



WATER COLOURS



A RESTORED MILL IN CO CARLOW TELLS THE STORY OF TWO CREATIVE MINDS WORKING TOGETHER. GEMMA TIPTON LOOKS AT A HOUSE THAT BENEFITS FROM THE TALENTS OF BOTH.

Artist Mark O'Neill's riverside home has been transformed into a retreat of light and space that opens up to the landscape. OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE LEFT The waterwheel has been restored and O'Neill is hoping to use it to generate electricity for the building. LEFT On the banks of the River Slaney, this 18th century thatched mill combines old-world charm with clean, contemporary living.

RIGHT Through the kitchen window, the balcony, made by local craftsmen, is visible. The columns were sourced from a local salvage yard. BELOW Maria opened up the kitchen with this window, providing a view of the rushing river that is almost cinematic. The kitchen units by Maise Interiors are finished with a gloss lacquer. OPPOSITE PAGE Stepping down into the living room, white paint lifts the relatively low ceiling. Natural linen on the sofas harmonises with elements such as the walnut unit, fulfilling Maria's aim "to create calm, light-filled interior spaces".



There is a romance attached to old buildings, but their undeniable charm and beauty do not necessarily mean that they are suited to the way we live today. Georgian townhouses enjoy perfect proportions and are famous for their light, but the configuration of rooms doesn't always fit with contemporary family life. Meanwhile, with the exception of the Great Houses, country homes from the past were built with the demands of warmth and shelter to the fore, closing themselves off from the surrounding landscape, which inevitably leads to dark rooms and low ceilings.

Updating these homes is a challenging balancing act to preserve the atmosphere of the house and maintain the sense of history but also give it a renewed future. When artist Mark O'Neill bought his 18th century thatched home, a former mill house (with water mill intact) on the banks of the River Slaney, it was technically ready to move into. However, by working with

interior designer Maria Fenlon, he has transformed a charming-but-dark house into a stunning place of light and water that opens itself up to the landscape, whilst providing a peaceful retreat.

When two creative talents work together, there can be inevitable clashes. Each has their own strong aesthetic sense, and both artists and interior designers are hyper-sensitive to the influence of colour and light. Fenlon describes the collaboration as a process. "People have this idea that interior designers will come in all 'Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen', and paint the walls pink and purple. But in reality, it's completely different. It's talking, listening, looking at the things people have, what they're wearing. I try to pick up on a style they like and develop that. Although, of course I direct them a bit ..."

It was the image of a bathroom with clean modern lines, which opened to the outside, that proved to be a starting point for the



BELOW Dogs Gretta and Baby Doll relax in their own bed, though they are happiest when following Mark around the house. OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE RIGHT The low-level windows are in the perfect position for views of the garden and river, while their height offers excellent privacy. BELOW RIGHT Soft velvets, taffeta silks and natural linens in neutral tones make the ground-floor guest bedroom a restful space. The paintings are favourites that Mark brought with him from his former period home.



project. Seeing O'Neill's immediate positive reaction made Fenlon realise that despite his choice of an old and rustic building, and his style of painting, which is famous for country scenes – dogs, cows, sheep and horses – the artist has a strong contemporary streak. "I don't have a signature style," Fenlon explains. "I try to find the client's preferred style. When we first visited the property, it was all dark, and turning in on itself, so that, together with the image I showed Mark, proved the beginning."

Opening a large window from the kitchen to the water, glassing in another section with French doors to the terrace, and restoring a balcony to an upper room, Fenlon's structural alterations immediately added the energies of the river and landscape to the feel of the house. Further interventions – such as white-painted ceilings, mirrors and reflective surfaces – have had such a profound effect that they feel almost structural. These alterations are balanced with the preservation of raw stone walls, deep window recesses and wooden beams.

Downstairs, the tones are neutral, with natural materials such as silks, silk velvet and linen predominating, while in the dramatic upstairs room that gives onto the balcony, more funky touches creep in with an electric blue chair and lime green rug. The walls display O'Neill's art collection, though none of the artist's own work – this was a deliberate choice. "Of an evening when I'm sitting down, I really don't want to be looking at my own work and thinking: that dog's tail is crooked ..."

The house has been inspirational for O'Neill. The openness of the design and its relationship to its surroundings have opened up his work: "I'm making bigger scale paintings, and I want them to look like paintings, so I'm using bigger brushes ... It's living here – it's about nature, being gutsy and bold, everything that nature is." 🌿

