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TALENT TO A MEWS

In a former stables attached to her Kensington shop, the Egg proprietor, Maureen Doherty, and architect Jonathan Tuckey have created a compact living space as understated and enigmatic as her lines of clothing. Soft, subtle surfaces set off thoughtfully selected ceramics and paintings to conjure a delicate interplay of light, shade and texture. Text: Timothy Brittain-Catlin. Photography: Rachael A. Smith

Left: a painting by Wallace Ting, given to Maureen by the artist, seems all the more luminous glimpsed on the floor beyond the subdued palette of the living area. The armchair and round table are from Puckhaber in



Top: the sleeping platform is perched high amid the roof beams. Above a 'Totomeo Micro' desk lamp by Artemide sits on a French fruitwood table by the bed. Right: the timber bath was specially made; the perforated bucket was once used to wash grapes or olives in the Mediterranean



This page, clockwise from top: on either side of the weathered kitchen table, from Puckhaber, stand a bentwood chair and an early 20th-century adjustable-height tubular-steel stool; the kitchen, usually concealed behind closed doors, has four wall compartments for everyday ingredients such as oil and vinegar. The vintage cooper taps were discovered by Jonathan; the staircase runs up the middle of the living space between a cool





This page, clockwise from top left: kettle, toaster, chopping board and pot of herbs form a still life on a linen tablecloth. The white fruit bowl comes from La Rochelle, and the little green jug from the Rigolo restaurant in Milan; the partition conceals a loo. An unseen door at its right can either close the cubicle or separate the whole shower room from the living area. The recess holds two tiny Lucie Rie bowls and a painting by Anthony Fry; the old stable doors now open on to the bathroom; in the shower room, the stone vessel on the wooden stool below the basin was discovered on eBay.



WELL, I'M up here in this exquisite little flat, and all the surfaces of the cabinets, as well as the few things on and in them, have an astonishing subtle lustre like the shell of a rare ostrich egg. So how appropriate it is that I am directly above the tiny shop and gallery of Maureen Doherty, which is called Egg, and located in an early 19th-century mews building in Kinnerton Street in Kensington. It is the most interesting house in a narrow street peppered with fascinating yards and closes. Both flat and shop are filled with intense sunlight, and so removed from everyday shopping and living that they seem to hover slightly above the ground.

Maureen says modestly that she is a facilitator, an enabler, one who draws work out of creative people. But that is hardly doing justice to what she has achieved. For many years she worked with the designer Issey Miyake, which, in addition to much else, involved finding and directing the architects who designed his shops. David Chipperfield, now world-famous, was commissioned by Maureen to create Miyake's first London shop; it was the architect's first significant project, and look what has happened to him since. She also gave the ceramicist Edmund de Waal his very first exhibition in 1995.

Egg mostly sells dresses designed or 'facilitated' (as she puts it) by Maureen and her team, and made by craft seamstresses from around the world. The inspiration for many of the gown-like dresses in plain linens, or black, or white, is Eastern or Far Eastern, in tribute to her long friendship with Miyake. But upstairs the character of the flat seems drawn from Maureen's love of ceramics, and perhaps especially from her deep admiration for the potter Lucie Rie, whom she befriended and who was a formative influence. She spent a lot of time with Rie, who encouraged her to move to Paris, where she studied with Annie Fourmanoir for six years.

Maureen is too modest to display her own ceramics, but one can see from what she has on her shelves how alert she is to the finest, most sensitive work, to its surface texture and form. Only someone with an acute awareness of its power could decorate a flat so intensely and yet with so little.

In fact it was one tiny work of Rie's – a bud-like pot for mixing colours – that Maureen gave to her architect Jonathan Tuckey: she posted it to his office with a little package of objects. This gesture was loaded with meaning and potential: Maureen intended it to convey the textures and tones of her eventual home. 'Maureen was a delight to collaborate with,' says Jonathan. She wanted the finished design to suit the character of the space, rather than first deciding what she needed and then asking her architects to fit it in. It is clear how much thought she invested in the whole process. The old partitions and fittings

were removed, and Jonathan and his project architect, Ryuta Hirayama, spent more than a year working with her in the derelict space as people carried on their daily business in the shop below.

On the ground floor, in what would once have been a mews stable, is a Japanese-style bath house – if you were to open the wide double doors, the bather would be right there in the street. And if sometimes the bather is in the street, the shop is sometimes in the bath, as Maureen's home, shop and gallery are architecturally interchangeable. The room is tiled in white, has a stack of shelves that Jonathan designed for it, and a wooden bath at the far end. One goes up the narrow stairs alongside to reach the living area of the house. And this is the space that so moved me when I entered it.

It is just a single large room divided by some partitions. These are made of chipboard edged with a gently stained softwood lip, whitened with wax to bring out the texture of the particles, or veneered with felt. These partitions form frames, on or within which Maureen has composed her ceramics, or small groups of everyday possessions. These compositions can change without disturbing the feeling of the whole place. Lucie Rie's mixing pot currently sits at the top of the stairs above a tiny painting, in a small niche with a door. The arrangement around the sink in the kitchen is arranged according to use: one group has oil and vinegar for her salads, and another has the honey and sugar for her breakfast.

These are displays, for sure – for Maureen is a shopkeeper and this part of her house could sometimes function as a shop – but there is a spiritual dimension to the overall composition that evidently goes much deeper. The upstairs shower room, for example, looks down on to the bath house below via a vertical shaft through which light can mysteriously filter either upwards or down depending on who is doing what at either end at the time. Jonathan calls this 'nostalgic' in the sense that it should remind you of enigmatic experiences of light in unusual places. Equally nostalgic – and special to the original character of the place – is the way in which the plastered lower part of the walls recalls the height of the building's original partitions before its restoration, while the bed, on a level further up at the very apex of the roof, could be a platform at the top of a hay-loft in what was once, after all, a mews house.

Maureen, meanwhile, is working her way up the street designing new properties: some will be shops, some galleries, and some perhaps tiny homes, but mostly, probably, will be a combination of all three. Jonathan Tuckey, we hope, will follow ■
Egg, 36 Kinnerton St, London SW1 (020 7235 9315; eggtrading.com). To contact Jonathan Tuckey Design, ring 020 8960 1909, or visit jonathantuckey.com