan Baldwin, spotted Debi's soon-to-be-home when they were walking past it together. Rather fortuitously, it was on a street that is also home to other artists, architects and designers.

A FITTING RESTORATION

The ground floor and basement of Debi's apartment occupies a handsome Regency building behind the area's famous 1930s Art-Deco Marine Court building. 'Just 40 steps away from the seafront,' Debi says. When she viewed it, local developer Michael Temple had just converted the space from a former garage. It was, Debi says, 'all open-plan and just delicious,' with three bedrooms, two wetrooms, a bathroom and laundry room on the basement

level, plus a living and kitchen area on the ground floor, with a bright painting studio on a mezzanine above it.

ALL ABOUT *display*

It might have been the open-plan design, the brilliant natural light and simple white walls that sold the space to Debi, but what's 'delicious' about it now are her shelves of curated collections, most notably in the living room.

'I wanted two long shelves that I could put stuff on to window dress,' says Debi, who made a feature of them by painting behind one with a strip of soft green paint she mixed herself. 'I move things around. I've been born and bred in magazine design, so I see everything as "let's change that, let's have a different layout there",' she says. At the moment, the display tells the story of Debi's career and includes framed photographs from friends and



DEBI'S *perfect day* IN ST LEONARDS

'My favourite walk is from St Leonards to Bexhill. It has to be during a low tide so you can go all along the edge of the sea. I'd get to the **De La Warr Pavilion** (dlwp.com), look at the current exhibition and have a coffee in the gorgeous restaurant. This is a walk to share, so it's one I'd usually do with friends. I'd get the train back to Hastings and walk to the Old Town to have a late lunch at **The Dragon Bar**, then buy fresh fish for supper from **Rock-a-Nore**. Then it'd be back to St Leonards for a ramble along **Norman Road** (thenormanroad.co.uk), which stretches up to Mercatoria. It's full of antiques shops and **Lucy Bell's beautiful photography gallery** is there, too (lucy-bell.com). The whole road has a great atmosphere. Then it would be a **swift glass of wine at the Doom and Gloom** – (it's actually the Horse & Groom, horseandgroomstleonards.co.uk – all the pubs in Hastings have nicknames), then back down the hill home.'

THIS PAGE, ABOVE The old barber shop sign, found in the street, was a gift from Clive Crook, who was Debi's art director at *The Observer* when she worked there ABOVE RIGHT Debi sees her home as a creative space, so all available corners are used for her work. Here she displays two of her 'nudes', plus moth screenprints by local design company Zeroh OPPOSITE Buying freshly landed fish at Rock-a-Nore

colleagues Emily Andersen and Jan Baldwin, an etching by painter Tom Phillips, who Debi once worked for, and a French 18th-century mirror, which harks back to her days as art director of *ELLE Decoration*. 'It was inspired by a house we featured when the magazine launched,' Debi says. A vintage set-square and ruler remind her of when she worked in an architect's office, while many of the paintings are her own new work.

And then there are her collections. Debi has long had a thing about spoons – displayed here in jars – which she picks up from car-boot sales and junk shops. 'They have to have an emotional value,' she says. 'I know when I pick them up if they're going to go home with me or not.' Her love of typography is also all around, mostly as As (for Angel), and a group of plaster-cast faces serve as a time capsule of an interiors fashion shoot from the late Eighties – including, enviably, a Keats death mask gifted to her from

design guru Ilse Crawford. Furniture is understated, but hints at design-savvy. Classics – the Barcelona daybed and the Artemide Tolomeo lamps – play off the quirky, including a birdhouse lamp by local design duo Aardvark (who live a few doors up from Debi).

Pops of red punctuate the white décor – for example in the bathroom, via an Ikea cabinet and old barber's sign. 'It's not my favourite, but as a graphic colour I adore it,' Debi says.

It's tempting to wonder if the designer/artist, who's originally a Bournemouth lass, thought she'd end up back at the coast? 'Not consciously,' she says, 'but the sea is very important to me. I don't think I'd leave it now.'

Debi's work can be seen as part of *Hastings and St Leonards Visual Arts Festival, Coastal Currents* (coastalcurrents.org.uk), from 27 August until 30 September.

For more coastal homes, see coastmagazine.co.uk