

Brush with genius

A Scottish baronial pile in Perthshire has fallen under the enchanting spell of a contemporary artist and his designer wife

Words **Fiona Reid**
Photographs **Susie Lowe**

McAlpine Miller has one of the most creative minds in art today," writes critic Estelle Lovatt FRSA, "and he's established a process that follows no Masters... Looking at his canvas is like watching a video game featuring Peter Max scuffling with Basquiat and Keith Haring scrapping with Ed Ruscha."

As Lovatt goes on to credit the artist with challenging "2D space towards a 4D Magic-Realism reality", it's little surprise to discover that Stuart McAlpine Miller and his wife Nikki have created a Perthshire home that's nothing short of a showstopper.

The couple had been looking for a property for a few years before coming to view this house and estate at Callander. As an international artist, Stuart could have lived anywhere, but he is Scottish and studied at Glasgow School of Art, so the couple decided to look in Scotland and came up with a shortlist of ten properties to view over a two-week period in July last year.

The Gart was the first house they viewed. Just 15 minutes' walk from Callander and sitting in an elevated position above the River Teith with an outlook to Ben Ledi and the Highlands beyond, this property has the perfect location for exploring Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park. The Scots Baronial house dates from 1835. An original, smaller house was designed on the site by William Burn, and was substantially rebuilt and enlarged after a fire in 1901.

Today's house has an impressive entrance facade with a tower on the south corner featuring a pepper pot

A frieze painted by Stuart McAlpine Miller, with his trademark blend of fashion models and comic books, decorates the bar





turret, and there's a second tower with a spired roof in the northeast corner. "The house looks very pretty with its turrets," says Nikki, "and looking out of the windows and seeing the mountains is very humbling."

But when she first viewed the interior it was very traditional. "We knew we were never going to find something exactly as we wanted it," she says, "but here the work was more to do with the interior than anything structural. We've taken on a lot of exhibition spaces in London so we're not afraid of large spaces."

Work started on the house last August, as soon as the couple had purchased it. They moved in when the top floor was completed in October and continued working through the remaining spaces, infusing each room with their distinctive style and design eye, not to mention their evident flair for colour. The house is filled with period detail, and has beautifully proportioned rooms, so the couple were starting with good bones here.

"I love original features, and I like the mix of contemporary and traditional," says Nikki. "We were definitely looking for a place with large open spaces. We wanted to create an art gallery within the house, so we wanted to have a lot of wall space and be considerate throughout with colour. It was a blank canvas at the time, but the view from every window was like a painting."

The Gart was a joint project for the couple, and Nikki says their approach to the interior was "very organic". "We knew we wanted to use grey and blue. I created a lot of mood boards on Pinterest. Once we had a room completed, we realised what artworks would work well. We wanted to showcase Stuart's art as we have clients



Above: The Gart as the MacAlpine Millers would first have seen it. Clockwise from top left: the dining table with chairs upholstered with Hollywood icons; an original fireplace surrounded by funky furnishings; the morning room with digital grand piano; the kitchen island; traditional woodwork offsets contemporary design in a bedroom

who come to the house." Indeed the couple are holding an exhibition here in September.

Stuart and Nikki already had some of the furniture featured throughout, and other pieces were made to order by Kingsgate Furniture. Nikki worked with David Thompson Designs when creating the stunning kitchen, which opens into the equally dramatic dining room. "We had to take down part of the wall in this space to make it flow into the dining room," says Nikki. She also specified the corner fireplace – a wonderful focal point that helps connect the two areas. The kitchen island is a sculptural pod shape that further enhances the flow, while the rich grey-painted cabinetry and wall colour ensure that the artworks "pop" within this space.

In 2012 Stuart took on the role of artist in residence at The Savoy Hotel in London, and his collection of paintings titled "A Time For Reflection" hangs in the hotel's famous Thames Foyer and features a series of iconic guests including Marilyn Monroe, Katharine



Hepburn and Marlene Dietrich. Here, in The Gart's dining room, each chair is upholstered with an artwork from this collection, creating a truly glamorous entertaining zone for guests.

It's clear in talking to Nikki that she embraces inspiration wherever she finds it, from Pinterest to magazines to chance discoveries. "I love finding pieces," she says. "There's a little Art Deco sofa that's reupholstered in one of Stuart's artworks, and I found the original sofa in a store in Hackney. I like reimagining things." Nikki's advice? "Buy the things you love, then make all the elements that you love work together."

The Gart is filled with personality, drama and individual touches – and it is now available for others to enjoy. The concept of letting the property evolved as the project was ongoing. As Nikki says: "It's a nice way for people to enjoy the house and Stuart's art as well." The house can accommodate up to 26 guests, who will have full use of the property including the 100ft long reception room with its roaring fire for

cold winter evenings; a well-stocked library with an open fire and comfy sofas and the morning room with its digital baby grand piano; a cinema room within one of the turrets; and a gin and whisky honesty bar with bespoke seating and a pool table, not to mention that stunning kitchen and dining room.

There is also the basement level, which includes a gallery featuring Stuart's artworks along with silk pieces from the Silks Collection designed by Nikki in kaleidoscopic hues inspired by Stuart's paintings. Stuart's most recent work includes a series of paintings commissioned by Warner Brothers based on the Harry Potter books and

films. You can see one of these artworks in the main reception room.

Now that the interior is finished, the couple have turned their attention to the 12 acres of grounds and are landscaping the area and developing a kitchen garden. The Gart is a remarkable property in a truly spectacular location. The MacAlpine Millers have created a home for themselves, and an incredible space for visitors, that feels both personal and very unique.

For information on letting The Gart, or to see more of Stuart McAlpine Miller's artworks, visit www.mcalpinemillerlabel.com

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