

EL EXCLUSIVE

# Francis Sultana Talks Homing Instincts

When it comes to the world of interiors, Francis Sultana is something of a polymath. Aged forty-four, the Maltese-born, London-based furniture and interior designer has come a long way since designing his first sofa for Annie Lennox two decades ago, being the go-to designer for an haut-monde of notable art collectors and patrons.

Working across both residential and commercial projects, recent commissions include the design of the restaurant for the Pavilion of Art and Design (PAD) in London in October. In addition to his own design studio, specializing in beautifully crafted pieces evoking the elegance of the 1920s and 1930s, with influences from both the natural world and contemporary art, Sultana is also Artistic Director of David Gill Galleries, London. Bar a three-year sabbatical, he has worked there since the age of nineteen.



FRANCIS SULTANA  
© Photo by Solina Guedroit

It is in the gallery's high ceilinged and light filled St. James's space – located on the same street as Christie's and surrounded by some of London's leading commercial galleries – that we meet. Following an enthusiastic introduction to one of the gallery's hot talents, Barnaby Barford, whose Tower of Babel is on display in the V&A's Medieval & Renaissance Galleries until 1st November, I'm invited to join Sultana on a sofa from his 'Celia' range. (Each of his collections is named after a friend, starting in 2012 with 'Yana', after Outset Founder and Intelligence Squared CEO, Yana Peel.) My eye settles on a pair of cushions in woven black leather and gold bullion that bring to mind a Chanel jacket. "It's a special hand-weave done for me in Paris," he explains. "I'm working with textiles that are being used for couture as well."

With no formal training – he left school after taking his A-levels in Gozo at the age of sixteen – Sultana credits Gill as having been his education, along with the V&A and several of his clients. Judging by his comet-like ascent, Sultana, who cuts a suave figure in his Anderson & Sheppard suit, has clearly been an attentive life student, with a generous manner that belies his steely focus as one of the industry's rising stars. He refers to himself as an "interior editor", adding: "Most of the people I know have a great aesthetic, I just put things together."

Sultana likes to keep his design aesthetic evolving. "My fundamental roots remain the same, but if I don't reinvent myself constantly then I will not create a history in my work. And I'm constantly inspired." Among industry peers he name checks two ultra British interior designers: Ashley Hicks and Nicky Haslam. "I consider myself British now," declares Sultana, who extends the concept to such quirkiness as his commitment to "carrying the torch for the British tradition of the guest loo – it's not about having the fanciest accessories, it's about the family photographs and the pile of magazines, a little mad sculpture and some drawings". (The loo at the gallery exhibits one of Mattia Bonetti's sculpturally surreal Flower Tables.)



IN THE SALON, COFFEE TABLE BY GAROUSTE AND BONETTI, ABOVE THE FIREPLACE AND ABOVE THE DOOR ARE WORKS BY RICHARD PRINCE, SILVER CONSOLE BY MATTIA BONETTI, ABOVE CONSOLE IS A WORK BY PAUL MCCARTHY AND ON IT IS A POT BY GRAYSON PERRY. COURTESY OF FRANCIS SULTANA  
© Francis Sultana

Sultana's Mayfair home, which he and Gill moved into eight years ago, also has something of a British feel to it, with its eclectic content. Sultana describes it as "very mixed. It's full of layers of things we bought on our travels, pieces from exhibitions throughout the years, an accumulation of favourite things". With the gallery's impressive roster of artists, this translates into shelves by Zaha Hadid, a stainless steel cabinet by Mattia Bonetti, pots by Grayson Perry (David Gill was one of the first galleries to show his work) and decorative boxes by Line Vautrin. "And it's the most non-decorated home I've ever done, for myself or for a client. It's all about the space," Sultana continues of the Grade I-listed apartment, with original parquet floors and fireplaces. "I just renovated and cleaned it up."

He and Gill first met in 1991, "and it's a whole journey of two people, of work, of creativity – a home should express the people who are there, and what they love. There are things that have very little value, but which can have a very big value to you," says Sultana, who has a similarly personal approach to private commissions. "If something is really important to them, we'll use it, we'll make it work. There's no such thing as bad taste."

His favourite room to decorate is the dining room, for "You can be a bit mischievous with a formal dining room, it is the most theatrical room you can have in your house; in English country houses dining rooms were often a very dark damask." A case in point is the dining room of his house on Malta, which "is a very deep blue with Venetian gold plaques. It's baroque, it's like going into the cathedral, and it's magic." (Of the PAD restaurant, he hints: "There's an edge of contemporary with my signature of a strong fabric. I want there to be an element of surprise when people go up there.") For the bathroom, he suggests that one "decorate it with the sense that you are decorating a room, it's not about marble everywhere, or tiles everywhere, it's about making it an inhabitable space that is part of you. And then, make it as luxurious as you can afford it to be, and as practical as you can: good storage, good lighting, good mirrors."

Following the stellar success of his design studio – now entering its fifth year – Sultana, who also chairs the Patrons Committee of the Design Fund, established for the benefit of the V&A Museum, is "more discerning" with his interior design projects these days. His fourth furniture collection, 'Lulu', is slated to launch in the coming weeks. Inspired by North Africa,



IN THE BATHROOM, WHITE TABLES AND MIRROR BY ORIEL HARWOOD, PAINTING ABOVE THE BATH BY ALDO MONDINO.  
© Courtesy of Francis Sultana

“but not Morocco – it’s more African tribal mixed with Art Deco; the French were very into Africa in the 1920s and 1930s, I’m doing a contemporary version of that”, Sultana lists the elements of the collection’s tweeds and weaves as “twine and rope, mixed with silk and coloured leather and hint of bullion – so the weaves are both poor and yet exquisitely rich.” Each collection is marked by the different pattern on the bronze that forms the legs of his chairs, tables and sofas, and the bases of his lamps; with ‘Lulu’ “the pattern is like raffia, it’s layered.”

He describes his furniture as “tailored. It’s about luxury and it’s about good quality, but it’s not about making grand gestures of contemporary design. I leave that to the artists I artistically direct.” There’s an element of understatement, another British trait (although the Philippo sofa we’re sitting on is covered in an Hermès fabric, “I love it because it looks like sackings”), making it fit well with both antiques and contemporary pieces, “or you can go with a complete look, though I much prefer people to mix me up.” The designer is also working on a line of accessories, which he’s always wanted to do: “candlesticks, picture frames, trays, boxes, vases, salt cellars – I want to have all the things I like buying. I’m creating my look.”

Fortunately, there’s soon going to be more space for his ‘look’ – Sultana’s other looming autumn project is moving his showroom from Chelsea to the floor above the David Gill gallery. “It’s a big step,” he remarks, “moving my company to such a neighbourhood, but we’re ready.” (At the time of going to press, work – and gutting - had just started; it was previously home to a hedge fund.) “And obviously, since I do decoration, it’s going to have to be quite an impressive office space,” he adds. Looking around the Sultana-designed David Gill space, the overall effect is less shop than salon, its clean lines and restrained palette maximizing the effect of pieces by Zaha Hadid and the Campana Brothers. There’s no doubt the new Francis Sultana showroom is going to be a major draw — as if his client base didn’t already have sufficient reason to be in St. James’s.



A RENDERING OF THE PAD RESTAURANT DESIGNED BY FRANCIS SULTANA.  
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