

NUMBERS GAME

Cary Nowell's playful ceramics add up to another success for the enterprising designer

BY TESSA SOUTER

California-based designer Cary Nowell is a born entrepreneur. When she gave up a thriving business making children's clothing two years ago to spend more time with her young family, she soon fell into another venture. She and a friend spent an afternoon at a paint-your-own ceramics workshop. It was so soothing that Nowell, who majored in painting in college, started going alone to make gifts. Before long she was setting up a studio and launching her own line of ceramics called Tabletop (from \$35 for a cup to \$195 for a platter).

The collection represents a melding of her favorite things: numbers ("I love their shapes, the simplicity of the graphics"), bright colors, and stark black and white. "I'm as busy as ever," says Nowell, who spends three mornings a week at her studio painting and firing each piece and every afternoon with her kids. "But it's a relaxed busy," says the designer, who insists she wouldn't want to build another big business. "I was so market-driven before—having to put out a collection and then get it into production. Now if I want to paint a 35 I just paint a 35." ■

JAMIE HAGLER / PRODUCED BY BARBARA A. S. HALL FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE READER INFORMATION



Doing the numbers: Nowell (left, in her big light-filled studio) moves from a black-and-white palette (above) to brights (below). Her son and daughter (right) show their ages—Abigail high-fives a platter while brother Peter holds a vase.





Letter perfect

An ordinary mantel becomes a graphic tableau when layered with plates alongside art, lamps, and vases. Glazed plates emblazoned with initials are a modern take on the monogram. To make them yourself, start with plain white plates and apply decals made especially for dishware (they're water- and heat-resistant). Use poster tack to securely prop plates against the wall. This approach is great for a brick fireplace, where hanging plates is tricky.

WHAT YOU NEED

- Monogrammed plates (ours are by Cary Novell, carynovell@mac.com) or white plates and ceramic vases, crateandbarrel.com
- Dishware decals, \$6, curiosityshoppeonline.com
- Poster tack

Initial Idea

A simple technique turns basic porcelain into an accessory that reflects your signature look.

BY PAIGE PORTER PHOTO ALEX HAYDEN PRODUCED BY MICHAEL WALTERS

Woman of letters

With a real estate staging business, two teenagers and her deceptively simple design work, local artist Cary Nowell stays quite busy — and, miraculously, calm

Nicole Makris
Editor

Ross Valley resident Cary Nowell comes from a long line of artists. Her grandfather was a photographer and painter. She describes her older brother as a “master watercolorist.” Her younger brother is an architect, and her mother and sister both paint with oil. While it may be no surprise to her family that the local designer is happiest with a paint brush in her hand, her unique approach to art and design has drawn the mother of two and former clothing designer international attention. Nowell’s design work was recently featured in the March issue of *Country Home* magazine, highlighting the minimal elegance of the Ross home she and her husband, also an architect, bought in August of 1989.

“We really kind of bought the dog on the block,” she says of the house. “It was clearly a fixer upper.”

The duo certainly rose to the challenge, trading the “dog” in for what’s now a cozy, French country-influenced home featuring Nowell’s artwork, refurbished furniture and a sprawling back patio surrounded by redwoods. The Nowells moved to Ross to raise their children in an environment that was family-friendly.

“Really what we were drawn to more than anything was the warm weather,” said Nowell, who grew up in San Francisco. “We were both just kind of tired of the fog. We wanted a place where we could raise kids, and basically we wanted warm summers.”

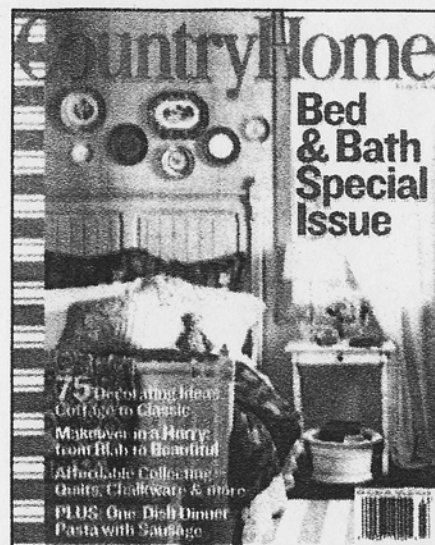
Nowell’s artwork focuses on the simplicity of letters and numbers, taking typography to a new level by featuring painted characters on antique French documents, silk pillows and ceramics. Ink, paper and letters have always fascinated her, she says. She used to wrap presents in Chinese newspaper.

“I’ve always loved type and words, and printed pages, and lettering and numbers. For me, it’s just that they’re really graphic, rather than necessarily significant by themselves. For instance, I love a letter — it doesn’t have to represent something in particular. It’s just that I love the shape and the character.”

