

Weekend

Chiconomy at home

A new art project sees local artists stylishly recycle discarded furniture. **JOANNE SAVAGE** considers art for the living room and finds out how you too can customise tired tables and dilapidated drawers

PEOPLE tend to think of art in conservative, narrow terms – paintings hanging on a wall in a gallery, bronze sculptures on thoroughfares, canvases done by masters like Picasso, Renoir, Monet. But art can have utility and inform the everyday. It is allied to design and therefore influences the contents of your wardrobe, the style of the shoes you wear, the car you drive or the shape and colour scheme of the sofa you sit on and the drapes in your living room. Some of the artworld's most famous painters branched out into design; the surrealist painter Salvador Dali created a silk pink chair – a pair of lips blown up as a sumptuous cushion – and less practically, a telephone with the body of a lobster for a receiver. American pop artist Andy Warhol made his silkscreens into fabrics for dresses. Mexican artists Frida Kahlo and Diego Riviera turned their home into a blue-coloured artwork, their Casa Azul full of odd paintings, ornaments, native American sculptures and bohemian bric-a-brac. Art has always made its mark on interiors and furniture. Artists generally know good design or how to turn a bog-standard dining chair into something flamboyant and kooky. They can turn chairs into works of art. (Which raises the question of when a chair is still a chair? When does it become a piece of art rather than just something to plank yourself on and relieve the weight of your legs?)

ReFound, a creative collective based

in Belfast, is working to recycle and restyle old furniture to create unique, functional art pieces. This is art you can either sit on, cushion your coccyx with, put your feet up on or store clothes inside. A selection of artists from or working in Northern Ireland, including painter Neil Shawcross, illustrator Kev Largey and print-maker Anushiya Sundaralingam, have worked on discarded pieces of furniture, splashing them with paint, picking up delicate paintbrushes or using needle and thread to sew on buttons and swathes of fabric. Each piece is titled like an artwork and signed by the artist – these are boutique chairs and tables that have been laboured over and lovingly bedecked with insignia or splodges of paint, artful graffiti or modish patternings. And the idea is to keep the works affordable and accessible to the art-conscious home owner. Jill O'Neill, the east Belfast woman who founded the project, said it aims to help add an artistic touch to Northern Irish homes. Why stick to paisley print chairs and MDF furniture when you can have coolly tattooed tabletops and retro-print cushions?

"We rescued pieces of furniture from secondhand shops and the Belfast missions, car boot sales and markets. Then we asked a number of artists to come and take a piece of furniture of their choosing and breathe new life into it by restyling it in their own particular way," says Jill. "Each artist has produced something so highly individual. No two pieces are alike and I suppose it is testament to what you can do with a bit of creativity and an old chair or table."

Jill, a history of art graduate, formerly worked for ReadyMade, a San Francisco-based magazine which focuses on DIY culture, furniture and home improvement. The hippy-ish publication encouraged people to create unique home or fashion items from everyday materials: lamps made out of CD spindles, shower curtains made with plastic bags, coffee tables and bookcases made from broken speakers.

It was an 'upcycling' philosophy, all about handmade goods and an eco-friendly, do-it-yourself mentality. Independent rock artists would share their own DIY projects; The Flaming Lips helpfully told readers how to make a mock space station out of junkyard parts.

"ReFound in part comes from my experiences at ReadyMade, they were all about 'upcycling' or taking something discarded and making it



Jill O'Neill has encouraged local artists to work their magic on discarded pieces of furniture



Chair 'ReFound' by Neil Shawcross

new and functional. From coast to coast in America they are really interested in getting the most out of everyday materials. And this is not just because it's good for the environment, but also because it's fun," observes Jill. "People often think recycling, getting stuff from landfill sites,

yawn, yawn. But it's a bit of craic to find something discarded and think, what the heck could I do with that?"

This is ripe stimulus for dedicated hoarders to go digging among their antiques and storage boxes for objects to 'upcycle'. Just imagine what you could do with all the accumulated detritus in your attic or the old knick-knacks cluttering your garage or garden shed. This isn't just rubbish – in the logic of ReadyMade and ReFound it can be used to create something new – an off-beat chair, a rudimentary table...even a questionable plastic-bag shower curtain.

It's about thinking outside the box and considering the creative potential in junk.

Jill herself is fond of secondhand clothes and furniture and doesn't turn her nose up at hand-me-downs. Plus she knows how to use a sewing machine.

But ReadyMade doesn't simply flag up a newly-resourceful approach to rubbish and 'waste' furniture, it's about showcasing the work of local artists.

"For me this is really about getting people to appreciate that art can have utility, that you can buy quirky chairs or chests of drawers, jazzed-up by artists, adding something different, unique and vintage to your living space."

■ ReFound's bespoke pieces of furniture will be on sale at the 'pop-up shop' at 94 Castlereagh Road, Belfast, June 17-20. Prices will range from £50 to £400 pounds. For more information on the project visit www.refoundonline.com.

DIY chiconomy

If you'd rather get down to a bit of creative re-fashioning of old furniture than fork out for a Neil Shawcross chair, here are some tips on 'upcycling'

- Tired dining chairs can be revamped with the clever use of paint, as demonstrated by Shawcross. Repaint in a formulaic fashion or splat the paint for a Jackson Pollock look.
- Dining room chairs can be easily upholstered by removing the seat and covering it in a vibrant new fabric. Attach the material on the under part of the seat with staples or needle and thread.
- Give tables a twist by revamping their surface area. Have a mirror cut to cover the top and place a collage of postcards, family photos or magazine cuttings underneath for a colourful, personalised table.
- Customise armchairs with pieces of fabric, or if you have time, sew borders, braids or patterns.
- Paint patterns or designs on chests of drawers or wardrobes. Buy stencils if you want to keep the patternings tidy and be brave with colour for a modern 'pop art' feel.
- Restyle cushions by adding buttons, beads, patches of quirky material or recover them altogether with original fabrics.
- Save your sofa arms by using pretty table runners or place mats placed over the original fabric.



ReFound vase by Brendan Boyle