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# Home

*Below, Michael Smith  
at his Bel Air house  
with his Labradoodles  
Jasper, left, and Sport*

*Edited by* GERRI GALLAGHER

## THE MAN WHO MADE-OVER THE WHITE HOUSE...

... and Cindy Crawford's house, and Tom Cruise's too —  
in fact, just about anyone who's anyone's house.

Annabel Rivkin meets interior-design dynamo Michael Smith







Smith with  
Cindy Crawford

### CINDY'S HOUSE



Michael S. Smith and I are at Masterpiece, the shiny Chelsea newcomer that has replaced Grosvenor House Art & Antiques. Fair and, it seems, heralded a newly splashy, social and barefacedly expensive attitude to how people decorate their houses.

Certainly it doesn't feel like London. Too slick. Too air-conditioned. Too network-y and plush and marvellous. There is neither a warm glass of white wine nor a stained tie in sight. The canapés are foie gras-focused and presented on glass slabs. The carpet is springy, muffling footfall and absorbing some of the cacophony of chatter that bounces off the high ceilings of the Royal Hospital.

Hugo de Ferranti mans his smart gallery pop-up and chats to the ever-immaculate Duke of Beaufort – elegant in a ruthlessly cut navy-blue suit. Rose Uniacke hovers by her stand, set up as a gorgeously muted sitting room. Richard Carling's presence is everywhere and the restaurants are Le Caprice and Harry's Bar, all booked up to the utter hilt.

And through this glamorous, money-flooded setting glides Michael Smith, 47, like a Dries Van Noten-clad bird of paradise, chucking out bon mots like others blow kisses. His suit is slubby beige linen; he wears – and somehow pulls off – open-toed sandals and has thrown a vivid turquoise cashmere jumper over his shoulders. His hair is artfully unruly and he rarely stops moving forwards, appearing to look straight ahead and yet somehow clocking 360 degrees of everything. You just don't

notice him noticing. It is most uncanny.

The man who became famous in the Nineties as the Thinking Celebrities' decorator – Michelle Pfeiffer, George Clooney, Steven Spielberg, Tom Cruise, Cindy Crawford, Harrison Ford, Rob Reiner – and then went on to decorate for moguls like Rupert Murdoch and Howard Marks (to clarify: the hedgefund titan, not *Mr Nice Guy* dope-dealer Howard Marks), added another flash of fame to his bow two years ago when he was the man the Obamas picked to work on the White House, to revamp their quarters and tweak the Oval Office, which makes him America's First Interior Designer. And he wears the mantle lightly.

He is in London partly because he is not the type to miss out on Masterpiece, and partly because he trots around the globe the way most of us trot round the corner to pick up a newspaper, but primarily because he is in the middle of decorating Natalie Massenet's new London house. The Net-a-Porter founder and Smith have been friends for 25 years. 'He was the young interior-design star in LA and I was a reporter starting out at WWJD,' recalls Massenet. 'I was sent to interview him about his new Volvo station wagon to find out if this was the new hot car to drive and I thought, "Who is this guy and why are we taking his taste decisions so seriously?" Two minutes with him and I got it. Michael was a walking soundbite, unequivocal in his opinions, with a radar for all things good taste.'

His breezy, distracted Californian manner masks a character possessed of unusual focus; a person who researches everything with

absolute thoroughness. He does not decorate for these rich and demanding and well-travelled people merely on instinct. The secret of such blanket client satisfaction? 'I spend so much time prepping for the test that generally I get a good grade on the test,' he says. 'If you say to me, "I want a sofa," I will ask 100 questions and look at your reactions and formulate the kind of sofa that you should have.'

He has countless multiples – clients who use him time and again as they move around the world or expand their way of life to straddle countries and continents. He has no signature style and is baffled by the very idea. He decorates not just according to how a person wants to live but also where their life might be going, which he calls, 'a sort of three-dimensional chess. Evelyn de Rothschild [he decorated Sir Evelyn and his wife Lynn's New York apartment] said I was the only decorator he'd ever had who actually listened to him. Being charming is one thing but you do actually have to listen. And not just listen but deduce. Figure out what is comfortable and what level of discomfort you can put people through in order for them to have a greater product in the end. I suppose it's trying to figure out what people want versus what they think they want.' That way the end result fits better. Lasts longer. Better value for (a lot of) money. And everybody's happy. 'I don't think I actually asked him to do my house officially,' says Massenet. 'It was more like Michael was well aware that if it was left up to me it would never get done and so he stepped in to save the day. As he is one of my dearest friends in the world and he has a gift, I

# WENDI'S HOUSE



With Wendi Deng

would have been crazy not to rely on him."

Michael creates a sort of buzz at Masterpiece. The dealers know him and they know he has many clients, most of whom trust him completely and have an awful lot of cash to chuck at their houses. He would be a well-liked man even without this huge surge of money behind him but, in the middle of a recession and with a slight whiff of desperation hanging over some of the Masterpiece shopfronts, he is powerfully popular.

