

At Home with the FT Interiors [+ Add to myFT](#)

The Paris fantasy of ‘clay magician’ Saraï Delfendahl

The artist’s ceramic sculptures are intended to ‘make us dream of somewhere else’ — her Haussmannian home makes that a day-to-day reality



On the sixth floor of a quintessential Haussmannian building in Paris’s 7th arrondissement — past creamy stone walls, mosaic floors, stained glass windows and an ironwork cage lift — is the [home](#) of 63-year-old artist Saraï Delfendahl and her husband Philippe, a writer and editor. It’s a space that is at turns bright and airy and higgledy piggledy.

“I was pregnant with my middle child, Marc, when we moved in,” says Delfendahl. “I just loved the light. For me it was like a country home; it’s a little charming.” That was 28 years ago. But it wasn’t until her three children had left home that Delfendahl really put her artistic stamp on the place. When the couple renovated last year, redoing the well-worn kitchen and bathroom, it presented an opportunity to showcase Delfendahl’s ceramic works. Alongside her characterful sculptures, integral details have been crafted in clay.

“I call Saraï ‘the clay magician’,” says Laurence Bonnel, founder of Paris’s Galerie Scene Ouverte, which has represented Delfendahl for the past six years and recently included her work in its award-winning booth at the Ceramic Brussels fair. Her work has been shown at Paris museums La Halle Saint-Pierre and Palais de Tokyo, and attracted collectors from Italy and Switzerland to India and China.



The kitchen's tiled mural splashback and plaited cupboard handles are made by Delfendahl

At home, her kitchen is an homage to her practice. The splashback is a tiled mural, with mystical creatures on a turquoise-green background. Its painterly texture is inspired by the work of German artist Markus Lüpertz and was created with layers of glaze in multiple firings. On the ceiling a pair of bell-shaped lampshades resemble monsters with glowing eyes. A fruit basket, and the plaited handles on the cream-coloured kitchen cupboards are also Delfendahl's work; she has even glazed some of the floor tiles a deep green.

"I'm really happy with how the kitchen turned out," says Delfendahl, making tea — served, of course, in her own mugs. "I love to cook. I'm very gourmand. My three children are very gourmand. Eating is at the heart of our family." Some of her plates and bowls feature images of her children etched into the clay.



Utensil hooks are made by Delfendahl...



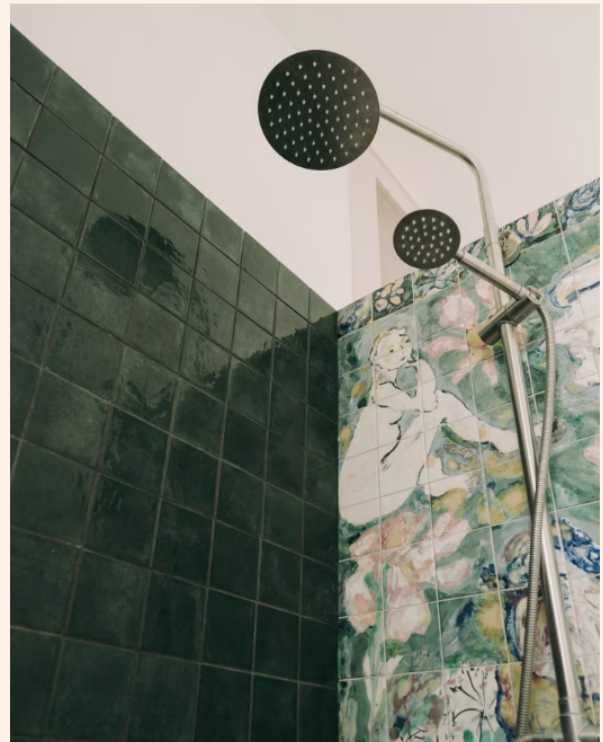
... as is a bell-shaped lampshade

Other rooms have been given ceramic updates, too. In the entrance hall, an antique wooden chandelier has been augmented with floral forms; a small toilet has another Delfendahl splashback; venturing along a narrow, book-lined corridor brings you to a bathroom with two swirling pink and green ceramic murals around the bath and the shower. Soap dishes, a wall light and towel hooks in the shape of a fish and a bird are all part of what Delfendahl calls her “creative universe”.

These [interiors](#) pieces are not something she creates to commission, though. “I don’t want to be someone who makes lamps to order,” says Delfendahl, who trained first as a designer at Paris’s L’École Nationale Supérieure de Création Industrielle. “Studying design leads to lots of things — lots of things I didn’t want to do. I just wanted to be an artist.” At first she focused on painting, until about 17 years ago when a friend introduced her to clay. “I started to make some sculptures and just thought it was terrific,” she says.



