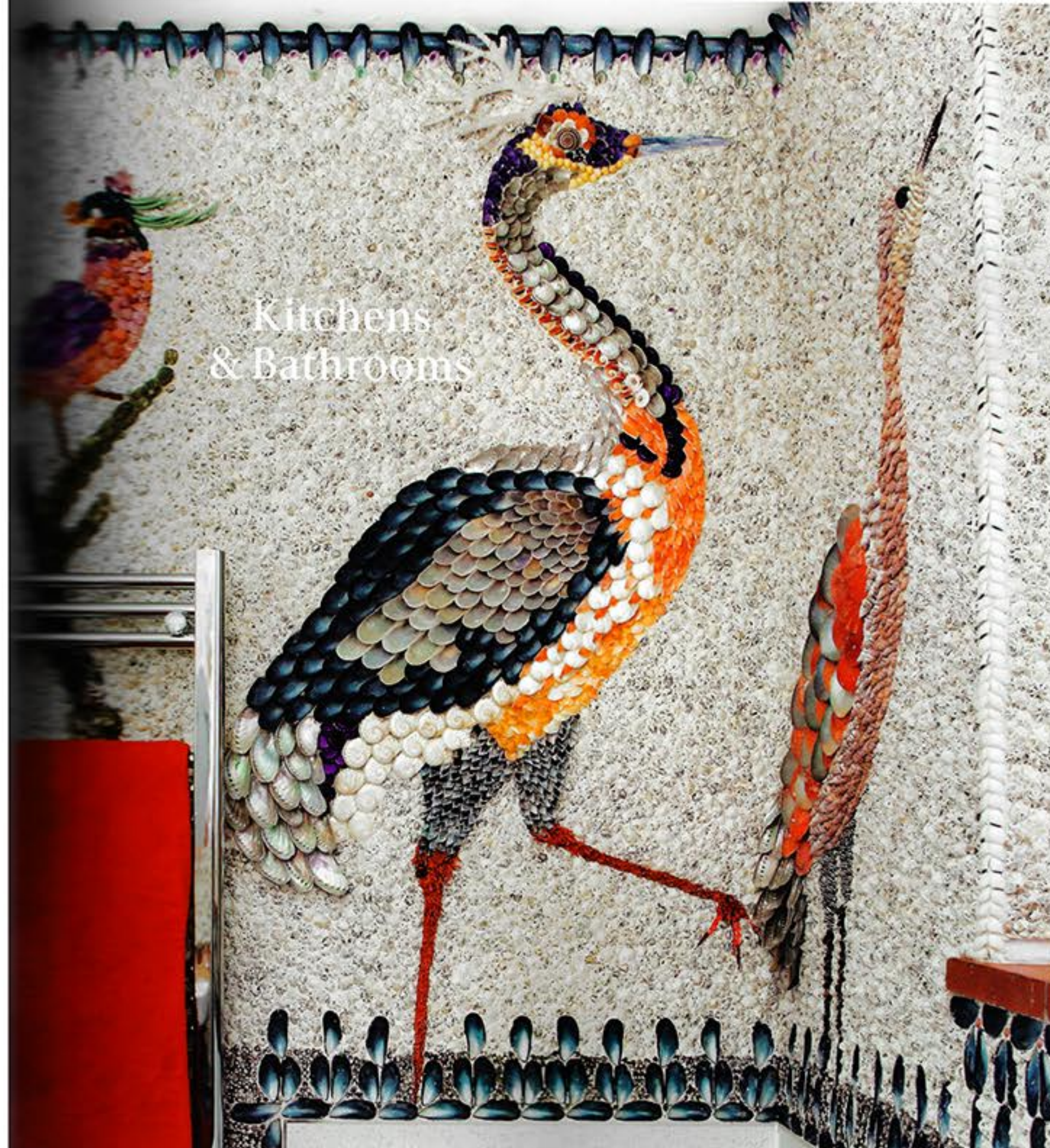


THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

MAY 2024



Kitchens & Bathrooms



Kitchens & Bathrooms cover: je egret rien – not for the first time, Blott Kerr-Wilson has boldly clad her bathroom entirely with shells. Crane your necks for a better view of her waders on page 166. Photograph: Megan Dalton

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Well, shiver me barnacles! It's not a bathroom covered with shells – loo cistern and all. Damian Thompson meets the home-owner responsible, and Wolf friend Blott Kerr-Wilson

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Holy Ritz

What did the courtesan, Spanish duchess and American socialite have in common? They all had bathrooms by a certain interwar designer. Alice Ingham, Mitchell Owens and Bernini Raison can smell a Ritz...

