

The time-traveller's life

Artist Joy Bell lives in a tiny former church in Northland, surrounded by a mosaic assemblage of past and present

WORDS SARAH LANG / PHOTOGRAPHS JANE USSHER



THIS PAGE (clockwise from top left) In the workroom of Joy Bell's home near Warkworth, hand-picked blooms mimic the flowers on her Victorian enamel jug. Joy's painting on the doors of her shed creates the illusion of a horse in a stable beside a brick wall and window; only Bella the Jack Russell is real. In the small kauri kitchen most meals are eaten on bar stools at the bench, when it's not covered with art. Missy, the Arab pony. **OPPOSITE** The front garden, with its sweeping driveway, curving lines and overhanging trees, evokes the grounds of an English country estate.



JOY BELL CAN see into the future. In her courtyard sits a headstone, to be unveiled in 2070, which reads: “Here lies the body of Joy Bell, hard-working and honest till she fell. At age 110, gave to worms what she refused to men.” The epitaph, carved by Joy herself as a 19-year-old monumental mason, captures her lively, unconventional personality – a personality that’s also reflected in her country home near Warkworth, Northland. As I arrive, driving past overhanging fruit trees and outdoor mosaics, a brightly clad woman waves hello with a rainbow lorikeet perched on her head.

Joy arrived here in 1996 after 18 years in Ponsonby, Auckland, 12 of which were spent establishing and running an art gallery-turned-antiques shop. Craving community and space for herself and her baby son, she decided to shut the shop and sell off the priciest antiques, raising just enough to buy a country home with a bit of freehold land. “I loved this place before I even saw it properly. I drove in and saw all the trees, with their shelter, privacy, shade. I thought, ‘Oh, I hope the house isn’t too bad.’”

Built in the 1880s, it was once a tiny “country-bumpkin church” that served a since-vanished village. By 1919 it was derelict and boarded up, and remained that way until an Englishman bought it in the 1970s, moved it off the roadside onto the 1.6ha behind and, at his wife’s behest, turned it into an English cottage by adding three lean-tos. It’s still so small that Joy’s neighbours call it the dollhouse.

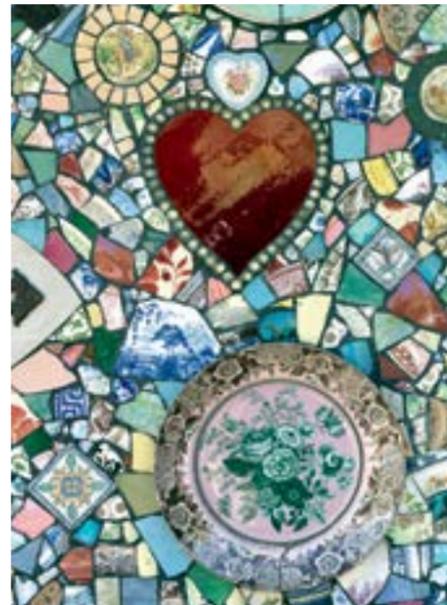
Inside, hundreds of antiques and collectables – some family heirlooms, most from Joy’s antiques shop – transform a small, basic living space into a sort of Victoriana-meets-natural-history-museum. There are old black and white photos, paintings, statues, plates, dolls, busts, vases, ancient books, stuffed animals. There are crosses, rosary beads and religious icons (as befits a former church with a lapsed Catholic owner). >

THIS PAGE In the dining room Joy painted the feature wall black before gluing on Victoriana images, including fruit, fans and butterflies; the light fitting has been embellished with wine decanter stoppers. **OPPOSITE** (clockwise from top left) Looking into the tiny, light-flooded entrance alcove that’s now the kids’ computer room. Joy, who’s been involved in bird-rescue efforts for 25 years, has many talking lorikeet parrots that sit on her shoulder or head, demanding maple syrup: “They’re hilarious, gregarious – total extroverts.” The lounge was once the central room of the church; it’s quite dark, so Joy is considering repainting the walls a lighter colour.





THIS PAGE (clockwise from top left) In 1920s Turkey many African boys were street traders of coffee; this "black boy wind-up automaton" was made to promote Turkish coffee: "He's quite freaky as his eyes follow you and he's been known to scare children." A kitchen cupboard door has been découpaged with images of angels; it has a 1940s rubber hand for a knob. In Joy's bedroom is a Victorian whatnot made of burned bamboo. Taxidermied crocodiles and iguanas "run along the rafters" of Joy's bedroom: "For some reason I have a strange liking for bits of dead animals." **OPPOSITE** Joy added a ceiling and four dormer windows to create her rafter-top bedroom above the lounge; she sewed the quilt from scraps of floral clothing; the spider monkey skeleton above the bed was snapped up on Auckland's K Rd. >



“Some say they couldn’t live here. Others love it and bring friends around to see it”

There are cabinets and glass cases full of tiny curios: watches, pens, clocks, scrolls, medals, badges, songbooks, jewellery, model guns, a miniature camera, a tiny guitar. If you let her, she’ll tell you the story of each one. “They’re things people used – the weird, unusual, bizarre,” says Joy.

Up a slender mezzanine staircase, among the rafters, is Joy’s bedroom. Stuffed birds and a monkey skull sit alongside photos of olden-day families and antique clocks. Joy, who says she’s “in heaven” sketching and reading up here, knows that her house – especially her bedroom – is a minimalist’s nightmare.

