



Cherine Magrabi sits upon a dining table by Martino Gamper in her Beirut apartment, wearing a Celine dress in acqua, one of her favourite tones, and a statement cuff by Liza Eisner Jewellery

A HOUSE WITH HEART

As founder of the non-profit House of Today, Cherine Magrabi is an ardent advocate of Lebanon's design talent. She talks to **Anna Brady** about her love of her rugged adopted city Beirut, nurturing designers and decorating by instinct

Photography by WALID RASHID

"When we moved to Beirut, people were telling us we would never be able to live a normal life here, that it would be so different to living in England" says Cherine Magrabi. "But it was like a breath of fresh air, we enjoy the chaos as much as we dread it. Every day is a new day in Lebanon and everyone lives each day as if it's their last. There's an energy that you don't get anywhere else." Cherine speaks passionately about her adopted home country and the three bedroom apartment in the downtown Beirut district of Solidere to which she, her husband and their three sons moved from London in 2002. Raised in Jeddah, born to an Egyptian Saudi father and Lebanese mother, she went to boarding school in Switzerland then moved to London to study Interior Architecture at Chelsea College of Art, then Inghild School of Design. She married and had her sons, now aged 15, 16 and 18, in London, before relocating to Beirut.

"I wanted my boys to be connected to our roots," she says, "In 2002 Beirut was opening up, peace was establishing itself. It has such a rich history and is full of people who are so dynamic that they sometimes become destructive." Cherine is at home among creatives, "I feed off them, learn off them. And I get that in Lebanon. My greatest moments are sitting in a designer's studio as they work." It's another of the reasons she loves Beirut, for its dynamic creative scene. Yet on her arrival, Cherine was struck by how little recognition there was for this talent in the outside world. And so in 2012 she founded House of Today was born, a non-profit organisation supporting Lebanese designers. It came about organically. Through her work as executive creative director of MAGRABI, the family eyewear business, Cherine was looking out for Lebanese designers but found no good introduction. "There were very good designers but no-one knew about them" she says, "Through word of mouth and my work I was able to meet some. I realised there was this wealth of under-recognised talent in Beirut." She was compelled to act, though she didn't know quite what at first. "I wanted to create an event. I didn't have it all planned out but I knew I wanted to do something, to expose the work of Lebanese designers and see the reaction of the public."

The first exhibition was held in 2012, an event that has turned into the House of Today Design Biennale, a month long biannual event that held its third edition in December 2016 and is now one of the most established design events in Beirut. Cherine issued an open call to designers, then after a selection process, the shortlisted designers were presented with the theme *Confessions* to interpret through a design for the exhibition. It was an intentionally provocative theme, says Cherine, "as we live in a society where there are quite a lot of taboos." A desire to provoke continued; the second theme was *Naked*. House of Today has four main aims; to identify, nurture, showcase and connect Lebanon's designers. "When I first started House of Today, there was no platform for design in Lebanon" says Cherine, "Now it has become a design hub. That's what we wanted to do, bring designers together under one roof, speaking the same language. Now we are contacted by architects and companies from all over the Middle East asking for referrals on designers." Giving an international stage, last December House of Today selected 20 Lebanese designers to produce products for the online WallpaperSTORE, so they could be sold after the exhibition. Cherine is proud of House of Today. "It has grown far more and far faster than expected" she says. Successful alumni include Rami Dalle, who was asked by Hermès to design the windows of their Beirut store, and the duo David/Nicolas, who have since created designs for Nilufar and Carpenter's Workshop galleries in Milan and London.