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MUSSEL MEMORY

Blott Kerr-Wilson's brilliant career has been bookended by bathrooms in this magazine. The first, a deep-sea grotto she made in her London council house, won a competition in *Wol* in the 1990s, setting her on her life's course as a sheller extraordinaire. Now, living in Norfolk, she's created a new conch-clad wonder. Damian Thompson washes up. Photography: Megan Dalton



Opposite: *Architectonica*, or sundial shell, forms the eye of a (kind of) crane, and its fantastic coral crest was donated by Camilla Legh, then owner of Adlington Hall, Cheshire, after Blott restored the estate shell house in 2013. Purple bottle-tops can be spied along the neck. What resembles a turaco is peeping towards the shower stall; 'this I like - naughty!' Above: Blott surveys her handiwork

You don't often see swans *gliding* across a field. But that's the view from Blott Kerr-Wilson's kitchen in her stylish bungalow in north Norfolk. It's an optical illusion, of course, thanks to the ribbon-like river below being hidden by a slope in the pasture. Soon I discover that this avian oddity is just an *amuse-bouche* for the visual feast along her corridor...

But first, let's rewind a few decades. In 1987, Blott (sort of short for Charlotte) had acquired a council house in a rough part of Peckham, southeast London, when the Great Storm hit these shores in October. Having nursed since childhood a love of secret grottoes, she drove her Robin Reliant to the South Coast to haul back thousands of shells from Margate beach thrown up by the hurricane. Learning on the job, she turned her SE15 bathroom into a powder room fit for Poseidon. What's more, when founding editor Min Hogg ran a competition in *The World of Interiors* for the best amateur-decorated domestic room, Blott entered hers 'for a laugh' – and, to her amazement, won (*Vol Aug 1993*). The comedic contrast between this most aristocratic form of decoration and the gritty location off the Old Kent Road piqued the interest of the press. That and perhaps the fact she was by this time attending Goldsmiths College alongside Damien Hirst and the YBAs, when 'craft' was a dirty word. 'For about a week I was like a Kardashian,' Blott recalls, shaking her head. 'I was in the *Daily Mail* with Fergie – she had just sucked someone's toes.'

The jobs began to roll in. Darina Allen, the celebrity chef who runs a cookery school at Ballymaloe, commissioned the tyro sheller to decorate a little orchard house as a silver wedding present for her husband. Subsequently, she's been cornered by everyone from the Duchess of Westminster – Blott hung on to the duke's cheque, which, hilariously, bounced – to interior designer Martin Brudnizki. There have been Regency restorations, pretty plant pots and rippling artworks inspired by BBC Radio's shipping forecast. Was she not daunted, tackling all these tasks

untrained? 'I think I was too young to feel that. I thought it would all come together, and it did.' Her playful streak, her sheer gusto, is infectious. 'I love job interviews. I love meeting people and going round people's houses – it's such good fun!'

Blott, who has two grown-up sons, moved back to Britain from France after a divorce six years ago. She embarked on her new bathroom project in March 2023. The bare bones of it are bog-standard, and one is almost shocked to stand at the threshold and see the ordinary fixtures and fittings, to realise that functional things happen in this glittering space. For, on a whitish 'shell-dashed' background of limpet exoskeletons, five exotic birds vie for my attention. Three of them perch on bare trees, the boughs' rough bark formed from pheasant shells and abalones. Conceivably the big crane-like bird above the tub, its crimson leg poised dramatically mid-step, and the egret-y one eyeing an insect, might have waded in from local wetlands, but the other three look positively tropical. Then I spy purple bottle-tops among the plumage and a crest made of a crab claw, and start to doubt that ornithological accuracy is really the point. Blott confirms: 'I chalk the outline of real birds [taken from photographs], but then I just fill them in as I go.' So if realism isn't the point, what is she after? 'To be inspired, I have to have a movement.' Most bivalves, she explains, are not symmetrical, and so it's about finding the 'direction'