As a full-time mom (she has a 14-year-old daughter and 16-year-old son) with a thriving real estate staging business, Nowell still somehow manages to have her work shown in San Francisco, Paris and other venues. Her current passion involves painting over old handwritten French documents, creating collage-like paintings that emphasize the text of antique students’ notebooks, marriage licenses, real estate deeds and other official prints.

“I’m really staging houses and developing that as a full-time enterprise, but I will not put my paint brush down,” says Nowell, who is no stranger to hard work. For 17 years before starting a family, she owned a children’s clothing company, designing and manufacturing textiles that sold to high-end department stores like Neiman Marcus, Saks and Nordstrom. Like her current artwork, her clothing design was heavily influenced by trips to France.

“I’m a real francophile,” Nowell says of her work. She’s spent quite a bit of time in France, including a recent year in Paris where, she says, her son and daughter had the unique opportunity to be immersed in



French culture, learn a new language and live in a “real” city. Now, amid her design and real estate work, Nowell makes time to paint because, she says, she just has to.

“I love painting my paintings. It’s very relaxing and therapeutic. I really love having a paint brush in my hand — even if I’m painting furniture.”

Which probably isn’t too far off for Nowell. Despite the fact that everyone who visited was in awe of her Ross home, Nowell and her husband recently sold the place and are looking for a new “dog” on the block. “Ross is just a great small town to live in,” says Nowell, who loved that her kids could walk to school, bike up Mount Tam and run around their yard and garden without fear of traffic. But times change.

“We’re just ready for a new project,” says Nowell of the couple’s mutual desire to start from scratch on a new home. “We’re both designers — and change is good.”



Cary Nowell’s Ross home and her design work were featured in the March 2007 issue of *Country Home* (center). Top, far left of Nowell’s paintings on an antique French document, and, Nowell at home with her dogs and hand-painted ceramics.

photos courtesy of *Country Home*
document courtesy of C

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Cary Nowell has been a designer for over thirty years. Growing up in a family of artists and painters, she graduated from the California College of the Arts. With an entrepreneurial spirit, at a young age she started what became a nationally recognized children's clothing company, where she designed and manufactured a high end product that was sold in better specialty and department stores, as well as catalogues across the U.S.

For the past ten years, Cary has painted a collection of black and white graphic ceramics that is sold throughout the U.S. and featured in numerous books and magazines. Much of her work reflects a European sensibility and style.

Recently, she and her family lived in Paris, from which she draws much inspiration, as seen in her collection of decorative graphic paintings and collages. The background for her paintings are antique French documents, which are inspiring, simply by the flair and fluidity of the original handwriting. With layers of paint and gold leaf paper, Cary has put a contemporary spin on these old world masterpieces.

Cary lives near San Francisco with her husband and two children. Her passion for painting, styling and interiors is boundless.



PARIS

in Healdsburg

INTERIOR DESIGNER MYRA HOEFER has always been passionate about Paris. With an apartment and atelier in the City of Lights, she travels there frequently to seek out the best of French antiques, fabrics and decorative accessories. "Parisian interiors have a fresh sense of style and chic," says Hoefer. ¶ Now, the designer and her business partner, Ken Pacada, are bringing contemporary Parisian splendor to Northern California with a hot Healdsburg design store, 21 Arrondissement. "I wanted to bring a light-hearted, relaxed French sensibility and originality to the wine country," Hoefer explains of her three-year-old shop. ¶ And this is French style without the clichés. Among recent favorite finds are quirky bronze table lamps adorned with ravens and rosebuds, framed butterfly collections, white plaster sculptures and chandeliers and gold-leaf encrusted lamps. "I encourage our clients to experiment with color and to combine rustic



SIMON PEARCE

A New England-based designer and manufacturer of original designs in hand-blown glass and handmade pottery since 1971, Simon Pearce is making his retail debut on the West Coast. The new San Francisco shop will feature his full

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line of
glass
and

pottery, along with a collection of fine linens, flatware and home accents. 2223 Fillmore St., San Francisco, 415-409-3700; simonpearce.com.

VIOSKI

Modern designer Jeff Vioski's new 3,000-square-foot showroom in L.A. displays his sleek, architectural furnishings and select home design products. Vioski's namesake furniture collection includes functional and stylish Fratelli chairs, zebra wood consoles and the elegant Isola lounge in natural linen. 132 S. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles, 323-937-7741.





1: Connie Kirk • 2: David Skinner • 3: Cary Nowell • 4: Ira Yeager 5: Paris Prints • 6: Kim Wheaton