

Wildlife artist's new house is full of creature comforts

Joanna May opens the door to her beautifully decorated Victorian terrace, near Marlborough, that has become the backdrop to the artist's stunning new collection of paintings inspired by African animals. Judi Couse plays house guest.

WHILE MOST of us usually have to view at least a dozen or so properties before we eventually find one that we feel we can make our home, Joanna May was lucky enough to only have to view one.

"I knew that this was the house for me the moment I stepped inside; this house spoke to me and I just had to have it," said Joanna.

"The estate agent had no idea that I was a wildlife artist when I asked him if he knew if there were any hares in the fields that surround the village. 'Not to my knowledge' was his reply. As soon as he found out I was an artist, of course, he said 'Yes, there are plenty'," she laughs.

Joanna was a wildlife illustrator for 10 years, working on mainly children's books and encyclopaedias, before she started out on her own.

"I always had paintings in my head that I wanted to paint for myself. I just never seemed to have any time to paint for myself," she said.

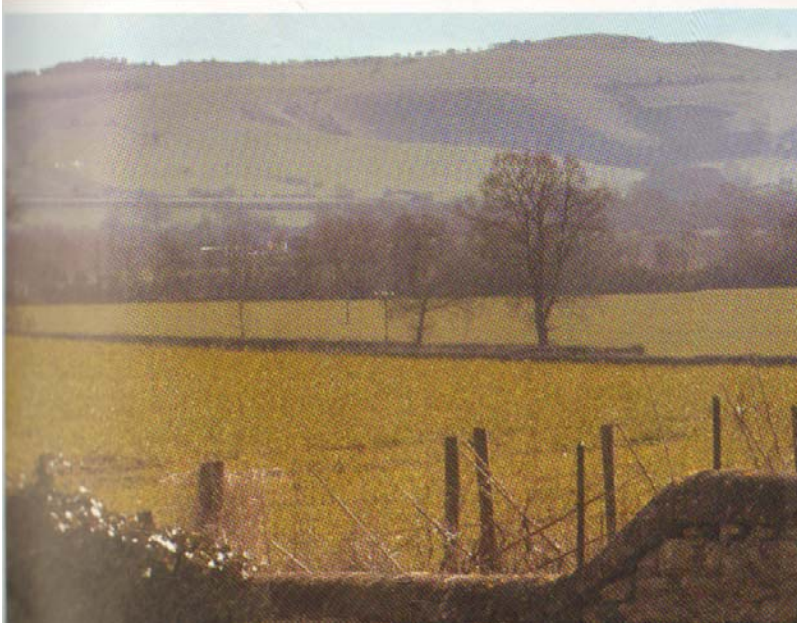
Joanna produced a painting of two boxing hares called *A Moment in Time*, and, as she puts it herself, the rest is history. Her paintings now fetch £1,000 a square foot. She is widely recognised for specialising in the brown hare, which has become a trademark.

Joanna has only been at her Victorian terraced house for just over a year but has already fully renovated and decorated it throughout, while running her business single-handedly. Her beautiful home is situated in the pretty village of Bourton, 20 minutes from her gallery in Marlborough.

Before Joanna bought her own house she had been living in a rented flat in



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Marlborough. "I really loved my flat and also living in Marlborough, however it was inevitable that I should one day move out to the countryside because of my work. It really was particularly important that I should be closer to nature and I also really wanted to buy my own house. I just never thought that I would be able to afford to take on a mortgage," she said.

"This house and where I live now is just so perfect for me. I work from home in my top floor studio at the beginning of the week and then on Thursday, Friday and Saturday I open my gallery in Marlborough."

Joanna has owned her highly successful gallery in Marlborough for almost four years. "Even before I opened the gallery door people were knocking on the window wanting to buy my prints," she laughs.

The day Joanna invited me to see her beautiful home and talk to me about her stunning work she was positively beaming with excitement. The BBC had just approached her and she was in discussions with producers to feature in a new programme

'I knew this was the house for me the moment I stepped inside'

called *Spring Watch*, starring Bill Oddie.

"The BBC were here only yesterday in fact," said Joanna.

"Did you see any hares?" I asked.

"We went for a walk across the fields and, yes, we were lucky enough to see some hares," she said smiling.

Joanna has been preparing for her solo show at Gallery One, Barnes, London, which runs from April 14-30, where she will unveil new works of art entitled *The Abstract Patterns of African Wildlife*. She has just returned from a trip to South Africa's Kruger National Park and, as she puts it, has been beavering away at her new work ever since.

