

# telegraph magazine

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## Taste-free tyrants

Inside the homes of the world's dictators

## Love in the time of chlamydia

Sexual health clinics at crisis point



Brett Easton Ellis comes clean



A young visitor to Blott Kerr-Wilson's home informed his mother that the highlight of his stay there was 'having a bath in a car-park'. While she may have worried about her offspring's overactive imagination, anyone who has inspected Kerr-Wilson's open-plan bathing arrangements can confirm the accuracy of his description. The converted mill, the Moulin Mauze, near La Rochelle in Brittany, is the size of a small department store and the bathroom in question occupies a corner of one entire, otherwise empty, floor. Imagine living in Harvey Nichols emptied of all merchandise and you have a notion of the volume of space the shell artist shares with her husband, Benjamin Krebs, a photographer, and their sons (Auguste, seven, and Tangy, five). It is the sort of place you need wheels to get around – rather a plus for small boys with lots of energy and bicycles.

During the colder months, the family retires to a proper mill house attached to the former mill. The winter home is a pretty, bourgeois rose-clad building with a relatively conventional layout: proper bedrooms, bathrooms enclosed by walls and, most essentially, central heating. In summer the house is rented out to holidaymakers and the

family takes up residence in the mill. The giant task of transforming the vast three-storey building from obsolete 19th-century wreck into an all-year-round family home has taken over Krebs's life to the point that he no longer works as a photographer.

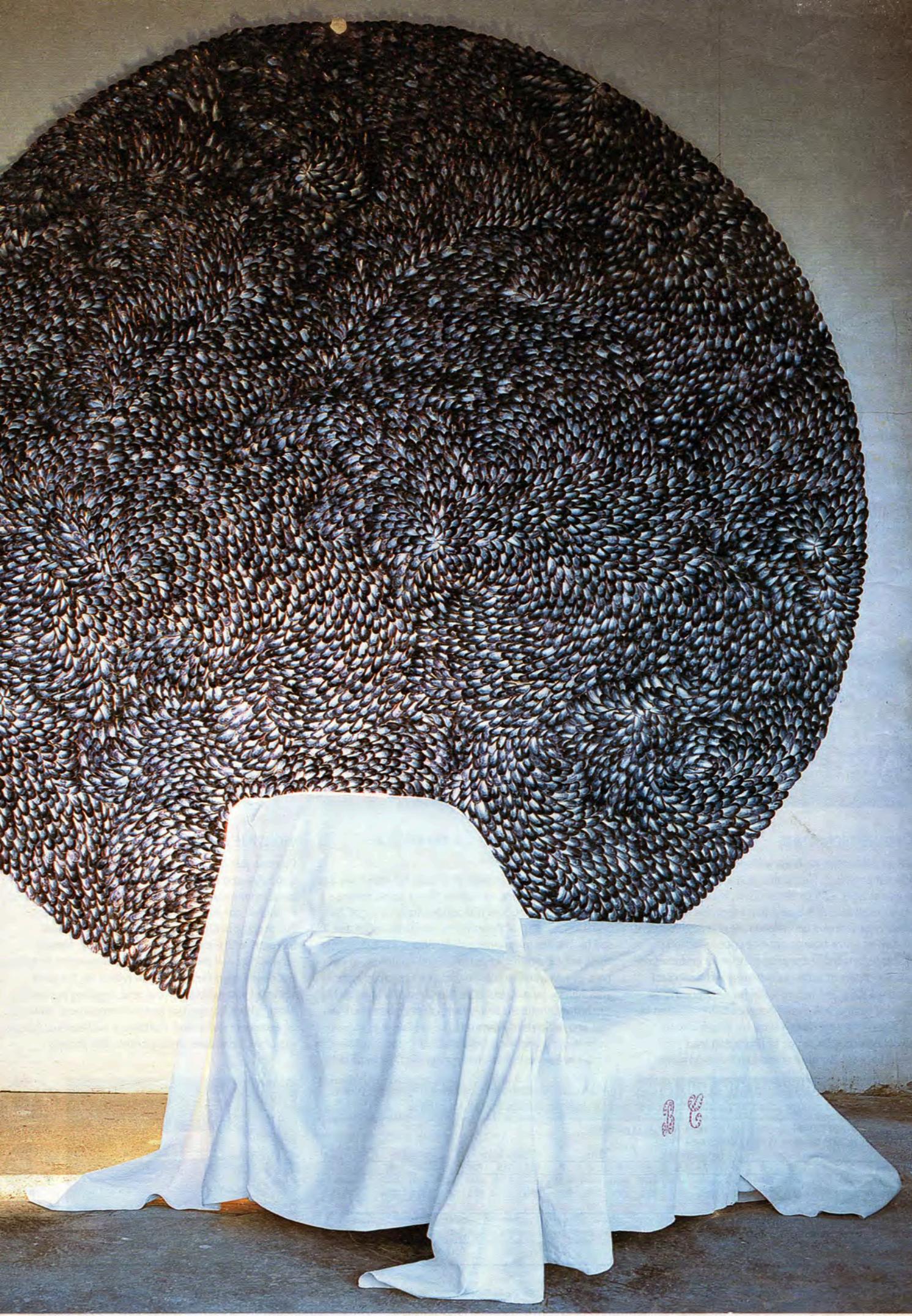
At the moment, the first floor of the mill is divided, albeit in a rather makeshift way, into zones for working, sleeping, cooking, playing and dining, while the top floor accommodates the bathroom and a colossal amount of storage space. Most of the furniture is simple utilitarian finds trawled from local markets, mixed with basics from Ikea. Kerr-Wilson's work, and paintings and ceramics by members of Krebs's family, add to the bohemian atmosphere. A vintage glass-fronted cabinet from a shop functions as a frame, left empty apart from two mussel-shell 'pictures'. Through a doorway you glimpse shell panels, maquettes for an underground room in a chateau. They suggest a theatrical grand salon but merely disguise more empty space.

