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EMILY TODHUNTER

INTERIORS

car – is under the stairs in her flat, the raised ground floor of a white stucco house on the north side of Eccleston Square in Pimlico. Melissa and Fiona, 'my linchpins', keep flitting in and out with phone messages. The most startling thing, in comparison with most decorators, is how varied her commissions are: 'I'm doing Gordon and Victoria White's new house in Bel-Air; helping Mogens Tholstrup do over his new restaurant, Daphne's in Draycott Avenue; a Japanese restaurant in Athens for Leonidas Goulondris; a house in Chepstow Villas; a new stand at Newbury racecourse with Lady Porchester and Anne Egerton; some rooms at the Berkeley – their common parts will be next; and a doctor's flat in Little Venice,' she says, reeling off the names and looking surprised when I comment that it seems like an awful lot to do at once.

Emily is a rare mixture of control, sense, and riotous creative flair – she says she just *knew* that Christopher's had to be painted 'in the colours of the Sistine Chapel'. In return, her clients adore her. Restaurateur Mogens Tholstrup, who runs EST in Soho, enthuses, 'Emily creates atmospheres as well as design icons. She has fantastic ideas, such as using Pakistani shop fronts in my new restaurant. But also she's positive and enthusiastic, and has no ego whatsoever – she's not trying to promote herself. I'm sure she finds it very easy to make friends. After all, it's not only talent that makes business, but charm.'

'Everything about my life,' says Emily, 'is an extension of my business. I think about it three-quarters of the day and night. Friends are very important in my line. I do feel sometimes that I have to be Mr Nice Guy, otherwise I'd lose jobs as I practically always get commissions through friends.' Her client list is a younger, better-looking version of the Jockey Club committee. An unfair interpretation might be that Emily just confers extra social clout on her clients, and fills restaurants with her vast rent-a-crowd of friends. When you look at the success of her past and current projects, that is evidently not the case – but the social circle does help.

Emily redecorated Taki's apartment. He says he appreciated the fact that she was competitively priced and, particularly, that she was a girl. Since then she has done his hotel in Athens, the Caravel, and has worked for the likes of Mrs Charles Glass, Charlie Vivian Smith, the Hon Natasha Grenfell, Ghislaine Maxwell, the von Hurters and David St George, 'although every time I start doing things for him he gets another girlfriend who's a decorator'.

After talking to me, she is having lunch with 'the lighting people working on Daphne's' and has just instructed a linchpin to 'get Victoria [Lady White of Hull] to come round at four'. The Whites' house is a good project for her; according to Dempster, 'Gordy', the American head of Hanson, paid around £4 million for it. 'It's an amazing house, right at the top of Bel-Air, on a promontory that overlooks LA. You can virtually see from the desert to the sea. It's French Regency style, and really one of the very special houses in the whole of LA.' Emily has been out there four or five times, although, as she says, 'you can't really organise structural stuff from over here.' With the obvious relish of a captain leading the hockey team on tour, Emily says, 'We've had the most amazing time. Victoria and I are the same age – twenty-nine – and we get on so well. We've been to a Renaissance silk factory in Florence, and now we're off to the East End where we're having the fringes made.'

One wonders what members of the East End fringe trade make of these commanding 29-year-olds; one charming, capable, low-voiced English upper-crust girl, and one tall, wide-eyed Californian model, both of them beautifully dressed. When I ask Emily how she spends her profits, she says laughing, 'Well, this is the first year I've made a proper

profit. But I do spend it all on clothes.' Judging by the number of times Tomasz Starzewski rings up in the space of an hour, she has expensive and very current tastes.

According to one friend, 'Emily is a nonpareil at social connections. No one can network as convincingly as she can. She knows everybody.' Educated at Heathfield, Oxford High – 'I wanted to go somewhere more academic' – and Bristol University, where she read philosophy and psychology, Emily was brought up in an old rectory in Oxfordshire. Half her family are in the City – 'father, brother, sister' – but in inclination she is closest to her mother, 'a painter and gardener'. She proudly shows me a published collection of her mother's beautiful watercolours (she seems to have done for apples what Redouté did for roses) and in her trademark self-deprecating fashion says, 'She has wonderful taste. She's a much better decorator than me.'

Emily started decorative painting in school and university holidays and subsequently became an apprentice to a friend of her mother's, Jim Smart, 'a genius Cockney painter'. This was a hands-and-knees-on-the-floor training. She says, 'We worked with all sorts of people, and went everywhere, from Missouri to Scotland.' Then a string of jobs led her to New York, where the Tale of Miss Todhunter really begins.

'My first real job was Au Bar which was a huge hit. Everybody went there.' She was 23 when a friend, Nick Simunek, persuaded Howard Stein, who also owned Xenon and bore a marked, cultivated resemblance to Humphrey Bogart, to let her and schoolfriend and fellow decorator Christina Fallah convert the dingy basement on East 58th Street into his new club. He took her because, according to Emily, 'I was so bloomin' cheap. It practically cost me to do it.'

