

Something Borrowed, Something Blue

This artist, a bon vivant and preserver of all things classic, sparks imagination in her home

BY JACQUELINE DEMONTRAVEL



IT'S THE TYPE OF HOUSE YOU WALK BY, WONDERING WHO LIVES THERE. Tourists stop to take a picture, cars decelerate—a lot of finger pointing. The house is painted toothpaste blue, cross-stitched with white planks. Mermaid signs hang here and there in homage to the street's name. This is a place where mermaids would live. The dweller is the next best thing, as this is the home of local Laguna Beach artist Doreen Mellen and her husband Brian.

(Opposite) 1. The stairs leading up to the main house are surrounded by lush greenery, notably passion fruit, which the Mellens love to cook with and even send to their friends and family. **2.** In true homage to the street's name, Doreen is attracted to the decorative mermaid pieces so plentiful in her coastal town's shops. **3.** Visitors identify the Mellens' home by this mermaid door sign. **4.** Just outside Doreen's studio is a hand-painted ceramic sign advertising her talents.





They are quite the pair. She's as delicate as a tea rose while he has the large booming presence of a sunflower; however, Doreen doesn't possess any of the fragility of her appearance, as seen when she moves her large ceramic pots like they are Christmas ornaments, pattering about town on her motor bike, or pushing the stubborn stable-like door to her "Blue Cottage Studio" with gusto—she's even known to out surf her grandkids.

1. A sleek Simon Pearce vase mixes well with simple hydrangeas and Doreen's handcrafted salt and pepper shakers. **2.** The color, size and texture of quail eggs are a natural display in the simple, elegant and functional kitchen where Doreen reigns. **3.** Doreen loves to cook. She is inspired by the interesting produce available at the local farmer's market. **(Above)** One of Doreen's jovial sketches with French culinary wording will mark one of her ceramic creations. **(Opposite)** Doreen's artistic dinnerware pieces are unique, sturdy, handcrafted and functional, which translates to her life.

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Perhaps this is the stock typically associated to a native of Tasmania, Australia. Yes, the home of the Looney Tunes character that always appears in a wake of fish bones. Though she is nothing like the “nasty little creature” that can terrorize a kennel of pit bulls, there is an animated quality to her. The way her eyes sparkle when she darts about her studio, lifting up her latest piece as if they were the boss’s kids. It’s easy to fall for her special creations. Large, deep mugs that make cocoa taste better, stumpy pitchers and plates that have the imprint of the creator’s thumb—all part of a dinnerware collection illustrated with lively caricatures of a chef creating all sorts of fun, and each one branded with her signature fleur-de-lis.

Doreen’s works can be spotted all across town. Just a few blocks from her home, tourists and locals coo over her works at the modish shop Stylistic Intervention. Just a block further you can sip on a cappuccino at Zinc Café or pull apart a muffin over one of her plates at Anastasia, another local hot spot charming the town. It’s impossible not to relish in the humor and romance of a lifestyle that connects her family, home and art, so endemic to a woman who lives in a blue house and plays with shapes and clay all day.

Her studio is located just beneath her house, in a garage that opens up to a street bustling with all the activity



1. These exquisite pillows were made from old Victorian quilts, which Doreen purchased in her native Australia. **2.** The loft guest bedroom is simply decorated yet focuses on the fine quality of heirloom linens, fresh flowers and such visceral elements as flowers, candles and Doreen’s own painting. **3.** Brian often brings flowers home for Doreen from the farmer’s market.



expected of a resort seaside town. While her workplace attracts the inquisitive passerby—her art attracts the local vendors—it is her warm spirit that draws you into a world seen through the sprite eyes of Doreen Mellen. “Everyone loves the studio,” she says. “Mothers stop by when coming home with their kids from kindergarten, children wander about, touching the pieces, and a tourist will want to buy something. Where else can you find that?”

Her love for her home is quite a testimony, considering she and Brian seem as restless to settle in a place as their love-em-and-leave-em cat, Smudge, who has chosen to sit in a computer case during Doreen’s interview. She and Brian have moved from Australia to Canada and lived in New Jersey, Chicago and Manhattan Beach, before making what appears to be a permanent settlement in Laguna Beach. It’s easy to see why from the three enchanting levels of connecting cottages climbing the hill like the vines of passion fruit skimming their property. Passion most certainly embraces the c. 1900 home, which seeps in every detail with a tasteful addition they designed themselves.

The furnishings are colorful, functional and exude a cozy feeling to aptly take in that glorious view of the Laguna Beach coastline that make hours go by in minutes. “I think it really is how I imagine a Laguna Beach cottage, a real beach cottage. I love that you don’t feel you’re inside. It’s not ostentatious—very practical, livable and comfortable. Every single thing in this home we’ve lugged around the world, and we always find a place for it.”

Portrait of an Artist

“From the time I could hold a pencil I was always doodling. I always liked caricatures. I’ve always been fascinated with people in the street, just sitting around—capturing their personalities, creating a story around them. Wherever we went in the world, you’d always see such characters. When my daughters were in college in New York, I would go into the City, and wait to meet them at the corner of Macy’s to observe. One time in the winter months a bag lady invited me to stand next to her, above the street vents that blew warm air. How clever! I took her to breakfast and drew her. Everywhere you go you always find someone.”