Joanna certainly has an enviable lifestyle – not only is she a talented and successful wildlife artist, she also looks a decade younger than her age. She will be celebrating her 40th birthday this year.

Joanna's conversation quickly changes to her house and the renovation work she has undertaken over the last 12 months. Every

Left: Joanna May with one of her impressive works
Top: The Victorian terrace in the village of Bourton
Left: The back garden looks out over fields

ME AND MY HOME

wall in the house has been re-plastered, but she decided to keep the original kitchen. "Basically there really was nothing wrong with it and I also had to consider my budget. It did look a bit old-fashioned and dated though," she said.

The kitchen cabinets were originally pine but Joanna has painted them in a soft white

eggshell paint. She has also removed the original cornice, and replaced the leaded glass display cabinets with clear glass, as well as changing the wall tiles. The kitchen now has a more contemporary look, which has been complemented by adding a rectangular glass-topped dining table. Joanna also decided to open up the wall between the sitting room and

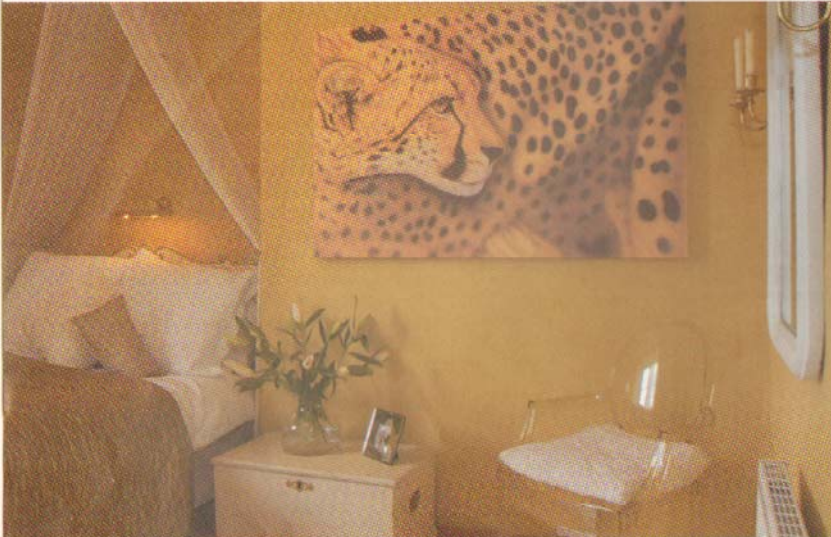
the kitchen with a large rectangular hatch.

"This house felt very dark and gloomy when I first moved in and there were dark colours everywhere, which certainly didn't help. I have really opened up my living space to let more light in. I can now sit in my kitchen and have breakfast while looking at this beautiful view of the Wiltshire countryside," said Joanna. "You must see the back of the house too, I even have my own outside privy."

Across the small courtyard is a large washroom with the original Victorian copper. Joanna's future plans are to turn the washroom into a self-contained studio for her work, complete with a patio door, which will open out onto her pretty garden. She is also looking forward to having a central heating system installed, having survived last winter with only makeshift heaters. "I just have to sell a few more paintings now to pay for it all," she said.

When it came to dressing her home, Joanna always had very clear ideas on how she wanted it to look. "My flat was eclectic and decorated in a wonderful mix of styles. However, I wanted this house to be more contemporary in style, but keeping the wonderful period details."

Left: Warm tones in the master bedroom
Below and above right: Joanna's stunning artwork dictates the colour scheme for the lounge





Joanna told me that she loves mixing old with new and feels that they can work beautifully together. Her home really is testimony to this. "My ex-partner is an antique dealer and we often used to go to France together shopping for antiques. A lot of the pieces in this house have come from France and also my flat. I think that they really do work well here though," she said.

With so much going on at present in Joanna's life, I asked her if she ever felt under pressure. "Oh no never," was her reply, "why should I? I love my work, it really is my passion and it doesn't feel like work at all to me. I am so lucky in doing what I love and being able to make a living at the same time and I'm also very positive and such an enthusiastic person. The secret is you just have to pace yourself; that's really all there is to it." WL

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Top right: The studio has plenty of natural light
 Above right: Stylish painted furniture in the bedroom
 Left: The intimate dining area in the kitchen