

DEREK FROST -BEING A DESIGNER, A GARDENER AND AN ARTIST

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Taken for the pages of my Memoir

LIVING AND LOVING IN THE AGE OF AIDS

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I leave school in 1970 with a clutch of poor exam results and, in consequence, instead of university go straight to work. A pair of distant relations, affluent spinster sisters Edith and Eleanor Frost, own Frost and Reed picture dealers. Started in 1808, it's one of the UK's oldest art dealerships. It's with this company, in Bristol, that I get my first job and start my training as an art dealer. I'm paid £400 per year. I know nothing about art.

Despite knowing nothing about art and culture, I prove rather good at persuading people to buy paintings from Frost and Reed. My skill is noted and after a year or so I'm transferred from Bristol to the company's grander galleries in Bond and Bruton Streets, London. The company's autocratic chairman, Stanley Wade, and his heavily bosomed girlfriend, Leonora Rochford, take an interest in me. Leonora is instructed to educate me and takes me regularly to The National Gallery, the Tate, The Courtauld Institute and London's many other art galleries. She wears a great solitaire diamond, powders her hands, and uses both to dramatic effect when declaiming about art to me and to whoever else passes through the galleries and is attracted by her performance.

For a boy who went straight from school to work it would appear that I have landed on my feet, that I'm all set to rise up the ranks of the art world. Instead I find that I'm unhappy. I don't enjoy working for an old-fashioned, rather stern boss. I don't want to wear a suit and behave in a conventional fashion with conventional people. I request a one-year leave of absence from Frost and Reed. To my surprise, Stanley Wade agrees.

Autumn is coming and my trip will soon end.

I next head to Europe where I focus on improving my language skills and on visiting art galleries and historic buildings. My lowly job with the Deutsche Bundesbahn allows me free train travel around Germany. The station platform that winter is cold and the work hard. It's a contrast to my life of lazy travel across exotic countries.

The last adventure of my year away is my first visit to Italy. Before leaving Paris, looking at paintings in the Musée du Jeu de Paume, I meet a girl who invites me to stay in Milan. Leaving that city, I continue my Grand Tour to this country's other great

cultural centres. At each I am taken in by another member of my friend's family, each equally hospitable. At every new stop their houses become grander, their personal

collections more extraordinary and the servants who attend them more numerous. None appear to look unkindly on my faded baggage and small collection of unsuitable clothes. My final Italian lodging is at the amazing Palladian masterpiece Villa Barbaro, also known as Villa di Maser, with its interiors decorated by Paolo Veronese!

I return from my travels much changed. There has also been change in the UK, and in spring 1974, a recession is in full swing. Stanley Wade finds himself unable to offer me a job back at his opulent galleries and offers me rather different employment. Frost and Reed has a division selling reproductions and I am sent to sell these to department stores and local galleries throughout Scotland. This means a big car filled with prints, lots of driving and a series of tatty, depressing places where I spend each night. What a change in my fortunes.

I show Mr Wade I can do it, indeed quite successfully. Then after two months I quit. Too bad for Stanley and the maiden aunts in Bristol. They might have thought to see me at some future Frost and Reed helm but don't appear to have any interest in the new me. I now see things differently. I don't owe them my long-term loyalty. We no longer fit and it's my life, not theirs.

So what and who is the new me? Most importantly, I'm out of the closet and I don't plan to hide that fact. I've become a modern, confident and independent adult. I've grown up and I plan to "do my own thing". I want to live in London. I want to know other gay men and I want to become an interior designer.

I find a one-room flat in Holland Park, where a platform raised on stilts puts me 60 centimetres below the ceiling when I sleep. I enroll in a design course by correspondence and find a clerk's position in the Architecture Department of the Greater London Council. Shortly after, I change jobs and sell expensive wallpaper from a basement shop in Mount Street. Then I become assistant to Michael Wield, a talented interior designer. His principal client is Victor Lownes, who, under the leadership of Hugh Hefner, developed the Playboy Club empire. Michael is working on Victor's rather sex-focused country house, which he shares with Marilyn, a former bunny who is soon to be his wife; a burgeoning collection of erotic art; his pet monkey and a bush baby that lives on a picture rail in his bedroom.

I start to climb the design ladder and will meet many colourful people on my way up.

