



Above: wooden dividing walls in the apartment are painted the palest of greys, colour-matched to a piece of newsprint. A harp, belonging to Christine Roland and Jason Dodge's eldest daughter, sits before a Pennsylvania Dutch chair. Opposite: Jason built the low seating in the open-plan kitchen/living room, while Christine upholstered it. She also made the porcelain lozenges hanging among the leaves of the vigorous vine



# WUNDER KIN

Even when heavily pregnant, ceramicist Christine Roland was busy making bathroom tiles (700 of them!) for her soulful Berlin flat. But then there's little she and her husband, artist Jason Dodge, won't turn their hands to. From the seating to the coffee service to a stoneware sink, they've crafted almost the entire contents - and all so their family can live by a set of ideals. Kirsty Bell admires the couple's cradle of creativity. Photography: Tim Walker



Top: the mobile in the hall was a wedding present from Scottish artist Martin Boyce. A discreet opening in the wall leads to the cat's built-in litter-tray. Above: all the cupboards are home-made, while the chairs are by George Nakashima, whose studio is close to where Jason grew up in Pennsylvania



Above: Christine's handmade tableware, candle-holders and vessels gather on the kitchen table. The sink is a shower tray from a hardware store, the succulents and cacti came courtesy of florist Mary Lennox, and the brushes in the corner were all produced by Berlin's Workshop for the Blind



Top: in the library a lithograph by Swedish Post-Impressionist Nils Dardel hangs below a drawing by Thea Djordjadze, a Georgian artist who is based in Berlin. Above: shelves in a corridor are filled with books from Jason's poetry press, Fivehundred Places, alongside exhibition catalogues



Above: in Jason's studio, a silver curtain conceals deep shelves holding an impressive array of power tools. This space is used more for assembling materials, organising and looking at things rather than for actually finalising artworks, which are generally realised *in situ* at his exhibitions



This page, clockwise from top left: a 1969 work from *The Book of 100 Questions* by James Lee Byars hangs on the bathroom wall; a basin has been positioned with smaller family members in mind; the door leads to a laundry room; the glazed stoneware sink was hand-carved by Christine



Strips of dark wood outline the contours of the room. The triangular stoneware tiles on the floor are another example of Christine's craftsmanship - she handmade 700 of them in all. The black ceramic hanging planters and the pale fluted porcelain sponge- and soap-dishes are also by her



## WHEN CHRISTINE

Roland comes to the door of the Berlin apartment she shares with her artist husband, Jason Dodge, their three young children, elderly dog and an even older cat, she is holding a small metal contraption. Turning the handle of this hand-held mill, not without some force, she is grinding coffee beans. This is the first clue to a finely tuned approach to living that permeates her home and extends to crockery, furnishings, flooring and even the walls, all of which were made by either Christine or Jason themselves. As you enter this airy interior, the grime of Berlin is forgotten, as are the usual 21st-century distractions. 'It is not *about* art and life,' says Jason, who is originally from eastern Pennsylvania. 'It *is* art and life.' With its well-used kitchen, abundant plants and ample evidence of active children, the apartment has the atmosphere of the famous home of turn-of-the-century Swedish artists Carl and Karin Larsson.

Like them, the Dodge/Roland family's life is shaped by creative enterprise. Christine, who is Danish, studied design and fine tailoring, but she switched allegiances some years ago and now works with ceramics. 'Any idea I have I can translate into clay,' she says, and indeed the apartment is full of unique plates and goblets, candle-holders and plant pots, even light fixtures and door knobs she has made by hand. 'You can roll it out and make a fold and it just stays there. With fabric you need a thousand stitches for that.' Her delicately fluted bowls in fine white porcelain do have something textile-like about them, as if made from stiff crimped taffeta, though her dark, gritty stoneware plates are more like cast iron. Both bear the marks of the maker's hand, as do the glossy coffee cups and rough-hewn pots and bowls that Christine laboriously carves out of solid blocks of clay. Each one of the 700 black triangular tiles that cover the bathroom floor was individually cut, rolled and hammered flat. 'I hadn't made tiles before and I got in way over my head, hammering this clay, eight months pregnant, in a giant white coat like a butcher,' she recalls,

her conversation punctuated with peals of laughter. 'But things made by hand are so much more beautiful and alive.'

