

# The Guardian



**'This building gives me so many ideas': creatives on**

# the spaces that inspire them

From a garage workshop filled with leather to a light-filled studio, these artists' surroundings are part of their process

## Hannah Booth

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### **The designer: 'My visitors become childlike with curiosity'**

As with all the best things, Caroline Strecker's one-woman leather bag business started by accident. Returning to the UK in 2015 after a nomadic few years travelling, and working and living in Los Angeles, she realised London was no longer home. Two chance conversations - one with her mother's lodger, who offered to rent Strecker his cottage in Somerset, where she still lives; the other with someone who couldn't find the right leather dog collar - led to her founding Rag of Colts (an old English collective noun for young male horses).

Strecker, 36, now makes bags by hand from vintage leather saddlery and bridle pieces (she gave up on dog collars pretty quickly - too easy). She has collected these, along with brass harness buckles, for years. "I love flea markets, auctions, junk shops," she says. "If I see anything in old leather, I buy it. I love the history and character of each piece, and wanted to find a way to reuse them. Some date back to Victorian times."

Horses run in the blood. Strecker grew up on a farm, and her great-grandfather won Olympic gold in polo in 1920. "He had a tack room, and I used to love sitting in there, smelling the old leather." She was surrounded by make-your-own creativity as a child: her mother trained as a pattern cutter and made their clothes.

Strecker works from a small garage attached to her cottage. "When I step into the studio, it has an energy," she says. "Visitors change when they come. They become childlike with curiosity and want to feel the leather." Bridles and saddles line the walls and fill every corner. She has 20 saddles ready to be made into bags, "so there's barely an inch of free space". Even if she could store them elsewhere, she wouldn't: "I get all my ideas from them."

She spends most of her time working at an old printmakers bench she found at a flea market in nearby Shepton Mallet (where she also found the rug). Opposite is a desk, with a chair covered in a vintage sheepskin numnah, a pad that sits underneath a saddle to make it more comfortable for the horse. She found the tack shop sign at an antiques auction.

Each bag Strecker makes is different. "It keeps me feeling creative, rather than like a production line," she says. She usually starts work early, around 6am, before having breakfast and walking her dogs. "I can get so absorbed in my work, I don't want to leave. But I shut the kitchen door on it all if I need to."

She's keen to dispel any romance associated with being a one-person creative business. "It's just me, so I can't get ill, or injure myself, or take any holiday. It's physical work, and my hands are covered in cuts and callouses. But I have no regrets."

*ragofcolts.com*

### **The writer: 'People are central to my novels. Being around others is the most important thing I can do'**





Nikesh Shukla in his shared office in Bristol. Photograph: Joel Redman/The Guardian

When Nikesh Shukla really doesn't want to be interrupted, he deploys the office trick of wearing headphones. But he rarely does this: interruptions, conversations and stimulation are the reason he's chosen a bustling office - a "digital arts space" shared with other creatives - over a hushed den.

"I cannot work in silence, I find it too distracting," he says. "I've never been a solitary person - I have to have people to talk to." His desk is based in Watershed, an arts venue on Bristol's waterside that, along with the shared studio, has three cinemas and a cafe-bar. Shukla works alongside 100 other "residents" from various artistic disciplines, mostly in the digital arena: digital artists, games designers, VR storytellers, software developers and film-makers. Shukla has been there since 2014, when he took a job editing an online magazine. "Being surrounded by artists means I have people to chew the fat with: Brexit, who saw *Fleabag* last night, that sort of thing," he says. He sits next to Chloe Meineck, a designer who works with music to create tools for people living with dementia, and opposite a VR games designer, whose work is often covered by non-disclosure agreements. "He always has his VR headset on."

Shukla is, by his own admission, "the most analogue person here". He writes novels - he wrote his second in this office, and is currently writing his third - along with journalism and treatments for TV and film, and has edited two collections of essays. This varied portfolio career benefits from sharing ideas. "People are central to my work, particularly my novels, so I need that contact. Being around others is the single most important thing a writer can do." Having digital experts on hand has its advantages, too: "Although I'm one of the few people here who has been traditionally published, I'm always seeking ways of connecting people with my work in a digital world," Shukla says. "We're not a studio full of lone wolves; collaboration is so important."

But isn't it hard to concentrate in a chatty office? "I only write in short chunks of time," he says. "I prioritise my really creative work - such as my novel - for first thing in the morning, when

I'm fresh, and never spend more than an hour or two on it. I can't immerse myself in one project - I'd get bored. I thrive on having lots of things to do."

Before he had children, Shukla worked at home. "But it caused me a lot of anxiety," he says. "I hated that lack of separation between home- and work-life. I'm not rich, so I didn't have the luxury of a garden room or loft conversion I could shut the door on." Once his children arrived, working from home was out of the question. "They're too distracting. Home is where Netflix and snacks are, too. I used to put the TV on for background noise, but ended up watching it. I love writing here, and wouldn't trade my messy, noisy desk for anywhere else."

