





Cynthia Corbett champions emerging artists working in every medium from her home-cum-gallery in South West London. *Liz Hoggard* takes a look. Photography by *Suki Dhanda*

# ART HOUSE



Nineteen years ago American-born Cynthia Corbett set up a gallery in her apartment in a converted Victorian convent in Wimbledon, South West London. Today this dual purpose prevails. Throughout the living areas of what is clearly a family home plentiful ceramics are displayed alongside prints by Tracey Emin and Chantal Joffe, and Deborah Azzopardi's bold Pop art canvases. In the hall there are baroque self-portrait mirrors by Warhol's contemporary Ultra Violet, and photographs by Sam Taylor-Wood and Fabiano Parisi.

Corbett started the business on a shoestring, inspired by other women who were selling art from their homes, such as Danielle Arnaud in Kennington, South London, and Caroline Wiseman in Aldeburgh. She sought out work at degree shows – everything from painting and

Previous spread: Lluís Barba's C-type digital print *La Muestra de Gersaint Watteau* hangs above the mantelpiece. Below it are two cups by Josef Albers from the 1930s, a Winterling china cup, and *Summer*, 2010, a rococo porcelain figurine by Beth Katleman



INTERIOR: PHOTO CRISTINA SCHEK

Above: Shelley Trees and Sunrise pattern sugar bowl and creamer from the 1930s next to *Date Lesson 101* by Sun Ae Kim, 2010 (right). Left: interior views of Corbett's home. Below: 'Bizarre Ware' tea set with its original tray by Clarice Cliffe, late 1920s

**'I like to say that in my career I went from working in emerging markets to supporting emerging artists'**

CYNTHIA CORBETT



video art to ceramics – and invited clients to view it in a domestic setting. ‘Our living spaces on the ground and first floors have large, interconnected rooms, lots of windows and amazing light, so are ideal,’ Corbett explains.

She knew that she needed a central London presence too, and began holding pop-ups in unusual places, including an optician’s shop in Leadenhall Market in the City of London. Later she rented gallery space on Cork Street for two weeks at a time (‘I thought: I’m in Mayfair!’) as well as borrowing money to take her artists to fairs including Art Basel Miami Beach (ABMB).

But Corbett was keen to do more to bring on new talent, and in 2009 she founded the Young Masters Art Prize for emerging artists of any age, in any medium, who pay homage to the skill and innovation of the Old Masters in original ways. Judges have included Charles Saumarez Smith of the Royal Academy, Janice Blackburn, former curator of contemporary arts and crafts at Sotheby’s, and the art critic Godfrey Barker.

A finalist in that first year was Lluís Barba, and one of his C-type digital prints hangs over Corbett’s mantelpiece. *La Muestra de Gersaint Watteau* is based on a painting by Jean-Antoine Watteau – *The Shop Sign of Gersaint* (1720) – but populated with contemporary celebrities, from the Kardashians to Damien Hirst. It is typical of Barba’s work, which often critiques the collusion between art, wealth and glamour, particularly in the context of museum and gallery spaces.

#### From Art Deco to now

In 2014 Corbett expanded the project further with the Young Masters Maylis Grand Ceramic Prize, financed by James and Maylis Grand. Works by its finalists can be seen throughout her apartment: Jo Taylor’s hand-built and wheel-thrown porcelain pieces, inspired by decorative architectural features; Tessa Eastman’s otherworldly *Cloud Bundles*; Israeli ceramist Michal Fargo’s porcelain rock vases; and Zemer Peled’s spiky, anemone-like sculptures made out of thousands of porcelain shards. On a table are two works by Lucille Lewin, the founder of the Whistles fashion chain, who retrained as a sculptor at the Royal College in her late 60s and was awarded last year’s Ceramic Prize.

Right: Fabiano Parisi’s photograph *Il mondo che non vedo*, 2017.

On the shelf below is *The Beautiful Unperfect – Wedgwood Series 2 (Blue)*, 2018, by Alissa Volchkova

Combining porcelain with other media including glass and salt crystals, Lewin’s work is the result of research into the origins of 18th-century porcelain and the alchemists who invented it.