The couple were originally looking to build their own house, but when they came across this unrenovated shell on the second floor of a former Jewish orphanage and school in the east of the city it was too good an opportunity to miss. Built in 1907 and surrounded by a tree-filled garden, the block differs greatly from Berlin's typical late 19th-century *Altbau* apartments, with their high ceilings, ornamental plasterwork and bourgeois enfilades. Here, the rooms meander through a generous open plan; only the bathrooms and the master bedroom are closed off with doors.

Tangles of Spanish moss hang in the coat-lined hallway, beyond which, on the left, two children's rooms face one another, each furnished with a low, painted wooden bed, and a wall of cupboards and shelves full of toys and picture books. Further along again, a spacious kitchen/living room is lined on one side by low, bright casement windows and at the far end by a row of kitchen cabinets made by Jason, their white-painted doors usually variously ajar. Electrical appliances are few and far between here: water is boiled in a kettle on the gas stove, and espresso made with a large mechanical press. 'We tend to avoid the convenient,' admits Jason – although a robot vacuum cleaner does lurk on the floor beside the oven. For a family with two working parents, three children and two pets, this was an understandable concession.

Jason's studio – or 'transit centre', as he describes it – is tucked away beyond the kitchen. Although his conceptual sculptures, which generally utilise found materials, are assembled *in situ* in his exhibitions, this space still functions as a fully operational workshop, with several impressive German power tools stored in the deep cupboards he made. It was here that much of the apartment took shape, a process Jason sees as decidedly separate from his artwork proper. He constructed all the walls (bar two existing load-bearing ones) from huge sheets of blockboard – a phenomenal task for a lone carpenter. 'I wanted every wall to also function as a cupboard,' he says when I ask why. His inspiration was a Félix Vallotton painting of a woman searching through a linen press.

Jason's furniture pieces, which can be found in every room, are all one-offs. The low-slung easy chair in the living room, for instance, was built of Thermo ash and custom-designed so that it would be comfortable for each family member, regardless of size, from three-year-old son to the man himself. Typically for him, this was made without any preliminary plans. 'I don't think in drawings, I think in things, in forms and bodies,' the artist says.

All this hands-on production and improvisation make for an uplifting atmosphere. When I ask the couple if they see their home as a collaboration, Jason laughs: 'There isn't really a line.' Christine elaborates: 'I am a designer: I can imagine how a cupboard should feel and what kind of things should fit in it. But Jason is a sculptor; he has an incredible sense of space.' While the apartment might be seen as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, perhaps it is the family itself that is the real collaboration here, and the apartment simply its container. 'In making this house and our work, we are trying to live in an idealistic way,' says Christine. Home and work life are porous, and it's the seemingly inconsequential things – fresh air through an open window, leaves unfurling on plants, hand-ground coffee served in a handmade cup – that the occupants appear to value most. The attachment is not to the thing *per se*, but to experience. 'If this table were gone tomorrow, I wouldn't care,' says Jason. 'The motivation, and the attachment, is to each other' ■

*Christine Roland's work will be exhibited at the Tanya Leighton and Jochum Rodgers galleries in Berlin and at Roksanda Ilincic, 9 Mount St, London W1, throughout May. Visit cancatstalktodogsintheirownway.net. For information about Jason Dodge, visit franconoero.com or caseykaplangallery.com*



Opposite: a pad hung on the wall by ribbons forms a headboard in the main bedroom. A cricket cage sits on the windowsill above it. The owners collaborated on the design of the angled copper lamp and the bedside table. Above: most of the apartment's internal walls incorporate storage