Delfendahl's bathroom is a tiled immersion into her world ...



... that extends up the back of the shower

A recent Paris exhibition at Galerie Scène Ouverte was titled *Vivre en Oiseau* and showcased her largest ceramic works to date — a menagerie of birdlike clay creatures, in her signature raw and instinctual style, some more than a metre high. The gallery continues to show several sculptures upstairs and will also present Delfendahl’s work at PAD Paris design fair this coming April. “I have different phases with my work,” she explains. “There was a time when I was making only unicorns. Then I was doing lots of lions. Another time it was crabs.” Birds, she says “can transport us and make us dream of somewhere else”.

This exhibition was the first time she has shown her plates (originally designed for her home in a similar style to her kitchen tiles) and jewellery: glazed and sometimes gold-accented pendants she has long made for herself and friends. Delfendahl also creates wall-mounted sculptures: part-human, part-animal forms that look like mythological creatures. “I call them *figures* in French; ‘models’ in English. I make them regularly; it’s like a habit I go back to after doing the large sculptures.” A troupe of them parade over the glazed double doors into her living room.



The living room is a mishmash of styles and includes mid-century furniture, wall-mounted figural sculptures by Delfendahl and a 1597 depiction of the Venetian carnival by Flemish painter Lodewijk Toeput.

Most of the artwork not by Delfendahl, however, is sourced by Philippe, a former journalist who now runs his own publishing house, Exils, and holds exhibitions at his office on Rue du Regard. “He’s passionate about paintings; he collects them — and also sells them,” says Delfendahl.

Recent subjects include 19th-century women painters and the paintings of Jules Agard — a ceramicist who worked with Picasso. At home, next to the dining table is a large oil painting — a 1597 depiction of the Venetian carnival — by Flemish painter Lodewijk Toeput. A cluster of gold-framed artworks next to the fireplace includes a 19th-century print attributed to French illustrator Gustave Doré, and a blue and white plate by contemporary Amsterdam-based ceramicist Ruan Hoffmann. “He found my sculptures on Instagram and we made an exchange,” says Delfendahl.

There are still works to hang after the renovation, she says. “We have big discussions at dinner about what should go where,” adds her son Marc, an assistant director who studied film in Los Angeles and is visiting his parents. “I think we enjoy debating it more than doing it.”



Delfendahl's wall-mounted figures extend to the opposite end of the living room

As well as the artworks, the furniture too is a mishmash of styles and eras. Nearly all the pieces come from auctions and flea markets. “Philippe found them, but we chose them together,” she says. “I pay attention to what’s going on in design but it’s not that important to me.”

A curvy chrome, mirror and glass coffee table displaying butterfly specimens is particularly intriguing. “We don’t know who designed it but we find it very poetic,” she says. “Unfortunately, it is quite damaged, but we are not parting with it.”

The dining table and chairs, meanwhile, are mid-century Nordic. Sometimes Delfendahl makes some ceramics here — especially the jewellery. “But now, more and more, I work at our home in the countryside, where I have an atelier and a big kiln,” she says. Near the town of Dreux, an hour’s drive west of Paris, the large château, where the couple usually spend several days a week, has been in Philippe’s family for more than 100 years.

“It’s extraordinary,” she says. “It was badly damaged during the war and afterwards Philippe’s father renovated part of it, but about half of it is still derelict, taken over by spiders — and that’s where I have installed myself because I have lots of space. And I need it! I make so much. I start early in the morning and often work late into the night.”



The apartment is in a Haussmannian building in Paris's 7th arrondissement

It's been a long road to recognition. "I've been an artist for a very long time," she says, "but [up until relatively recently] I didn't have many opportunities to show my work." This changed when her daughter, H el ene, encouraged her to post her ceramics on Instagram. "It has been a revolution for me," she says. As well as connecting her with a gallery and collectors, it has brought her into contact with other artists. One such is Klara Kristalova, who creates similarly surreal and fantastical ceramic figures, and has them strewn around her own home and garden in Norrt alje, Sweden.

On Delfendahl's mantelpiece, some of the objects are an ode to her rural retreat: nestled next to a pair of grand, early 19th-century candlesticks are a couple of squashes, grown in the garden. "I find them very pretty so they are sculptures before we eat them," she laughs.

Delfendahl's artistic vision for her home is not yet complete. In the living room, she plans to add tiles to the fireplace and two light fixtures with multiple ceramic elements hung on chains. How does it feel to be surrounded by her own work? "I love it," she exclaims. "At first, I was a little afraid that I wouldn't like it, living every day surrounded by my own creations . . . it's a lot. But for the moment I am very content."

Sara  Delfendahl's work will be exhibited by Galerie Sc ene Ouverte at [PAD Paris](#) design fair, April 2-6

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