

By Annemarie Kiely Photographed by Sharyn Cairns

# Grand illusion

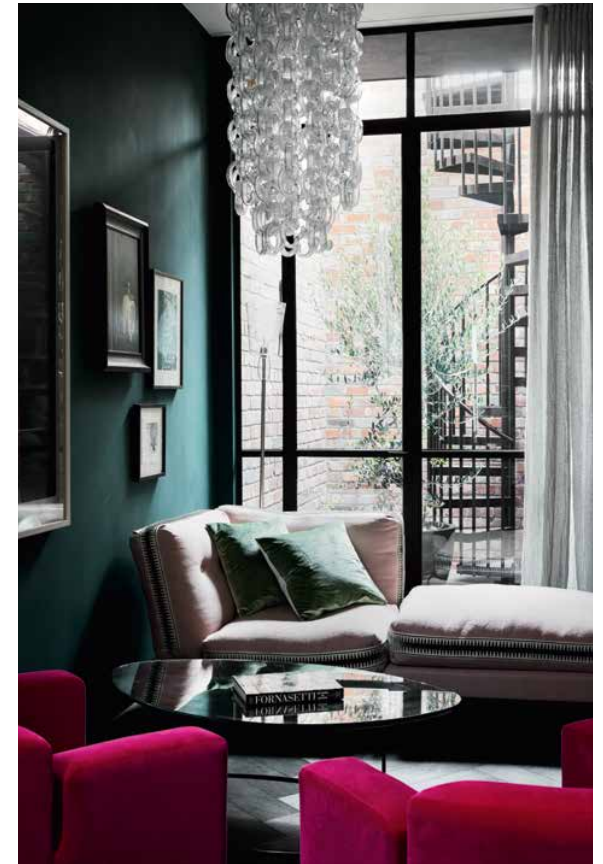
A fantastical world of hyper-reality awaits behind the front door of this former bookshop in a once-gritty part of MELBOURNE.



**THIS PAGE** designer Kate Challis standing before Valerie Sparks's *Le Vol* art installation, wears Scanlan Theodore blouse and trousers, and earrings by The French Jewel Box. **OPPOSITE PAGE** in the living room, chaise in de Le Cuona linen from Boyac and Samuel & Sons braid from South Pacific Fabrics; Fornasetti floor lamp; *East of the Sun, West of the Moon* artwork (top left) by Paquitta Maher; *The Organisation of the Vice* print (top right) by Valerie Sparks; *The Bouchardon Mill, Crozant* artwork by Armand Guillaumin. *Details, last pages.*



**THIS PAGE** in the kitchen and dining room, joinery in two-pack polyurethane in Resene Dusted Blue designed by Kate Challis Interiors; CDK Stone splashback and benchtop; Mark Tuckey dining table; Friends & Founders La Pipe chairs from Fred International; custom Christopher Boots Petra pendant light. **OPPOSITE PAGE** in another view of the living room, Ochre Moon Pebble coffee table; Fratelli Toso chandelier from Nicholas & Alistair.





**THIS PAGE** in the dining room, custom **banquette** by Kate Challis Interiors upholstered in Antoine d'Albioussie Drap de Flandres linen from Boyac; custom **shelves** by Kate Challis Interiors; custom Christopher Boots Petra **pendant light**; **curtains** in de Le Cuona linen from Boyac. **OPPOSITE PAGE** in another view of the living room, **armchairs** by Luciano Frigerio from Nicholas & Alistair upholstered in Designers Guild velvet; **side table** from McPherson Antiques; **Spring table lamp** by Marianna Kennedy; **print of Temptation of Eve** sculpture at Saint Lazare cathedral in Autun, France (top); **Snow White #1 artwork** by Oona Grimes; **Historia (2016) large print** by Jacqui Stockdale; custom **paint** by Porter's Paints for Kate Challis Interiors.



“The *best* interiors  
are DECEITFUL.  
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to PLAY” KATE CHALLIS



**THIS PAGE** in the lightwell, lacquered table by Marianna Kennedy; *Black Gum-3* (2007) artwork by Christian Thompson.  
**OPPOSITE PAGE** in the powder room, Carlo Scarpa Venini mirror from Nicholas & Alistair; custom Christopher Boots Petra wall sconce; Falper Lavamani wall-hung basin from Rogerseller; Yokato tapware from Brodware; Porter's Paints Bloom paint.

**B**ack in the noughties, when Kate Challis bought a decommissioned shop on Fitzroy's Gertrude Street — the hipster heart of Melbourne — she had a PhD in art history and a hankering to practise design. The street had a gritty allure, was glued by a sense of community, and incurred a short walk to the home of her beloved grandfather, Bernard Smith, one of the pre-eminent art historians of the 20th century. As she recalls it, the neighbourhood was then a rub-up of the city's rich and poor — a diamond in the rough with an outlaw reputation, a counterculture vibe and not a barista within cooe.