And so we hop and skip around Michael's London. From Masterpiece, where he is the beau of the ball; to Colefax and Fowles, where he charms the besuited, patrician public shop assistants virtually senseless; to Megan's, the homespun New King's Road café where we stop for lunch and he is accosted by various fans; to Jamb in Pinlicko, where his fabric line Jasper (named after one of his Labradoodles) is stocked; and on and on and on. "We invariably regret the project's end," said Howard Marks after Smith had done a couple of houses for him and his wife Nancy. And so Michael is invariably and repeatedly asked back to dinner at the houses he has decorated. He and his boyfriend of 12 years, James Costos, an HBO executive, recently hosted a fundraiser for President Obama's re-election campaign at their house in Bel Air — 400 people turned up and \$1 million was raised. Not many interior designers wield quite the same social and political power. But again, aware though he is, he wears it lightly.

Even working on the White House didn't rattle him. "Of course it's more pressure but, like anything,

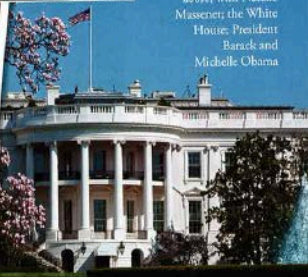
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He's the one  
you long to  
sit next to, not  
the know-it-all  
you long  
to swerve

# MICHELLE'S HOUSE



Clockwise from  
above, with Natalie  
Massener; the White  
House; President  
Barack and  
Michelle Obama







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He is more worried about doing up Natalie's children's rooms. 'I mean, this is my goddaughter's room, so if I blow it I really blow it. I try not to overdo it with Natalie in the sense that I know her so well, so I want to push my ideas when I know they are right. But I have to temper that. It's not my house.'

'Even though he is a native southern Californian he has a New York sensibility – hence his razor-sharp wit and opinionated banter,' says Massenet. 'And, when I met him, he had the best apartment of anyone I knew at that age... complete with an Hermès-orange study that made you forget you were in a beach spot in Santa Monica. I think he liked me because I was really into fashion and spoke French. I couldn't afford designer clothes at the time and I had this high-street white pant-suit I wore all the time. He told everyone it was YSL! He carried on embellishing my life, once introducing me to the locals at Round Hill – one of his favourite holiday spots – as the Countess de Massenet. I think part of the reason Michael is putting so much love into my house is his desire to see me living a very chic life.'

The eldest child of a businessman and artist, Michael grew up in the liberal atmosphere of Seventies southern California always knowing he was gay and never feeling the need to pretend to be any other way. 'Really early on I had these immersion episodes,' he says. 'When I was about 14 I read that novel *Shogun* about Japan and then I became completely obsessed with everything Japanese. I only ate Japanese food. I read every book on Japan. And then I went on to my Russian phase...' Which is presumably why he now knows everything about everything, which – the way he does it – makes him the funnest person at the party, the one you long to sit next to, rather than the know-it-all you long to swerve. He identifies your vibe, hops on to your level, and gives you a damn good time. 'There is literally nothing in the world more hilarious than getting drunk with Michael Smith,' says one besotted client.

He studied design at the Otis institute in California but got bored, decided it was too sterile and modern, 'ditched out' and came to London to study at the V&A in the mid-Eighties. 'I love the fundamentals of English life,' he says, 'the gentleness, the quirkiness. I enjoy what many people would describe as English decorating – really, it's a fusion of American and English that happened

you get used to the idea of it. Everyone there is so lovely and they have been there forever and that makes things so easy.'

with Nancy Lancaster [the American who did up Ditchley and, at one time, owned Colefax and Fowler] and Nancy Astor [Cliveden]. So it's what happened when American money met English history, rendering it, apart from anything else, comfortable.

He returned to California at 23 and his first big commission was a house for Bruce Springsteen. Unsurprisingly the Boss wanted an all-American abode, 'denim, folk art. But he proceeded to get divorced almost straight away so I don't think he lived in it for very long.' Aside from the stars and the studio heads (Peter Chernin, who ran Fox), Michael has decorated Shutters hotel in Los Angeles and the much-heralded Lowell in Manhattan, not to mention extensive corporate work, most notoriously the office of John Thain, former CEO of Merrill Lynch who, in conjunction with some aggressive cost-cutting at the bank, decided to hire Michael to redo his office. The budget was \$1.2 million.

What you get when you invest in Michael Smith – and it is a considerable investment – is a situation where, as far as possible, your DNA runs through your house's DNA. His work is the opposite of homogenised. It is highly personalised, brilliantly proportioned, a smidge theatrical, gently but crucially reflective of its location and just demanding enough that you and your sensibilities grow a little while it is being done. Because, as a sort of eternal student, he wants to grow too. 'The challenge is always not to be fearful of making a mistake,' he says. 'It's an intellectual exercise to try not to do things you know will work. I really so try to make it quite rigorous. That's why it takes patience to be a client because it's like cooking. If you see a lot of uncooked ingredients then it's hard to know how the finished thing will turn out. It's hard to show somebody the individual ingredients and make them believe that it will taste really great. I understand that if it goes badly then it doesn't taste great but you really do get strength from the combining of different things and it's a challenge.'

For one so chirpy, he exists in a mindset of constant worst-case scenario. 'It's not pessimistic, it's just rational,' he says. 'I think every sofa will come with a damaged skirt and every cupboard is going to arrive and be too small and every cupboard is not going to fit through the door. And when you live that way you can be sunny because you've made all your contingency plans.' And the client senses the contingency plans, feels secure and is able to relax and merrily proceed with winning Oscars or running America or however else they fill their days. It seems a truth universally acknowledged that life's a little less stressful and a little more stimulating when Michael Smith is decorating it. □