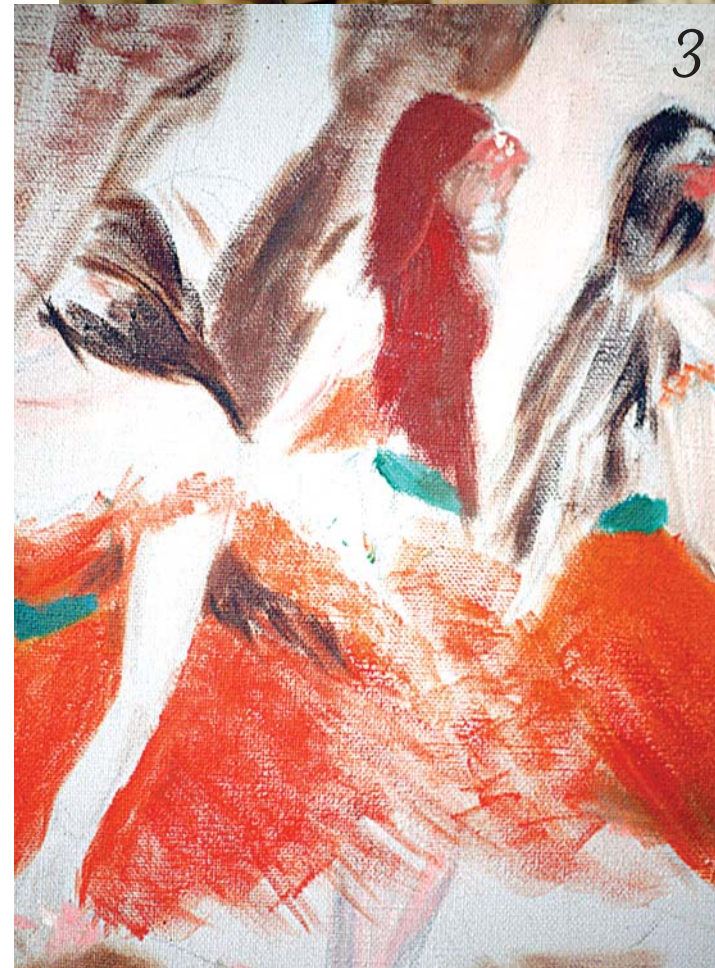
Some of those “lugged” items include a wooden statue Doreen found washed up on a Caribbean beach, which has become an excellent clawing board for Smudge; ceramic end tables from Hong Kong; and sculptures made from sharp surgical instruments bought at an antiques market in Australia. In an age where trying to pass through airport security with a tube of lip gloss screams “fingerprint me,” it’s amazing what the Feds would consider of some of Doreen’s finds.

Like her art, Doreen’s home has a story behind each piece, tales that are long, colorful and can be heard over endless cups of tea. There are the lacy pillowcases repurposed from Victorian Australian quilts, enough crocheted milk jug covers to make her linens cabinet burst open and, of course, there are her paintings, ceramics and art throughout.

Doreen and Brian can be philosophical when discussing her art and the lifestyle they’ve chosen, but not in that black-beret, sucking-on-clove-cigarettes kind of way. They embody all the warmth and humor of the continent they hail from—doesn’t everyone love an Aussie? Though they are not originally from the United States, they appreciate this country that appears to have the middle child syndrome of being set in their ways while seeming to find the need to defend who they are.

“So many people in America don’t think they have history, but they do,” says Doreen. “I’ve been determined to drive across the country, made trips from California to Canada, down the East Coast—meeting people in all of these towns and you do uncover history, an individual culture. I will never forget Deadwood, which reminded me of those old cowboy shows. I saw a policeman racing after a speeding car on a horse to give the driver a ticket. Going from region to region is like traveling through country to country. Americans are always trying to take someone else’s culture, not realizing that they have their own.”

(Opposite) 1. Doreen is an accomplished painter who creates colorful works renderings family, island life and the inspirations that spark her creativity. **2.** Doreen examines her collection of crocheted milk jug covers. Such covers were used in the Victorian times during high tea. **3.** A detail of Doreen’s painting shows her mastery as an artist. **4.** A lover of old books, the tasteful spines merge beautifully with other treasures, such as batik fabrics and artwork.





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Would we want to live in a world where everyone is the same? Most certainly not. But we're all drinking out of the same cups, sleeping beneath the same set of sheets, buying that machine-made piece purchased with a 99 after the dollar amount. Doreen's crafted works honor individuality, showing an appreciation of a civilized world with it's one-of-a-kind things, which we seem to be increasingly loosing touch with. "Each piece has a story, or inspiration from Doreen's life and background," says Brian, her most devoted supporter.

Brian and Doreen are a story separate from their Blue Cottage lifestyle. Brian has the qualities of a modern man who "doesn't harness" Doreen while maintaining the Old-World charm of a true gentleman. He will fill the house with flowers, albeit in vases without water, when Doreen comes home from a trip while she wouldn't accept him in her kitchen. "That's my space! I do the nurturing. They spoiled it for themselves, American women, as I receive a tray of breakfast in the morning."

Doreen has twin daughters from an earlier marriage who both live in California. Brian's two sons and daughter live in Australia. "Together we have eight fabulous grandchildren," she says. "When my grandkids come to visit they stay in the studio all day long; I have to drag them to the beach."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAIMEE ITAGAKI
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SEE SHOPPING GUIDE, PAGE 90.

(Opposite) 1. Even Smudge the cat complements the finely woven rug he chose to relax on. 2. The main room is a functional space that combines the living, dining and kitchen areas where visitors can take in breathtaking views of the coastline. 3. Illustrated books and wooden games add a decorative element to the coffee table. 4. The detail on this needlepoint pillow honors Doreen's respect for handcrafted items. 5. Jars filled with bath salts, pumice stones and French milled stones add elegance to a bathroom.