The most extreme reaction came from her Auntie May. “She had to go outside and wanted to be sick. She found it really claustrophobic and weird. Some say they couldn’t live here. Others love it and bring friends around to see it.”

Schoolmates of her children, Alec, 15, and Rosie, 14 (Joy split from their father when they were toddlers), certainly gape. But, says Rosie, her friends love it here – “They all live in normal white houses”. And what does Rosie herself think of it? “You know, I love it. I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else, and I wouldn’t like anyone else owning it, but I quite like clean things. I don’t like clutter.”

Her mum laughs. “I do live in the past and have an aversion to anything new so, of course, the kids dislike old stuff. I imagine they’ll end up minimalists. They do their own thing in their rooms.” Sure enough, Alec has a typical boy’s den and Rosie’s bedroom is strewn with *Twilight* posters.

There’s no room for Joy’s own art in the house, but it fills every cranny in her Aladdin’s cave of a studio, upstairs in an outdoor shed. Art lovers take tours here, buying mosaics and other pieces that blur the boundaries between conventional art forms. Think mixed-media assemblages, sculptures and gilded vases with a medieval, Victorian or art nouveau aesthetic.

Joy’s inspiration is her antiques. She takes moulds and makes models from various pieces then turns them into art. A Harvest Queen leadlight window, for instance, inspired a prize-winning fruits-of-the-vine sculpture. “I’m a time-travelling thief, stealing images from centuries ago and making a story.”

To call art her passion is an understatement. After the kids go to bed, she’s often up till the early hours. “I live with being tired to make good art.” She’s a perfectionist, lamenting that her first mosaic, created on an outdoor path and steps (pictured above), with animal figures for the kids, was “done wrong”. >



THIS PAGE (clockwise from top left) In the studio, Joy works on one of her gilded vases, by far her biggest-selling artworks. Joy loves the tinkling sound of wind chimes. Broken china was incorporated into the mosaic that covers an exterior wall of the house: “I’ve mosaicked two of the house’s five exterior walls, so I only need to paint three.” The first step in creating gilded vases involves gluing laser-copied images of flowers and birds to the inside. Surrounded by a mosaic wall in the courtyard, the French doors lead into Rosie’s room.
OPPOSITE (from left) The lorikeets spend their day on the wisteria-draped verandah. A neighbour helped bend the steel for the arches by running over it with his tractor; the steel was fed through drainage pipes dug up from the church’s original site.

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homes

The worst piece of advice I ever got: From my accountant friend, who was concerned that putting mosaics on the side of my house would be detrimental to its resale. I said, "I'm not leaving." There's a freedom in that.

Something I love about the house: It's dark in the day, but magical lit up at night.

My favourite time: The completion of a sculpture or a mosaic... much harder to accomplish than starting one. And when I wake up in the morning feeling incredibly energised and wondering what I'm going to work on today.

What sums me up as an artist: I don't accept the *Emperor's New Clothes* idea of what most people think is good art.

Favourite part of the house: My upstairs bedroom – a kid-free zone!

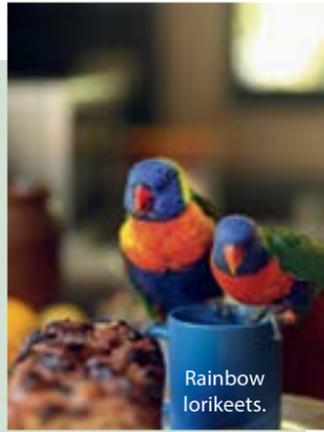
I hardly ever use: The computer. I'm a technophobe, but I gave in because the kids needed a computer for school. I really should get a website soon.

The things most valuable to me: Family heirlooms in my care to pass on to the next generations.

I love gazing at: Olden-day photos of families. I imagine what their lives were like. My favourite photo, above my bed, is a family outside an old cottage, with a horse and chickens.

The best thing about this area: It's much more friendly and communal than town. I'm friends with my neighbours.

Joy Bell



Rainbow lorikeets.

Today, some of the exterior walls of her house and studio have become "creative jigsaws". In the garden, mosaics adorn a bench seat, bird bath, washing-line stand, washing-basket holder, planter boxes, water tank, a giant rock and a half-completed outdoor lounge suite. Last year Joy co-wrote *Mosaics* (published by David Bateman) to guide novice mosaicists and she's regularly commissioned to create mosaic work for commercial and public areas, including loos. "I'm the toilet queen!"

Out back there's a sun-soaked deck where Joy has get-togethers over cheese, crackers and wine. ("Slaving in the kitchen isn't for me.") She picks dinner from a low-maintenance vege and herb garden and a rambling orchard serves as wind-break for the paddock where her two ponies chew carrots.

Joy gazes around with satisfaction. "I'll never move, even if I win a million dollars." But, come 2070, her daughter has her instructions: "Rosie, don't sell my stuff to an antiques dealer. Take it to an auction house." The kids won't want anything, Joy tells me, but Rosie chips in: "Mum, I'll keep some special things, things you love, and take them to my house." Awww.

But Joy doesn't mind what happens to the house or property once she's gone. "All that matters is that it has served me well – given me food, trees, room for the kids, dogs and horses, a place for my antiques, the time, freedom and space to make art. This place gives me everything I need." ■