Their designs also appear in Cherine's light, open-plan Beirut apartment, an enviable medley of styles, periods and colours combined to eclectic yet harmonious effect. She is led by her heart and gut instinct. Situated on the fourth floor of a modern block, the flat is flooded with



Cherine's beloved Evolution bench by Nacho Carbonell

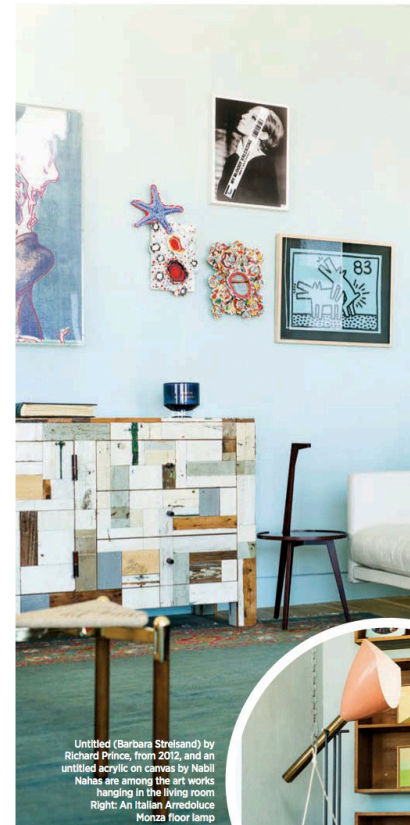
An untitled portrait by Alex Katz



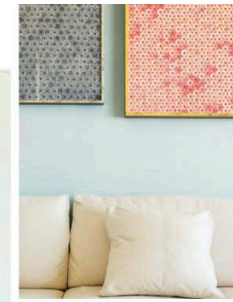
Above Cherine's dining table hangs a unique untitled light work by designer Max Broby, made with 3D printing technology, laminated wood and cast aluminium, dating from 2005. On the wall is a photograph of Marilyn Monroe, New York City, May 6, 1957, by Richard Avedon



Cherine, wearing Celine trousers and an Alaïa top, in front of one of the stars of her art collection, Lucio Fontana's *Concetto spaziale*, Attese, executed in 1950



Untitled (Barbara Streisand) by Richard Prince, from 2012, and an untitled acrylic on canvas by Mafai Nahas are among the art works hanging in the living room
Right: An Italian Arredoluce Monza floor lamp



Two pencil shavings, plexiglass and wood works from 2011 by Piotr Uklanski; left, Untitled (Ciccio), and right Untitled (Aisyah)

light, reflected off the Mediterranean sea below. It was the family's first home when they moved to Beirut 15 years ago, amidst the construction of Solidere. "When we first moved there was nothing and now it's an area buzzing with shops and restaurants" says Cherine, "I remember when we first moved, it felt like we were living in an empty shell and like we were the only ones who were actually living there." The new city changed her tastes. "In London I was used to warm colours and dark wood. Then when I moved next to the sea, with all the light, it slowly evolved to what it is today. There's an energy to the house that's very positive and calming." Her London home retains those warmer colours; she wants to walk in from a chilly street and feel warm and cosseted. In Beirut, with the heat and bustle of the streets outside, she seeks a peaceful sanctuary; the warmth is in the light, so the walls are cool hues and the star is the view. "I kept everything quite open. I wanted to live the whole space, to be able to see the kitchen from the living room" says Cherine, "I like that the eye can have a far view." She used peaceful colours, pinks, blues and aquas, although she also considers herself daring. "I use a lot of colours but they always blend together, there is nothing shocking."