Back in London, during that same year, the interior designer Mary Fox Linton, then in partnership with David Hicks, offers me a position but tells me: "If you want to keep the job don't become David's boyfriend – I've lost too many talented employees to his bed."

I have the highest regard for David Hicks as one of the most important groundbreaking designers of his day. I still do. David is reputed, within queer circles, to have been the boyfriend of Lord Louis Mountbatten and through him to have met his daughter Pamela,

who became his wife. Many gay and bisexual men then concealed their sexuality within marriages of this sort. Poor girls.

An invitation for the weekend, to their palatial home, Britwell House, soon arrives. The house is the ultimate statement of Hicks' unique style. Georgian rooms, perfectly detailed and painted in bright colours that might have made even Robert Adam, the great 18th-century architect and designer, gasp: bold geometric carpets; dramatic theatrical lighting; a mix of modern and period furniture, art and perfectly arranged "table-scapes" comprising multiple objects.

I'm the only guest. None of their children are at dinner, which is set for three and served in a magnificent octagonal domed room, its walls and windows covered in red silk damask. The conversation is formal, like the room. Lady Pamela retires and David pounces. I feel wretched about it all and to David's annoyance refuse to play ball. Keeping my job is more important to me; furthermore, I don't appreciate his presumption and I don't fancy him. It's the casting couch scenario; nothing new of course. The choice, yes or no, was mine. I didn't feel abused and fully understood what trade was in play.

The following year David and Mary dissolve their partnership, and I remain with Mary as she sets up her new company, Mary Fox Linton Ltd. She is generous and allows me to work directly with her clients and to develop my interior design skills; to play a growing role in designing many of the fabrics, carpets, dhurrie rugs and other products which her new company will sell, a range of products and interiors which originate the design style for which Mary is now so well known. One of Mary's greatest skills, a skill which advances the careers of myself and others, is her ability to identify talent and her willingness to nurture it.

As a designer I'm starting to develop a particular interest in three-dimensional space, internal volumes and how light penetrates through these. I encourage my clients to focus on improving space. I care more about function and objects and less about decorating. I'm always happy with a white space filled with art although I caution our clients not to decorate with art in the manner of pink room, pink painting. I hate that. There's also the psychological role: guiding a husband to listen to his wife and vice versa. Then there's the voice of the building and what's appropriate for it. I learn about people and their relationships. My skills improve and my passion for my subject strengthens.

I look at art and architecture and read about these subjects with ever greater focus. Music and nature provide equal reward. I travel as often as possible. I learn to listen, to feel and to look more deeply, to know more about the value of reflection and stillness.

Alongside nights spent at the Embassy Club I stay focused on my day job with Mary. I never expected to shine, so no one is more surprised than me when I do. Becoming successful is of increasing importance to me. Side by side with my work as an interior designer, I develop a particular interest in designing furniture and organise an exhibition

called “Old Masters and Modern Furniture” with the help of Derek Johns, J’s partner in the Embassy Club. Derek has the distinction of being the youngest ever director of Old Master Pictures at Sotheby’s and now runs his own successful gallery in partnership with Philip Harari. He allows me to borrow some of their best Old Master paintings for the exhibition, which I hang directly over modern furniture of our own design. The contrasts this creates are powerful and the exhibition excites interest and comment in the design press. At this time, few people mix elements from different periods in decoration, and many people who visit the exhibition leave with their perceptions about design altered.

Then a different design opportunity presents.

My design skills are put to the test when Jeremy entrusts me with the task of converting Heaven’s huge volumes into spaces suitable for his purpose. It’s a big responsibility and one which thrills me. I direct the builders to remove a huge area of mezzanine floor in the central arched space, which creates a vast double-height volume where we lay an enormous sprung dance floor, overlooked by a deep balcony. On the upper floor of the first arched space, we build a giant free-standing bar, all electric blue and silver, which stands at the centre of this cavernous room. The remaining third arched space will remain closed until we have the finances and the business to allow for its future use. We paint all Heaven’s walls and arches black. Great attention is given to spectacular lighting, lasers and the best sound system. The spaces are purposefully undecorated and hard-edged. The society and style barometer Harpers & Queen reports on Heaven and terms the interior styling “high tech”.

