MINIMALISTS BEWARE – LEGENDARY MODEL SCOUT FIONA ELLIS IS NO SHRINKING VIOLET WHEN IT COMES TO CREATING BOLD, BOUDOIR-INSPIRED LIVING SPACES

WORDS TINA LOFTHOUSE
ith an eye for all things bright and beautiful, Fiona Ellis discovered the supermodels Erin O’Connor, Karen Elson and Alex Wek. But after 25 years in the modelling world, Ellis, who is named alongside Kate Moss, Mario Testino and Vivienne Westwood in Elle magazine’s 100 names in fashion, decided to pursue her passion for interior design.

Ellis says that her two careers actually have much in common: “I treat a space how I would look at a face, almost within the frame of a camera shot,” she says. “I look at the shape and the tones and how it all fits in together.”

Her style is perhaps best described as boudoir-meets-boho-glamour. It is anything but conservative. Her own home in Sunningdale, Berkshire, which she shares with partner, artist Scott Hendrie and teenage daughter, Holly, demonstrates it well.

The living room is a combination of dark colours and animal prints, with croc-skin wallpaper above the fireplace, a leopard-skin rug and fur throws draped over the sofa. A peacock chair and peacock feathers accent the look. “I like a room to feel like it has evolved over time,” she says of the eclectic design.

But not everyone is a fan. “My daughter is always complaining that it is too dark in the house and when she has her own home it will be light, bright and minimal,” she says. Maybe to please her daughter then, her bedroom and kitchen are light in colour by comparison – although it is only a small compromise: her bedroom is a dusky lilac with a fluorescent orange four-poster adding a striking contrast and, while the kitchen may be predominantly white, it has striking sapphire-coloured tiles and black granite surfaces.

Her penchant for ornate lighting gives the house a theatrical feel, with the likes of hand-dyed lampshades adorning the French tole chandelier in the dining room, and a neon wall sconce in the bedroom.

Alongside the tactile throws, dramatic lights and textured wallpapers, Ellis adds to the atmosphere with Comme des Garçons’ incense sticks and Diptyque sandalwood candles. Flowers are also a must-have, with tuberose and peonies among Ellis’s favourite blooms.

Ellis’s home was her first project and it soon became a coveted location for photo shoots for the likes of Elle Decor and Habitat.
“Enjoy the experience of creating an amazing space to live”

Ellis then set up Ellis Eye Interiors and now uses her flair to create desirable abodes for clients across London and the Home Counties. It is often the case of ‘out with the bland and in with the bold’ with rich jewel colours, statement charcoal and dark woods replacing pastel palettes.

While she has a strong style, Ellis says it is always a case of collaboration with clients. “I love that I can learn from them through their own unique eye for things, relating to the colours they love or certain periods of furniture and furnishings. This aspect of getting to know your clients and the psychology of it all is a big part of what I enjoy,” she says. Drama and illusion feature heavily – one client had always wanted a library so Ellis created an entire fake wall of books for her.

Ellis also loves sourcing statement pieces for her clients and turns to antique fairs and dealers for something unique. Lillie Road is one of her recommended spots, along with The French House in SW6, and French Finds in Cheshire. To say Ellis is a Francophile is perhaps an understatement – also on her speed-dial is Maison Bananas in France for curios and art deco furniture.

And if she can’t source what she is after, she makes it herself – witness her collaboration with Scott on a collection of stunning skulls. Each skull is unique in design and they have already caught the eye of art collector Charles Saatchi’s company, which has been sourcing them for its clients in London and across the pond.

“Each artwork pays homage to the living creature, working with various mediums to enhance their beauty, such as gilding, metallic and fluorescents,” she explains. “The skulls take on another dimension.”

Their next collection of skulls is what Ellis curiously describes as “mental chicken oriental”. The mind really does boggle, but if anyone can turn the ridiculous into the sublime it is probably Ellis.

She is clearly a woman who is happy in her work. Ellis describes her home as her sanctuary and this is what she wants to create for others. “I love being able to express my creativity with colour, textures and form, and I love making people happy.”

As for the year ahead, Ellis is on a mission to liven up austere interiors everywhere by launching a range of fluorescent and leopard-print lampshades, and a collection of antique furniture given the Ellis Eye and Scott Hendrie touch of metallic, gilding and fluoro. “I find many clients are afraid of colour and how and where to use it and feel like they should play safe. My advice is to be bold and brave and experiment,” she says.

If you’re not feeling quite so bold, take a look at wallpapers, advises Ellis. “There are some wonderful collections out there. Some are pricey but they are really worth it and just by doing one wall or alcove you can achieve an amazing look.”

“Most importantly have fun doing it,” she says. “We spend around half our lives at home so enjoy the experience of creating an amazing space to live.”