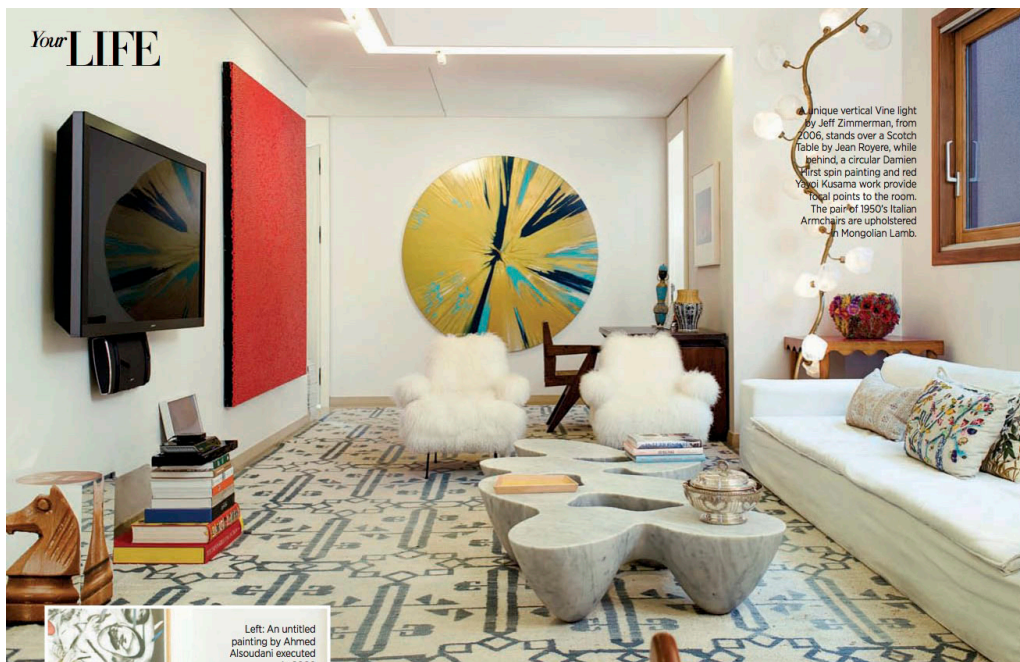
Cherine is also an avid collector, of art, modern and contemporary design and antiques, driven again by the heart not by investment. Every piece has meaning. "It reminds me of something, of a trip, of a moment. Depending on my mood, each piece speaks to me differently" she says, "That's how I've always worked on my home; collecting pieces from Le Puce in France, or buying pieces from fairs or exhibitions. There's no particular logic to my design style. It's not exacting, I don't like to be constrained by a certain period. I think that's why I can speak to so many designers. Each one does something special."

Alongside hunting out pieces in the famous Parisian flea market Le Puce, Cherine follows auctions at Christie's, Sotheby's and Piasa, and her favourite galleries are Nilufar in Milan, Crayon in Paris, FUMI in London. "I also like going to fairs like PAD London, and Maison Objet and the Biennale des Antiquaires in Paris but I don't go to them religiously, I'm too busy with my work with MAGRABL."

When she cannot attend these events, she follows them on Instagram, and often buys based on seeing something on the platform. "I think that it's the best window for design. It has brought everything much closer to home. Sometimes it's over promising, deceiving, and sometimes it's understated. You see it,



The floor to ceiling windows of the living room afford sweeping views over Downtown Beirut, best taken in from the Gio Ponti armchair. The Rhino sculpture on the table is by Xavier Lalanne



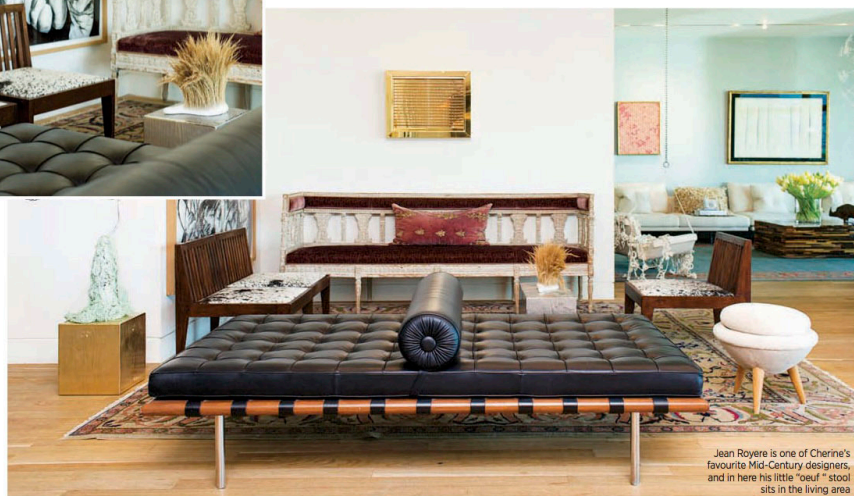
Unique vertical Vine light by Jeff Zimmerman, from 2006, stands over a Scotch Table by Jean Royere, while behind, a circular Damien Hirst spin painting and red velvet Kusama work provide focal points to the room. The pair of 1950's Italian Armchairs are upholstered in Mongolian Lamb.