Corbett and her husband have always collected ceramics, and a cabinet in their ‘Limoges yellow’ dining room displays their trophies. (Corbett saw the shade used in Monet’s house in Giverny and it struck a chord. ‘I’m not minimal; I believe in colour,’ she says.) There is a Clarice Cliff ‘Bizarre Ware’ tea set with its original ceramic tray, bought at auction at Christie’s in the late 1980s, and pieces by Susie Cooper they acquired later. ‘Both of us are obsessed by art deco,’ admits Corbett. The Royal Worcester was inherited from Harry’s mother with a rare collection of Swansea china (dated around 1812–15). ‘The Swansea Pottery was founded in 1811 but the paste they used wasn’t strong enough, so items only lasted about 60 years,’ she says, explaining its significance. ‘Very few pieces have survived.’

Corbett grew up in Massachusetts, one of 10 children born to a working-class Italian immigrant family. She planned to study music but her father insisted she go to ‘a proper university’. She took an MA in law and diplomacy, and went on to work in banks and multi-nationals, specialising in debt restructuring in emerging markets, from Eastern Europe to Sub-Saharan Africa. Her collection of Shona sculptures from Zimbabwe and reproduction Benin bronzes from Nigeria are reminders of this time.

In 1986 she came to work in London, met her husband and had her daughter, Carmela. As her daughter grew up, Corbett decided to quit her job at a Japanese bank. She and her husband sold their house so she could retrain, with a view to setting up her own gallery. She took a two-year postgraduate art history course at Christie’s and worked as a Tate guide to build up experience. Two decades on, her collectors include Lady Forte, Hannah Rothschild and Nadja Swarovski. She has also sold work to public collections including Liverpool’s Walker Art Gallery (courtesy of the Contemporary Art Society) and Leeds Museums and Galleries.

Her home is a testament to the relationships

she’s built up with artists in that time. There’s an aluminium wall panel, 153cm in diameter, by Klari Reis, who Corbett discovered at a City & Guilds degree show in 2005. More recently she spotted the Russian-French artist Alissa Volchkova at the Royal College of Art and brought her series of porcelain vessels, *The Beautiful Unperfect – Wedgwood (Blue)* to the Crafts Council’s Collect fair in London in 2017 and 2018. On a shelf above the staircase is a ceramic installation by another RCA graduate, Irina Razumovskaya: the name of her row of glazed porcelain vessels, *Metamorphoses*, referring to their mutating shapes and colours.

#### The risk business

Corbett is thrilled when her young artists achieve recognition. ‘I like to say that in my career I went from working in emerging markets to supporting emerging artists.’ To demonstrate this, the apartment has wall sconces and black Parian figures by Matt Smith, who was offered a residency at the V&A after winning the 2014 Young Masters Maylis Grand Ceramic Prize and recently had a show at Cambridge’s Fitzwilliam Museum. She shows me a black-and-white decorative table piece by RCA graduate Sun Ae Kim, shortlisted for the 2014 Ceramics Prize and who has just become artist-in-residence for Jo Malone Korea. Then there is the American artist Chris Antemann, known for her contemporary parodies of 18th-century porcelain figurines. Corbett first came across her in Chicago in 2010: ‘She was unknown when we showed her at the London Art Fair 2011 – we sold everything. Meissen then asked her to be its artist-in-residence.’ In 2015 she exhibited Antemann’s vast *Lemon Chandelier*, made of Meissen porcelain and measuring 105 x 81cm, at the Collect fair. ‘Installing it,’ she says, ‘was insane.’

But then Corbett likes to take risks. She encourages collectors to do the same, and focus on artists at the early stages of their careers. ‘You need to love what you buy. A piece of art should move you in some way and give you joy. If the artist then becomes successful, that is fantastic. But if they don’t, you will still love the work.’ *The Cynthia Corbett Gallery is open by appointment. [thecynthiacorbettgallery.com](http://thecynthiacorbettgallery.com)*