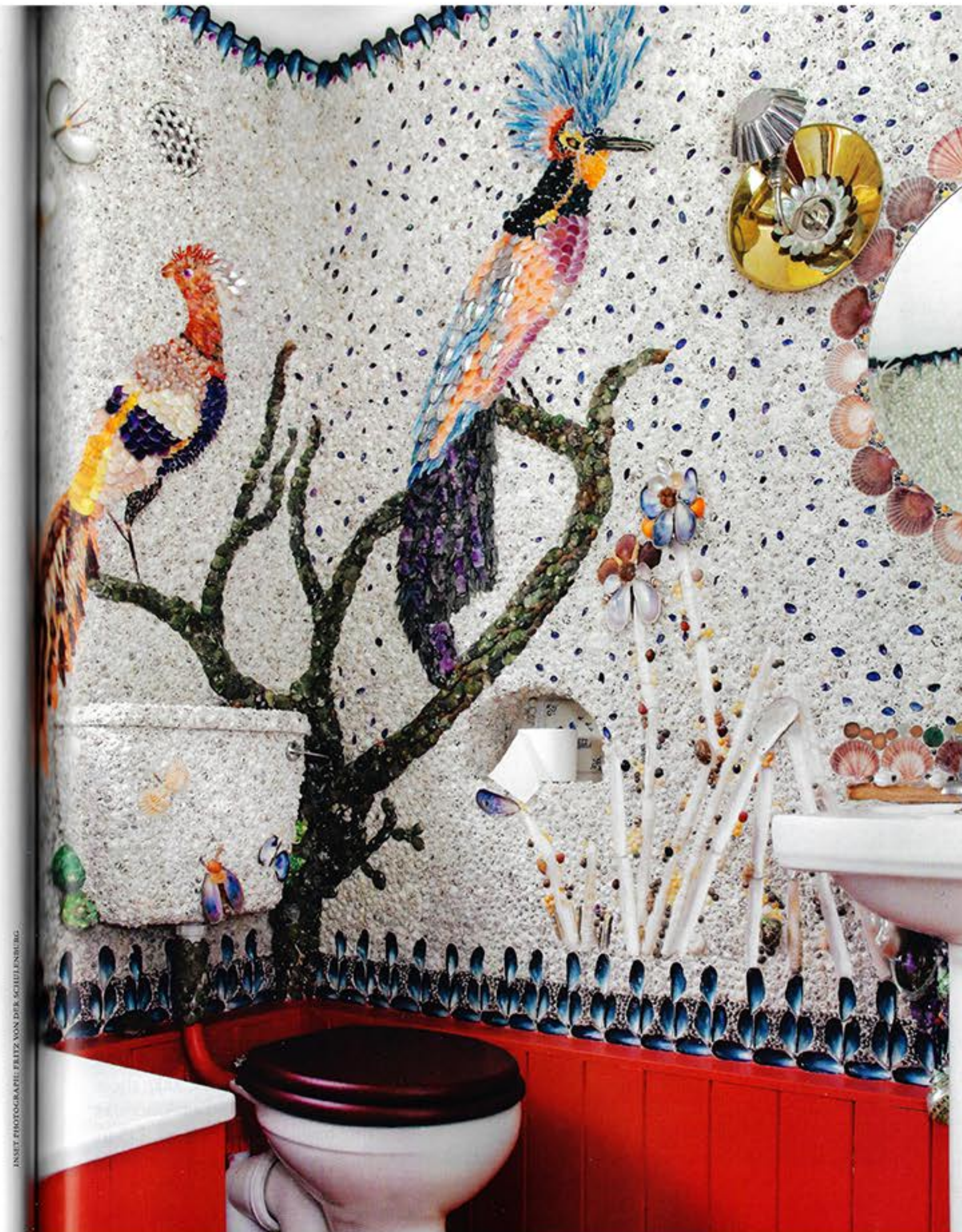


and 'flow'. Indeed, the way the light catches a run of shells on the birds' flanks – skilfully angled so one never glimpses the underlying cement – it's as if you can see a breeze ruffling their feathers.

Acquiring the raw materials has become harder and more expensive. Blott's dealer sends her photographs of exotic specimens from huge warehouses in the Philippines, which supply jewellery makers and seaside trinket shops around the world. And my host is intrepid enough to paddle her canoe off nearby Scolt Head, to gather the 'beautiful old orangey-black English oyster shells' that drift up from now-defunct Georgian beds. But mussels – her favourite kind, her bread-and-butter – have become a bit of a problem. British restaurants are not allowed to supply her because of food-waste bylaws, and Brexit has stymied their import from the Spanish paella industry. In a witty echo of an egg-and-dart cornice, the iridescent blue beauties form a border around the room.

Reflecting its creator's puckish personality, the décor dances with visual verve and magpie mischief. Two reflective sconces have been made using some old brioche tins that have languished in a cupboard for years. She has dotted real pearls from a string – 'my inheritance' – against the white walls so that they are almost invisible; but she knows they're there. Napkin rings have morphed into silvery butterflies. A (detachable) florist's vase grid, encrusted with marine bounty, masks the extractor fan. A plastic frog peeps out from beneath the washbasin to surprise loo sitters. 'I lie back in the bath, and I'm so proud of it actually... It's incredible to make a piece of work that you can actually be with.' And later, as she drives me back to Sheringham train station: 'This project is so important to me. *The World of Interiors* started me off on my career. This is my house and I hope I never leave here. I just thought, I really want to close the circle. I became the "shell lady", because once you're in *Interiors*, you've got a blessing. Phenomenal for me' ® For more information, visit blottkerrwilson.com

Above: Blott's first tub shot in 'Vol' – Peckham, 1993. Opposite: the sheller spotted (and snapped) the left-hand bird on her local baker's dress. Above its head flutters a butterfly made of freshwater mussels and sea-urchin spines. The hoopoe-like bird (Blott calls it a 'spoonbill' because the beak is made of the cutlery) has a technically tricky crown made of blue kyanite blades. A saucy delft tile by Paul Bommer lurks in the loo-roll recess, while pre-euro European coins 'detectorised' on fields nearby form a frieze above the washbasin



INSIDE PHOTOGRAPHY: FRITZ VON DER SCHEULENBURG