

ALL-STAR CAST

Viola Lanari's London flat is full of dramatic touches that include exquisite plaster pieces produced by her and wonderful eccentric finds

WORDS EMMA J PAGE PHOTOGRAPHY HELENIO BARBETTA/LIVING INSIDE



SITTING ROOM

'I wanted to fill this space with warmth as it has a cold light, so I chose a card coloured paint,' says Viola.

Walls in Cardboard Box (SC556), Papers and Paints.

Zigzag drinks table.

Jermaine Gallacher. 1970s

rug featuring Mah Jong players, The Saleroom

SITTING ROOM

A defunct fireplace serves as the perfect spot for a montage of items, including a wall-mounted vintage mirrored lampshade. A plaster piece by Viola makes an impromptu frame for a monoprint by Jermaine Gallacher. Vintage iron chairs in Aqua20 printed linen, Viola Lanari





DINING AREA

'I experimented with two sofas in the sitting room but found a foldable dining table for better flexibility,' says Viola. The bench fabric depicting autumnal fruits was a car-boot sale find.

Flower wall light, Viola Lanari, Zigzag candle holder, Jermaine Gallacher

If you visit Viola Lanari's southwest London flat, it's more than likely you'll find something pressed into your palm as you leave. Full of curios, plaster pieces, fabric swatches, pinned artwork and car-boot finds, items have a habit of finding their way to the right owner after a sojourn here. 'I enjoy gifting objects,' says the designer, known for her delicate plaster flower wall lights, sculptural furniture and latterly, printed textiles. 'A friend of mine recently left with a Victorian perfume bottle shaped like a ladies shoe. Nothing is intended to stay permanently.'

The Milan-born designer, who began her career in the decorating departments of a clutch of British interiors magazines, describes her two-bedroom Victorian flat as 'a sketch book – designed to evolve.' Discarded fabric remnants from shoots, gifts from fellow designers, roadside treasures and antique mirrors are loosely curated into appealing vignettes that are rotated frequently. 'I like that British sense of informality and eccentricity,' says Viola. 'Milan may be thought of as Europe's design capital, but it doesn't yet have a strong upcycling culture. I'm drawn to the more loosened up approach to interiors here.'

That preference is evident in a series of unexpected choices, from the dramatic mirrored vinyl walls and ceiling in the entrance hall ('I love tricks of the eye and playing with reflections') to the emerald guest bedroom or the living room doorway, adorned with painterly flourishes by stylist Maude Smith in a nod to the Bloomsbury Group. Surprisingly, Viola thinks not much of her Italian sensibility is evident here; rather, her family have long been influenced by English decorating. 'One of my grandmothers had a shop in Milan selling British silverware; another used to come to the UK and go rummaging in antique markets,' she says. 'And my mother has always made lampshades.'

That love of treasure hunting became an imperative when Viola arrived in London 15 years ago. She frequented car-boot sales and markets 'as if my life



depended on it' once struggling onto a bus with a chair covered in German stamps from 1952 that she picked up in Battersea. 'It's a very unexpected finish for such a utilitarian piece and I love that juxtaposition,' she says. 'I like developing an archive of core pieces.'

Plaster prototypes abound. The two flower lights secured with drawing pins to the living room window pane are the first that Viola designed, after her career changed course when she produced lamp bases for a pop-up store. A console table, made in plaster and structurally supported by a chicken-wire base, has spawned further, more refined iterations for selling that are now finished in wax for gloss and longevity. 'These early pieces are works in progress and I like that I can see my mistakes in them,' she says. 'Over time, my work has become more artistic and less craft-based.' Reflecting that evolution are Viola's collaborations with Porta Romana and Balineum, for whom she designs resin finished wall lights. 'You have to be responsive to the material,' she says of plaster. 'You add and set, add and set, in a process of trial and error.'

An air of creative impermanence runs through these schemes, inspired by Viola's time spent styling shoots. Lately, she's been drawn to interiors that allow breathing space around her designs, and is currently contemplating a move to a bigger flat. 'That might be a sign my style is growing up,' she says. 'My home will always be a testing ground, though. Creating vignettes from disparate pieces is endlessly fascinating.' 📸

■ violanari.com



SITTING ROOM

Viola made the plaster of Paris console table by hand, loosely inspired by Asian design. Above it hangs a vintage Japanese tapestry hand-painted on velvet with a devoré technique. Viola bought it in Zerne, Switzerland. Living room door artwork. Maude Smith



KITCHEN

Removing the extractor hood freed up plenty of wall space for vintage plates. 'Then there are trays for everyday use balanced on the slimmest shelf ever,' says Viola. Anthropologie sells latte bowls. Find similar wooden boards at Divertimenti



HALLWAY

A vinyl mirror wall and ceiling covering lends a sense of infinity to this space, while reflecting the light and colours of the adjoining rooms. The 1960s flower pendant light and Baroque-style ceramic mirror are from Paris flea markets. Find adhesive mirror vinyl on eBay



BEDROOM

A lamp base that Viola made for Porta Romana is topped by a hat from a collection by Hurtence. The table is decorated with a Kenyan fabric. To the left is a chair covered in 1950s German stamps. Liotard lamp, Viola Lanari at Porta Romana

BEDROOM

Walls and ceiling were treated to the same vivid green for a cocooning effect, offset by wool bedding in royal blue. Walls and ceiling in Moorish Green (HC54), Papers and Paints. Cushions in Aqua20 and Smoke20 printed linen fabric and Serpentine side table, all Viola Lanari



MEET THE OWNER

Viola Lanari shares her style inspiration

SMALL CHANGE, BIG IMPACT To a dark corner, add an object with a shiny surface, such as a mirror paper shade. It will reflect elements of the rest of the room and gift you with a new dimension.

FAVOURITE DECORATIVE FLOURISH Fish eye mirrors.

YOUR STYLE IN THREE WORDS Dusk. Memory. Shine.

GO-TO DESIGN DETAIL Artist-painted surfaces. Could be a wall, could be a door, the skirting of the wall or your wardrobe doors: if you let a surface artist take over and add character and uniqueness to it, you won't regret it.

DESIGN INSPIRATION Everything in the glass section at the V&A.

YOUR INSTANT FEEL GOOD

Finding ways to create shadows, day and night.



MAIN BEDROOM

'I find so many fabrics beautiful – I hang them, cover furniture with them or even pop samples on top of plates,' says Viola.

Oberkampf bed spread fabric, Braquenié collection at Pierre Frey. Hand embroidered **silk panel** by Dhahabu Ngumbao Dadu at Kirsten Hecktermann.

Lamp base, Viola Lanari