Side by side with the madness and the fun of our nights I spend my days focused on developing my independent career as a designer. In 1981, I’m appointed Design Director at Mary Fox Linton Ltd and lead a team of three other designers working from a studio located at our new double-fronted shop on the Fulham Road. Mary’s earlier association with David Hicks is no longer evident in the work we carry out, and, in the years to come, Mary Fox Linton Ltd’s design reputation will rise to great heights. Jeremy, equally focused, spends his days ensuring that both the Embassy and Heaven run as efficient businesses.

Christopher Selmes and Geoffrey Roberts have asked Mary Fox Linton Ltd to design the interior of their new home, the palatial Lindsey House on Cheyne Walk. All goes well until their other advisor, the talented antique dealer Christopher Gibbs, leads them in a contrary design direction. Without discussion, Mary Fox Linton Ltd is fired from the project. Subsequently I hear that Christopher Selmes, encouraged by a line or two of cocaine, takes a gun and shoots out many of the spotlights I have liberally installed in his ceilings. He calls it “de-Frosting the house”.

My ambitions grow, and in 1983 I hand in my notice at Mary Fox Linton Ltd and start my own interior design business, Derek Frost Associates Ltd (DFA).

Developing as a designer under the care of Mary has been an incredibly valuable learning experience, but I now feel fully fledged and ready to fly the nest and go out on my own. I'm passionate about my work and I'm good at it. I believe I will be successful in attracting interesting clients and design projects of my own. The design press takes an interest in my work, and in one article I'm billed as the next David Hicks... not something I ever thought about myself.

Jeremy acquires what will become a 50 per cent interest in an enormous building on the King's Road, then called the Furniture Cave and now known as the Furniture & Arts Building. Most of the building's tenants sell antique furniture and decorative objects. Over the years, I will paint the building a number of different colours; currently it's the brightest lime green. This will get our building noticed by the large number of people who pass down the Kings Road but will horrify a number of our more conservative tenants and neighbours.

With others, Jeremy opens Pasta Pasta, a shop selling the best Italian food. It sits on Pimlico Road, with interiors by my new design company: modern, white and bright green, with a silver mirrored ceiling. The food and design press pay us great attention.

On the second floor of the Furniture Cave we open Power Station, a weights gym for men. At this time, the kind of gym where many people now work out barely existed. Gyms then mostly meant a place where bruisers and fighters trained. Power Station is one of London's first modern gyms. We fill it with the newest resistance machines imported from America. The floor throughout is bright red rubber and many of the walls silver. All is slick, high tech and new. We install a large communal shower and the biggest jacuzzi we can find. Both attract interest of a rather provocative nature from our members. Power Station is popular but as a business is ahead of its time and never flourishes.

However, DFA proves successful, and, together with my new team, we soon find ourselves winning a number of increasingly interesting projects. One new client is Sir Edward Heath, Britain's Prime Minister from 1970–4, who has secured a lease on one of the exquisite Queen Anne houses which lie in the shadow of Salisbury Cathedral and whose gardens give onto water meadows. The house is in a poor state and Sir Edward asks me to take on the task with the instruction: "I want you to remodel the house in a contemporary fashion whilst paying respect to its Queen Anne origins." It's the first time he has actually owned a house of his own and he's passionate about the project. I'm happy when he's thrilled with the final result; it gives me great pleasure seeing him showing off his completed home to his friends.

My interest in designing contemporary furniture has advanced side by side with my interior design projects and DFA is now securing commissions to design adventurous "one-off" pieces of furniture which are both sculptural and functional. I establish a circle of craftsmen who have the skills to make these demanding objects; each piece is of the

highest quality. In 1985 I exhibit examples of this work at a private exhibition staged at Frederic, Lord Leighton's former home and studio in Holland Park. The exhibition is well attended and elicits positive mention in the design press.

The exhibition brings us new clients including Richard Branson's cousin, Simon Draper and his wife Francoise. Few appreciate the pivotal role Simon played in finding and signing many of the star artists that secured the great success of Virgin Records. Over the years I will help to make two houses for Simon and Francoise, for which they will commission from me many pieces of furniture. We become friends. Virgin has come into our lives for a second important time.

Power Station has not proved to be the success we had hoped and we convert it from a gymnasium to eMbargo, a members' dining and drinking club. As a "venue of the night a degree of outrage, decadence and fantasy is appropriate – Jeremy trusts in my design skills, applying few brakes. The style is a mix of primitive and contemporary. Black is mixed with the brightest of colours. Patterns are enormous and crude. Yet again Harpers & Queen write about us and our contribution to London life, and eMbargo quickly becomes a successful and fashionable destination. Jeremy, the club maestro, hits his mark for a third time.