Since Kerr-Wilson won a *World of Interiors* competition 14 years ago (by 'shelling' the bathroom of her council flat in Peckham) she has become the person to call for a shell folly or a

## Shell shock

The transformation by the shell artist Blott Kerr-Wilson and her husband of a vast wreck of a mill in Brittany has stunned the locals. By Hilary Robertson. Photographs by Bill Batten





bokery School in Ireland – Darina Allen's anniversary present for her husband. Recent commissions have taken her to Texas, where she has just completed a bathroom. Last winter the whole family decamped to Wales for several months while Kerr-Wilson restored the shell room at Llwendeg, which opens to the public next spring. It seems only fitting that she eventually found her way to Brittany, where she is a stone's throw from the coast. She collects some shells off the beach, though most come ready-cleaned from companies in England, France and America.

The mill's courtyard garden includes a separate laundry, the first part of the property the couple converted. Kerr-Wilson (whose name is Charlotte; Blott stems from a childhood mispronunciation of her sister) chose this room as the ideal place to show off her art. Walls are partially covered with her shells, undulating alternate stripes of mussel and abalone and otherwise painted an intense 'lein blue'. But the most dramatic piece is a deceptively simple circle of mussel shells arranged in a spiral, about eight feet in diameter. The laundry currently serves as a dining-room, greenhouse and place to contemplate chickens and children at play in the courtyard.

The Moulin Mauze, which she bought in 2000, is not the first eccentric (and freezing cold) building Kerr-Wilson has inhabited. Eleven years ago she first moved to France when offered a job as a 'guardian' to a chateau. She accepted impulsively before discovering that she would actually be living in an unheated farmhouse surrounded by the derelict remains of the grand building she had



bove two of six decorative panels made as tapestries for a commission in a French chateau; the room is otherwise empty. **Top right** Blott Kerr-Wilson has chosen a sober colour scheme for the master bedroom of the 'winter' mill –素雅 but couldn't resist a decorative flourish – the window casements are elaborately 'shelled'. **Right** the mill's sole bathroom occupies a corner of the huge second floor





xpected to move into. 'The official address, Les Ruines du Château Mendon, should have given me a clue,' she says ruefully.

It was while adapting to her role as 'châtelaine' that Kerr-Wilson met Krebs, who coaxed her away from the rubble 'to live in his tower', a two-room folly in the garden of his house. 'It was agreed I would pay my rent on the tower in home-baked cakes,' she adds. This charming arrangement lasted until they became a couple and she moved into Krebs's chilly but enchanting house.

As their alliance was forged against a backdrop of interesting but tumbledown architecture, their decision to buy a building as challenging as the mill was probably inevitable. Krebs found it by accident. 'I saw the river and followed it,' he explains. (He comes from a family of serial renovators; while we discuss the mill, his mother is

**Above** the mill's living area, containing mussel pictures by Kerr-Wilson inside a glass cabinet; her sons Auguste and Tanguy enjoy cycling around the mill. **Left** Kerr-Wilson's workshop is organised like an old-fashioned sweetshop with jar upon jar of shells



scanning the property pages for some unloved, ramshackle gem.)

The inhabitants of sleepy Mauze-le-Mignon, a market town peopled by men in faded blue overalls pushing bicycles laden with vegetables, initially thought they were time-wasters if not lunatics. Now they are impressed and intrigued and give the family produce from their allotments. The weather was ghastly, living conditions grim. Kerr-Wilson, anxious to make some progress, encouraged her children to strip wallpaper with her, turning it into a game. Happily, Auguste and Tanguy survived the old building's numerous hazards: gaping holes, missing sections of floor, lethal old machinery, windows that open into the abyss. But their rambling home is as thrilling as any adventure playground. Word has spread and every day curious young boys and girls lurk outside the rusty metal gate that opens into the courtyard hoping for an invitation to play.

Kerr-Wilson may have found her home in rural France but she has not surrendered her streak of British eccentricity. She cuts a dash at the school gates in a bizarrely orchestrated outfit of stripy jumper teamed with a skirt made from furnishing fabric, zig-zag tights, embossed leather clogs and earrings fashioned from pearls and miniature plastic pigs; her colourful attire a contrast to the subtlety of her stones and shells. She is entertaining and exuberant yet her solitary work demands patience and concentration. Notable, too, is the shift in style between the two homes, one cosily rich in colour, the other dusty and raw. Her double life suits her rather well.

*Blott Kerr-Wilson: 00 33 5 49 35 22 56;  
blottshellhouses.com*



**Above** Blott Kerr-Wilson, her husband Benjamin Krebs, and their children Auguste and Tanguy outside the orangery. **Right** a corridor in the mill has been decorated with a kind of abalone shell known as asses' ears. **Top** the mill's courtyard with mill house and adjoining mill on the left, and orangery at the far end