"That was 15 years ago," says Challis, a fine-featured beauty with a bohemian air who has since traded academia for a self-named design practice that now specifies art instead of studying it. She still inhabits the old Fitzroy shop — site of Melbourne's first feminist reading room, Shrew Women's Bookshop, but the growth of her small family and the reformation of Gertrude, from brawling bars into city-best cafes, determined that its 19th-century structure be recast in content and character.

"This is now like the private entry into an exclusive supper club," says Challis, opening her streetside front door into an immersive dining room that summons the hyper-reality of a natural-history

diorama. "This used to be our living room, but it never worked. You'd sit here in the evening and overhear conversations on the street. It never felt cosy or private, so I decided to put the living room at the back of the house."

Collaborating with Ridolfi Architecture, Challis upended the original ground-floor plan of her semidetached property, siting an open kitchen at street front to sync with the commercial nature of the strip. The flip felt more receptive to the rhythms of the day and Challis's dream of designing around Melbourne artist Valerie Sparks's dramatic, large-scale work.

"I have loved Valerie's work forever," she says, informing that her first dining-room scheme allowed wall space for the framing of Sparks's *Le Vol* — large-scale prints featuring the taxidermy bird trophies of natural history in hybrid landscapes that pillory the past's thieving culture of collecting. "I fell in love with the series and then met Valerie. She had worked out that Bernard Smith was my grandfather before we met and cited his work and the aesthetics of the 18th and 19th century as a broad shaper of *Le Vol*."

This knowledge — that Sparks's creative stimulus was in part sourced from Smith's magnum opus, *European Vision and the South Pacific* — emboldened Challis to commission *Le Vol* as a space-engulfing installation. Sparks was onboard but had to find a way of wrapping her artwork — a play on the 19th-century panoramic wallpapers produced by Joseph Dufour — around a kitchen nearly four metres high. The process was complex but the outcome astounding and made more fantastically so by Christopher Boots's build of a 300-kilogram light from crystal quartz stones seemingly mined from Sparks's historic landscape.

"My grandfather was one of the first historians to write about Captain Cook's artists and scientists," Challis says, adding that Sparks's base landscape and birds were lifted from works by artists from his second voyage. "So, Valerie placed a little tribute to him in the form of an owl," she adds, pointing to one corner.

This reference to her famously Marxist grandfather, celebrated in the 2016 biography *Hegel's Owl: The Life of Bernard Smith*, sits in silent watch over a galley kitchen clad in Calacatta marble, the veins of which appear to root from Sparks's flora. It speaks to a lived house in which Challis has hidden the history of lives lived in resonant layers of colour and content.

"It's all about evoking emotion," she says, leading passage through the space of the former dining room — now a corridor flanked by a bank of service-concealing cupboards — into a salon set with a cascading Murano chandelier circa 1960s. "It took a lot of goes to get this wall colour right." The gumnut green to which she refers pulls from the nationalistic palette of *Western Australian Gum Blossom* (1928) by Margaret Preston — a tightly structured still life that informs the bud-pink fluorescence of '60s Luciano Frigerio club chairs and the stamen yellow of vintage lampshades casting warm light on a wall of staunchly feminist art.

Everywhere, books and considered craft reveal Challis's belief in decorating with duplicity and story, as tells in a small stairwell propped with a history-laden lacquered table — handmade by her friend, Marianna Kennedy — and papered with Fornasetti's Nuvolette clouds, an illusory continuation of Sparks's nirvana. "The best interiors are deceitful," explains Challis, as she circles her PhD study on the illuminated manuscripts in the *Rothschild Prayer Book* (a rare 16th-century book of hours purchased at a Christie's auction for around \$15 million by Perth billionaire Kerry Stokes in 2014). "Those artists created this amazing illusionism, tantalised the eye. If you are going to fib with fantasy, take it all the way — give yourself permission to play. And in that artful self-investigation, the amazing interior will emerge." **VL**

[katechallis.com](http://katechallis.com) @katechallisinteriors



**THIS PAGE** in the main bedroom, custom bed by Kate Challis Interiors with bedhead upholstered in Antoine d'Albousse Drap de Flandres linen from Boyac; vintage mirrored bedside table; Hale Mercantile Co bed linen from Mondopiero; Ocre Eucalyptus wall light. **OPPOSITE PAGE** in the stairwell, Fornasetti Nuvolette wallpaper by Cole & Son; antique late-19th-century chandelier balustrade; in Porter's Paints Aniseed and Snow White paint.





**THIS PAGE** in another bedroom, custom bed by Kate Challis Interiors and Bespoke Melbourne; Surgeon light by Lost Profile Studio; custom paint by Porter's Paints. **OPPOSITE PAGE** in the bathroom, Duravit Scola basin; Jieldé Loft wall light from Eurouluce; Popham Design Zig Zag tiles from Tiento Tiles. *Details, last pages.*