In 1989, DFA design a room, billed as "The Office of a Collector", for the British Interior Design Exhibition. Our room is eclectic, bold, colourful, patterned and filled with art both old and contemporary. For this we receive attention and praise. The judges deliberate between our room and another for first place in the show but sadly it goes, ironically, to David Hicks Ltd. Despite this the design press report there is importance and originality in my work and seem excited by what they see. DFA will go on to receive evermore substantial and challenging design opportunities.

It's here, at Needsore, that I develop a passion for gardening. I love the physicality of it as much as the creative process. To plant something small, to nurture it, to watch it grow, to see it flower and then seed, is the greatest pleasure. Gardening attaches me to Planet Earth and my love for both grows.

A bench from my childhood sits in our garden overlooking the sea. It belonged to my parents and my grandparents before that. Three generations of my family have sat on this bench and considered the Dorothy Frances Gurney inscription, carved into its back: "The kiss of the sun for pardon, the song of the birds for mirth, one is nearer God's heart in a garden, than anywhere else on earth."

Gardening is demanding at Needsore. It's a wild place and the many birds and other animals who live there see my garden as their larder. The prevailing southwesterly winds come straight off the sea, blowing strong and laden with salt. You have to go with nature and make a garden that respects its environment.

I learn more about the seasons and the rhythms of nature.

On hot, still summer days, I delight in throwing off my shoes and planting my bare feet in the warm soil; bending down with my face amongst the green of the plants, smelling them and the cool that remains on them; stretching down with my eyes and hands searching for ways to nurture and husband what lies below. Then autumn, a time of exceptional colour, when welly boots replace bare feet. A time when the wind is high, the soil is damp and the smell in the air is earthier. It's becoming chilly and I'm pruning hard, tying down, feeding and preparing for the cold, dark winter that lies ahead. Then, there's spring, the glorious time of rebirth.

Within a day or two of selling Heaven, Jeremy is excited to learn about a completely derelict mews in London SW1 that has just come on the market. It's so forgotten and abandoned that it's never been connected to the city's sewerage system. A queue of potential purchasers quickly forms. Due to the recent sale of Heaven we are lucky to have cash in hand and this allows us to jump to the head of the line and the lower, broader half of the mews becomes ours. The sale allows us to build Moreton Yard – or, as we will call it, “The House that Heaven Built”.

The crumbling buildings are demolished. In their place, we make a concealed contemporary house built around a water filled courtyard garden, plus two small mews cottages, one of which will become my DFA studio.

Moreton Yard will become our beloved London home for the next 26 years. It will fill with a growing collection of art, books, plants and personal treasures. It will house our busy social and work lives, and at other times be a place of great tranquillity. Moreton Yard commands a different sort of garden to Needsore. There is more order here. Embraced on three sides by the house and along its fourth by a tall wall, we dig a substantial pond and surround it with flat stones and gravel. Water runs down into it and the sound echoes through the house. Fish swim there and a sculptural maple tree hangs over it. Around its edges, black bamboo and ferns will grow ever larger and white flowering wisteria will quickly cover the wall beyond it. There's an oriental aesthetic at play, one that appeals to my sense of discipline and philosophy of less being more. Despite this, there's little here of the Japanese “tortured” garden. Nature remains in command, not me.

The Old Cuban Shack lies to one side of an overgrown jungle of avocado trees, bananas and big-leaved vines. A small turquoise pool beckons from a far corner. All is hidden from view behind hedges of untended bougainvillea. The tropical abundance here seems immediately familiar to me and takes me back to the first garden I knew, to the tropical garden where I took my first steps, alongside the Passig River in Manila.

The shack is just that; as simple as can be. It's constructed entirely of a rough sawn dark red wood called Dade County pine; its interior spaces are unpainted and dark. Silver metallic roof tiles reflect the sun's glare. Sash windows separate its shady rooms from

the brilliant light outside and big double doors connect its double-height living space to the garden. Over the years, the shack will fill with crazy pink and turquoise but will never conceal its humble origins. We and our friends will spend many happy times here.