*The Good Immigrant USA (co-edited by Nikesh Shukla) is published by Dialogue.*

## **The artistic director: 'My collecting is like a madness - I can't go anywhere without bringing something back'**



Anda Winters in the bar of the Print Room theatre, surrounded by objects she's collected. Photograph: Suki Dhanda/The Guardian

Anda Winters sees beauty in everything: a rusting heating system in the basement of the theatre she runs ("It's like an installation"), vintage typewriters ("I have a huge passion for them"), old telephones, even ancient graters. "I love them," she says of the latter. "They remind me of childhood." These objects and more fill every wall, table, nook, the box office, even Winters' own offices at the Print Room in London, which opened as the Coronet Theatre in 1898, before becoming a cinema in the 1920s. Parts of the building have barely changed in 120 years. A vintage drinks trolley sits in the lobby, a huge orchid sitting on the top, a few bottles below.

Winters opened the Print Room in September 2010 in a converted graphic design studio and printing warehouse. In July 2014, it moved into the old Coronet cinema. (Next month the Print Room will revert to the original theatre name, The Coronet.) Her mission is to stage exciting, undiscovered plays by great writers, and encourage new talent. "It was so exciting, taking on this building," says Croatian-born Winters, who grew up in a small town to artistic parents - her



father an architect, her mother a ballet dancer. “When I saw it, I thought, I’ll never find my way around.” Alongside a main auditorium, is a second, smaller studio space that often stages art shows, and a cavernous basement bar – previously the stalls. The building is a warren of corridors, staircases and tiny dressing rooms.

Winters shows me one of her favourite walls: beautifully aged, distressed and patinated with age, in what now serves as the men’s dressing room. Next door is the men’s loo; Winters found its vintage light switch in Berlin. “This building gives me so many ideas,” she says. “It’s full of secrets.” These include the rumoured ghost of a young woman, and chalk drawings on the walls of enemy planes made during the second world war, when the theatre’s roof was used as a lookout.

Winters studied fashion in New York, with a view to becoming a costume designer. But she always had in mind that she wanted to run a theatre, one that could combine her love of art, music, poetry – and objects. Her collecting, she says, is “like a madness. I can’t go anywhere without bringing something back. I like old objects, and the stories behind them.” In the offices are a collection of reception desk bells, and porcelain dogs mounted bottom-down on a wall. She visits her favourite antiques store every Friday. “When I don’t turn up, they call, worried,” she smiles.

She makes things, too: a wall-mounted saucepan with a mirror in the bottom; a set of chair backs – relieved of their seats – mounted on a bench; photographs taken in Norway. She is currently turning mismatched vintage glassware into lights. “I’d love to open a shop here to sell these things,” she says. As a busy, international artistic director, where does she find the time? “I don’t sleep so well,” she says.

*the-print-room.org*

**The children’s writer and illustrator: ‘For years, my table lived in the family shed’**



Benji Davies in his studio, which has plenty of space to house all the tools of his trade. Photograph: Suki Dhanda/The Guardian

In 2009, Benji Davies took a trip to Whitstable, Kent, and photographed the colourful wooden beach huts dotted along the seafront. They remained on his camera for a few years, until he came to write his first book, *The Storm Whale*, published in 2013. The main character lives with his fisherman father in a higgledy-piggledy house that has a strong resemblance to these huts, sitting on a windswept strip of sand.

“I get seeds of ideas, store them, and a few years later, they turn up somewhere,” Davies says. His books have a strong sense of place. “A lot of them are scenes I’ve absorbed from visits. Grandad’s Island came after a trip to Thailand, with lots of tropical colour.” A few years ago, with several more bestselling children’s books under his belt, Davies returned to Whitstable. “And there they were, the huts – I was so surprised to see them. They were so familiar – it was as if I had invented them in my imagination.”

Davies now works from a studio in London with windows on three sides. “I’ve found having three walls of light appealing; they’re conducive to working away from the computer, something I want to explore further.”

Davies does his early work – ink or pencil thumbnail sketches along with the text itself, a dual process he refers to as “writing” – from an old kitchen table that belonged to his father. Look closely and you can see clamp marks from the family’s meat mincer. “For years it lived in our shed with guinea pig cages on top,” he says. Once his book starts to take shape, Davies moves to a nearby desk with a computer – complete with a new surface made by the designers Unto This Last – scans the roughs, and works over the top of them with digital colour. Typography is hand-drawn in ink, scanned and placed on top.

For the first time since Davies left full-time employment as an animation director of commercials, in 2012, he is surrounded by all his tools. “I moved here recently from a smaller



space, and before that I worked at home. Here, I finally have the freedom to move around, not feel restricted, and have some physical and mental breathing space.”

Davies enjoys his solitude. “I’m temperamentally suited to working on my own,” he says, but adds that from his studio he can see people coming and going. “I nearly took a studio that’s a bit more tucked away in the building, but as I work by myself felt it was important to be seen and to see other people – otherwise I may as well be in a shed at the bottom of the garden.”

On top of books, he has the odd side-project: he has just illustrated a bookshop window for the launch of his new picture book. His next big project is to animate his books, combining his old role and his new one. “To see them on screen, that’s a big ambition of mine.”

*Tad is published by Harper Collins*

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