Au Bar was, for an almost record-breaking length of time for New York, the hottest club in the city. And Emily was there the whole time. 'Every night people would get drunk and offer me the most wild jobs. I mean, I got three Park Avenue apartments every night and not one of them would follow it through.' But she had 19 magazine articles after her first job: 'In Japan, Germany... it was amazing.' Howard had caught the perfect person for the mood in New

York and Emily admits, 'It was an advantage being English – at that time it was all Ralph Lauren, wacky English country-house-attic style, whereas now it's all corn-on-the-cob culture.'

When I suggest that her versatility and youth might annoy more specific, long-established decorators – one friend had said, 'I think Emily will push David

Mlinaric and Fitch & Co into a cupboard' – she shakes her head and says, 'People don't envy me, honestly. Some of the people I have worked with are not easy, believe me.'

One of her favourite jobs was redecorating Nigel Nicolson's private wing at Sissinghurst Castle. 'I tried to make it look as if it hadn't been decorated, just smartened up. It was such fun working for him.' She reads me the brief from Nigel: 'To renovate house, twenty-five years since last decorated. Intended for next generation as well as mine... and the mouse-nibbled curtains in Virginia's study need replacing.' She takes friends to visit him whenever she goes to Kent. His letter to her when she finished the work there explains why being done over by Emily is of such value: 'I'm so grateful for what you have done here. You have transformed a domicile into a home, giving it a mixture of its own character, my taste and yours. You have been so prompt in carrying out all these commissions. Emily green will be the family colour for Sissinghurst for at least the next century.' □



With Taki at his 1990 party at Christopher's

Emily has expensive and very current tastes



Room service: Emily Todhunter at Sissinghurst Castle, where Emily green will be the family colour for at least the next century.



The importance of being glossed over by Emily Todhunter

Her client list sounds like the membership of Annabel's. Catherine Ostler meets the interior decorator who creates the only clubs, restaurants and houses to be seen in now. Photographed by John Swannell

Emily Todhunter's drawing room looks familiar. It is because this room, with two sash windows hung with original Aubusson drapes, is a living advertisement for her work, and has been used as such by *House & Garden* for the past year. Equally well dressed, in sky-blue Equipment shirt with huge matching eyes and brown Joseph trousers, Emily is on the phone. 'He's that huge, fat man. We had dinner at Le Cirque. But if I could talk to someone down at Littlecote, that would be wonderful.' She is talking to Peter de Savary's brother, seeking advice for one of her potential clients, property developer Andrew de Candole. 'He wants to open the garden at Groombridge Place to the public, and I thought we might get some advice from the de Savarys.'

She is bright-eyed and fast-talking, informal but energetic. She keeps moving round the room, resting an arm against the fireplace like an assured hostess, then leaning back in an armchair with her square-toed brown court shoes and brown legs resting on the coffee table. She talks in a deep voice interspersed with high-pitched giggles, and has an actively smart, slightly clipped accent - 'dine' for 'down' - which adds to the impression of total Englishness. There's not a trace, in her voice, of the five years she lived in the States. She is the sort of Mary Poppins figure you would entrust your children to, with her brown hair swept up into a tidy, short ponytail, and purple and gold spherical earrings swaying - except that the children would have too much fun to want to come home. One female friend said admiringly: 'I would have had a crush on her at school.'

The hub of operations of Emily Todhunter Designs - apart from her

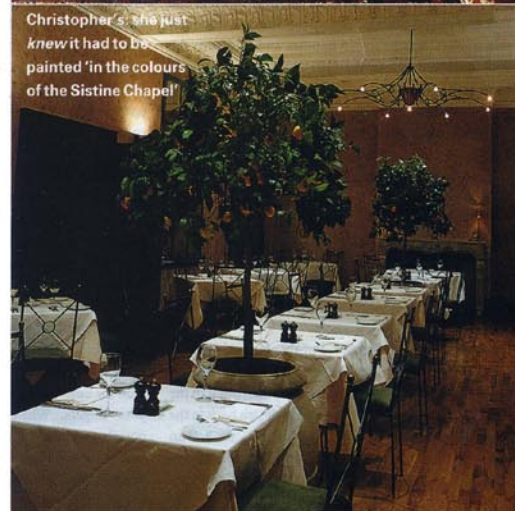
PHOTOGRAPHED WITH NIGEL NICOLSON'S PERMISSION AT SESSINGHURST CASTLE, STYLED BY CATRIONA KEEN. HAIR BY JOE AT NEVILLE'S, MAKE-UP BY CHARLIE DUFFY AT JOY GOODMAN. SIMON BROWN



Taki's apartment: he appreciated her competitive price and the fact she was a girl



Au Bar: the dingy basement she transformed into a hot New York club



Christopher's: she just knew it had to be painted 'in the colours of the Sistine Chapel'