The shack's jungle will slowly become our much-loved tropical garden. As with all gardening in the tropics, it means the liberal use of saws and machetes – everything is enormous and growth is rampant. A tropical garden is virile and dense, filled with brilliant light and dark shade. Leaves are large, shiny and brightly patterned. Many of the flowers are fragrant. Cacti produce great plate-sized blooms which open during the night; their scent attracts the bats who pollinate them. Ginger flowers in profusion hang over the pool. I make sure the garden remains a jungle, and I'm often in it, scaling trees to attack galloping climbers, hacking away to create space and light amongst the plants. Growth is so fast that both quickly diminish. Larry, "the Leaping Lizard", visits and climbs amongst the trees. Great branches come down but new growth quickly calls him back. You sweat and fight mightily and joyously in this verdant place.

Andrew Stone, one of Crusaid's original committee members, is an executor of Freddy Kobler's will, which leaves a legacy of half a million pounds to be disposed of as Andrew considers best. Freddy was co-founder and director of Grand Metropolitan Hotels. Receipt of this gift is a great boost to Crusaid's early development: the Kobler donation, together with NHS funding, is used to open a dedicated HIV/AIDS clinic, the Kobler Centre, at what is now called the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital. Crusaid asks me to work with Riverside Health to implement its interior design. Two great British artists, both gay, Howard Hodgkin and Patrick Procktor, work with me and each donate a series of coloured and etched glass windows, one for the reception area and the other for the day ward. We are pleased to meet Princess Diana for a second time, when she opens the centre in September 1988. At the time of writing, the Kobler Centre still continues to offer top quality HIV/AIDS outpatient healthcare.

On South Beach, Miami, Jeremy and Richard find a good-looking 1940s building, comprising 12 custom-built apartments on Collins and Ninth. It's one street back from the beach and encircled by a garden filled with tropical plants and flowers. They like it, and The Nines on Collins becomes ours. Like the fancy beach fags we paint it in our own candy palette - primrose and prawn pink.

It's late April 1991. I'm in Thailand. I'm designing the interior of Philanderer, an enormous sailing boat; a great bird which will soon fly across the world's oceans. I'm surrounded by the dust of construction and the glare of tropical light. For me, it's a dream project and thrilling. What I experience there, what I contribute as a designer, fills me with deep satisfaction.

We're at the Nice Superyacht show. Philanderer, which I last saw under construction in Thailand, just prior to Jeremy's HIV diagnosis two years ago, is in the water. She's a sleek giant cruising yacht, boasting the latest in sailing technology, minimal lines and a

high character interior courtesy of DFA. It's thrilling to see her here and so many people admiring her.

We're excited about developing Macklin Street. I'm busy drawing up plans. We're going to open our own gym on the first floor, maybe a yoga studio on the floor above. There could be a fabulous penthouse on the top floor.

Macklin Street now boasts a second floor of fully let "Gay- Friendly Offices", a first floor gym and pay parking on the ground floor. Only the top floor remains empty.

I prune the Moreton Yard wisteria hard. Balancing on the wall feels good. It's a regular autumn job. Must be done.

John Schlesinger has decided to move from his Hicks designed house to a new London address. He asks me to reconfigure the spaces and to redecorate his new home. It's a challenging project. Working for a close friend who has a highly developed aesthetic, an impressive collection of art and who accepts only the highest standards is exactly the sort of project I love.

Despite such opportunities, I'm finding it hard to keep focused on the demands of my design business alongside the threat to Jeremy's health and the many other responsibilities which fill our lives.

Often a combination of anguish, anger and a troubled energy pushes me out into the garden. I work there with ever greater industry and find that the physicality of working with plants, weeding, pruning, pulling down and tying back gives me great relief and comfort.

Going gardening. Tear out those weeds. Gardening really helps. It's sunny at Needsore, my feet are bare and sweat is running down my back. How can I not feel happy here? I do feel happy. Bless nature, sunshine, breeze and flowers. Bless the natural rhythms which more and more sustain and nourish me. Colour is here.

I'm not paying enough attention to my design business. In particular, I'm not devoting time to networking and to meeting the people who will bring me new work. When you're worried, sad, confused and in pain you don't feel like being fabulous with strangers. You don't want to go to all the social events, openings and shows. You don't want to talk to the right people, get noticed and get talked about. I need work to keep my company afloat, but increasingly don't want to shoulder the inevitable demands that accompany each new project. My design team at that time, Piers Northam and Rosemary Howman, are understanding of my new situation, but neither are in a position to bring DFA new work or lead the design process.