Left: An untitled painting by Ahmed Alsoudani executed in 2009
Right: Sensorial brushes by Najla El Zein sits on the table

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Jean Royere is one of Cherine's favourite Mid-Century designers, and in here his little "oeuf" stool sits in the living area

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and you go visit and then make your own judgement."

The apartment is peppered with designs by European Mid-Century Modern masters. In one bedroom, a classic compass leg office chair Pierre Jeanneret, the type first designed by for the administrative offices at Chândigarh and purchased from Galerie Patrick Seguin, sits by an elegant desk and floor lamp, both by Greta Magnusson Gross, with a willowy freestanding ashtay by Jean Royere alongside. "I do tend to collect Mid-Century as I like the simplicity, I like the quality of work" says Cherine, "I love Pierre Jeanneret, of course, and my last purchase was a table by Mathieu Matégot. It is very dainty and romantic."

Across the apartment, Cherine punctuates the purity of such economical design and clean colour with touches of humour and rawness; this is no bland minimalism. She has a particular love for the Italian Post-War *Arte Povera* movement. "It's raw, it's meaningful, it's rich without being excessive" she says, "It's the simplicity of it that makes it so rich. The fact that artists often didn't have the canvases or the materials at the time but found some other means to express themselves, through burning or cutting." She has a Lucio Fontana 'slash' piece and a *Volumi* work from 1960 by his contemporary Dadamaino, sole female member of Piero Manzoni's *Azimuth* group.

Lightening this rawness is the humour; the playful Keith Haring bronze entrance table, "one of the first pieces we bought for Beirut" says Cherine, drawn to "the childishness of it." I mention the irresistible *Evolution* bench by Dutch designer Nacho Carbonell, made of papier-mâché on a wire frame, almost squirrel-like in form. "Oh I love, love, love that piece!" she says, "It was actually his first piece for Rossana Orlandi so I was lucky enough to spot it at the time. My husband hates it, it's the one piece he would love me to store far away. When my kids were younger, my youngest would climb inside it and hide." On most things, however, Cherine and her husband agree. "We don't use art consultants as such" she says, "I buy what I love. My husband is more established, he prefers to buy more established art, more for investment. It's passion led, we've never sold any of our art. We have it all hanging on our walls, a lot of collectors have warehouses, but we're not there yet and I don't think we ever will be. I want to live with it, my best art is in my bedroom."

House of Today designers crop up in the apartment too; there's a cabinet commissioned by David/Nicolas, who have also designed the interiors of MAGRABI's new M concept stores, which she says aim to "personalise the experience of buying eyewear." But her favourite piece is a diminutive antique *canapé* sofa in her bedroom by the French painter and costume and set designer, Marie Laurencin (1883-1956), which sits below Laurencin's painting, *Jeune Femme au Chien* from circa 1913. "It was in an opera house" says Cherine of the *canapé*, "It's meaningful, very romantic, and has beautiful figures of a woman dancing on it. The fact that I love the opera and the ballet makes it more meaningful to me." She laughs, a little shyly, "I suppose, I'm just a hopeless romantic."

PHOTOGRAPH BY WALID HASSIO



Cherine, again in Celine culottes and a vintage Celine polo neck, in front of VITRINE CHERINE, "a mix between a 'cabinet de curiosité', a 'dressoir' and a 'bar'" a unique piece designed by David/Nicolas



Befitting Cherine's love of humorous, quirky design is François-Xavier Lalanne's La Sauterelle (Bar à Tablettes) designed in 1967