Winter gardening back at Needsore. It's good to be working hard in the cold. All is now put to bed, cut safely back, tidied, protected from the bitter winds, ready for the winter's rest. The cold and the physical work clears my troubled mind.

I start to fear that events may force me to close my design business. I'm fearful about losing Jeremy and now I'm fearful about a lesser, but nevertheless fundamental, loss in my life. I've worked hard to become a successful designer. I'm proud of my business and the quality work DFA does. It gives me a great sense of pride that people select me from amongst my competitors and see value in paying me for the service I provide. Must I now give this up?

Thinking about closing my business also forces me to consider the question: Who will I be if I'm no longer Derek Frost the designer? It feels good when a member of the design press says: "A skilled and original creator. His work should be watched." Must this stop? It's important to me that I'm successful on my own account. If I close my design business will my sense of personal success evaporate? How then will I be judged by others? Why care and does this matter?

I try to balance, in my increasingly confused mind, what's more important: designing huge houses for wealthy people, equipping myself to help Jeremy run his businesses, learning to share the wisdom of yoga with others, or maximising private loving time with Jeremy given when there's a high probability he'll soon become ill and will die.

My work as a designer has become ever more detailed and precise. Every millimetre seems to count. Every detail is considered minutely. My work seems to demand from me the tightest focus. A concept or an idea will roll round and round in my head endlessly, a thousand variants considered; sketch follows sketch as a design thought advances. The pressure I impose on myself in this way sometimes feels like a hurt in my head. Is all this the expression of a building madness? How much longer should I stay focused on the minutiae of designing for others? Maybe it's time to stop?

Spring has arrived. I'm in the garden at Needsore. There's a calm sea behind me. An afternoon of good physical work, struggling to dig out two deeply rooted old plants. I replace them with a pink flowering climbing rose and a purple clematis. I dig two generous holes into which I tip good dark compost and a handful of bone meal. Into each a plant then goes. Now I add soil mixed with more compost. I stamp them well in and give them a good watering. A thousand gulls keep me company and the cool air is filled with their wild calling. Hard physical toil and me happy as a lark.

My design business takes me to the US. In open country, near San Diego, I'm excited to see the construction of a contemporary, mud-clad building of immense scale and beautiful detail. My interest in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and my love for things oriental has been noticed by my adventurous new clients. They have asked me to design furniture for their new home. On the same trip I visit the 1994 Design House in San

Francisco which exhibits a bold, colourful, abstract approach for a bathroom designed by DFA.

Despite such evidence of my success I continue to feel a diminishing urge to design and start to acknowledge that my priorities, my responsibilities and my interests are shifting elsewhere. Still I delay closing my design business, not doing what I now know needs to be done, still fearful that others will quickly forget about my independent success and design skills. Still I remain worried about losing my independence and status.

I feel overwhelmed by the demands of DFA. There are so many design drawings to be completed. Why am I accepting new work when so much else demands my attention? A Saudi prince has asked me to design the interiors of his new palace in Riyadh. The prototype for Rapier Boats is starting to look good, but will it be ready for the EarlsCourt show? Three magazines want to publish pictures of John Schlesinger's completed apartment. I need to close my design business.

It's then, ice crunching under my feet, that I have my eureka moment. That's it. Decision made. Close DFA.

Am I disappointed that I haven't scaled the peaks, reached the summit as a designer? Do I feel cheated? Am I resentful? No. Absolutely not. Interior design has served me and I have served it. I learnt that I could succeed as a designer and I achieved a lot. I now know that the energy I put into it must move elsewhere. I'm ready to move on. I turn down the Riyadh job – my first step toward closing the business that has been so precious to me.

My decision to close DFA is tested immediately. A few years back I helped make a house in London for Nick Mason, Pink Floyd's drummer, and his lovely wife Netty. Now they've bought a beautiful Georgian house in the country, the former home of Andrew and Camilla Parker Bowles. It's a dream project. I explain to them why I have to say no. They're understanding, as I knew they would be. Then the offer of a second equally interesting job. Again it's not easy to say no, but it's what I'm now resolved to do.

My small design team will leave at the end of the summer. I'm confident they'll find good jobs elsewhere, that we'll part the best of friends. Their support during a difficult time is so appreciated.

So who will I be now that I'm no longer Derek the Designer? I'll still be me, substantially unchanged, still worthy of being loved by Jeremy, family and friends. In reality, little of importance will be different. I'll have simply stopped doing one thing in order to make space to do other things. Surprisingly, even my ego doesn't seem that bothered.

What remains essential to me, of course, is that I continue to be creative. For me, as for any creative person, this will be no challenge. I don't need a job or a client to be

creative. For me, just about every act is an act of creation: arranging flowers, working in the garden, setting a table, making a bed. The most ordinary acts are all creative acts if carried out as beautifully as possible. To do this comes entirely naturally to me. It's what I do. Who I am.

I decide to devote more time to drawing and painting. In this I will refuse to be precise, rigid, tight. I will learn to be expansive, loose, even wild. I will remember Dorothy Hancock's fine example. I determine there will be laughter in my work.

Millimeters now only serve to tie me up in mental knots.

Making my own art, in this loose, expansive way, will speed my healing. Making my own art, as opposed to working for others, will also allow me the freedom to be immediately and completely available to Jeremy if he gets sick. This gives me great peace of mind.

Drawing and painting gives me increasing pleasure. I'm attending regular art classes. Making representational art requires that you really look, and this looking introduces me to an unexpected love. It's hard not to fall in love with a person or an object when you look closely and deeply. An aged wrinkled face, a distorted stained rock, a twisted rusted tin can, when studied carefully, assumes an unexpected beauty. Beauty and love can be found in the most unlikely surroundings. Youth and newness are, of course, immediately beautiful and under close inspection display this to a miraculous degree; similar inspection displays the same in a face of any age. Almost without exception, objects that come from nature are by default beautiful.

This is how yoga teaches looking: "Learn to look in a disconnected sort of way – look without analysing and labelling; look with your heart."

Painting, particularly oil painting, becomes a wonderfully sensuous experience. Initial stumbling occasionally gives way to a beautiful fluidity. Lay down a colour with a big brush and use lots of paint, put another fat blob of another colour on top of it, draw the top colour apart and enjoy portions of the bottom colour glimpsing through. Embark on endless colour and texture games, playing with no particular purpose.

It's better to focus on the process and not the result. Most probably the result won't be up to much but don't let that matter. I'm happy to say that my art ego is small. I don't expect what I do to be any good. Being good simply doesn't matter. I'm not doing this to please anyone else. It's my private adventure.

Since closing my design business, I have developed a more joyful relationship with interiors and architecture and with all the components of these arts. When previously I looked at such things, it was with a grasping mind, hungry for new ideas to hone my skills. Now I look only in pursuit of pleasure and learning. I'm no longer cataloguing

what will be useful. Now my looking is relaxed and even light-hearted. Of course, I'm still critical of poor quality and delighted by beauty, high standards and originality.

I have not forgotten a determination to curb my controlling nature when drawing or painting, to allow the process to take some sort of lead of its own, to just allow stuff to happen. At the end of a painting day, mounds of differently coloured paint lie across my palette. Rather than waste them, I scoop them up with a broad palette knife, taking up a largely random combination of varying colours without giving it much thought. I then draw the loaded flat knife across a clean surface. What happens happens. Often I see landscape emerging and I might allow this to guide me as I apply the remaining colours. What I call my scrapings – made with a mind that is almost entirely disengaged, and having almost no idea about how the colour will coalesce and in what form – produce results which are often more admired than almost anything else I make.

Before leaving London, I was, for some years, a member of a weekly painting group, working under the eagle eye of the highly regarded artist Maggi Hambling. Examples of Maggi's work are on proud display in many of our national galleries and also internationally. I felt fortunate to be one of her students. Maggi, a trousered lesbian and mostly sporting a large fedora when out (in all senses out), presents as rather fierce, but in reality has a warm open heart. All students joining her class are on probation for their first term, at the end of which each is required to perform an art piece in full drag – no exceptions made. I worked hard preparing for my performance, which combined painting, costume, dance and song. Maggi's critique of my efforts: "Certainly creative but technically poor." My skirt fell off mid-show! However, I'm happy to say my effort was deemed sufficient to win me a permanent place in her class.