

An Artist's Palette

These longtime renters celebrate homeownership by freely bringing tons of color to their garden, porch, and home.



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Fanciful Flowers

Relocating from New York to Mississippi has given Kate Donovan (katedonovan.com) space for a home studio, where she adorns wood plates, terra-cotta saucers, and tiny matchbooks with botanical designs (she also makes vegetables, like the pea pod and its curlicue stem, out of copper).



Sometimes, you have to listen hard for messages from the universe. Other times, there's simply no missing them. That was the case for Kate Donovan and Leslie Joblin when they were deciding where to live after holing up for much of the pandemic in State College, PA, where Kate grew up and Leslie was finishing grad school. They had heard through a friend that a charming house was about to hit the market in Water Valley, MS—a town they loved to visit when in the area to see Leslie's family—so they decided on a whim to take a look.

They were immediately drawn to the lush green garden, blue front porch, red front door, and the cute carvings of cat heads atop two of the front gate pickets. "That detail felt like it was calling for us," Leslie says. (They have rescued four cats together.) The red front door also felt like a sign: Red doors were a symbol for the Bloomsbury Group—a collective of artists and writers cofounded by Virginia Woolf—a subject over which Kate and Leslie first bonded. (The group figured in Leslie's PhD work on modernist interiors.)

But Kate, an artist and longtime magazine lifestyle editor, had a rare, golden-ticket kind of rent-stabilized apartment back in New York City. It would be crazy to give that up, right? So the couple went back to Queens, just to see how it compared. Stopping into their favorite bookstore, they immediately spotted on the display table *The B.T.C. Old-Fashioned Grocery Cookbook*—

recipes from the bakery and food shop that stands about 400 feet, as the biscuit flies, from the front steps of the Water Valley house. Blue porch and red door it was!

Since moving in early 2022, the couple have created a space where home, garden, and color all intersect. It's as if the zinnias and cosmos along the front fence form a colorfully dotted line connecting the garden to the blue porch, butter yellow living room, teal library, and candy apple red accents throughout the house. As first-time buyers, Kate and Leslie used color to personalize every corner—a liberty they never had as renters. The circa-1885 three-bedroom house was in good condition when they bought it, so "knock on wood, we had very little renovating to do," Kate says. "Working with color has been our more affordable way of changing up the space."

They've drenched the walls of each room in an array of garden-reminiscent hues, not to mention all the ornately hand-painted details around the doors and windows. They're regulars at the Farrell-Calhoun paint store in nearby Oxford. "We'll go in and say, 'What would happen if we mixed this and this color?' And the guy is always like, 'Let's try it!'" says Leslie, who works in communications at the University of Mississippi. When they were painting the library, for example, they mixed an entire gradient of blue as samples.

The pair incorporate additional layers of color and pattern with a lot of art (made by Kate and other local artists), textiles, and thrifted finds. They love going to estate sales for all kinds of discoveries: "Sure, we've found great stuff," Kate says, "but we've also learned so much about the area and our new neighbors." And they have nothing less than the universe to thank for bringing them here.

Hello, Yellow

When the couple first looked at the house, Kate says they noticed "a real reverence for color." The living room was yellow—a hue they previously never would have considered for their main space—"but it was the first thing we loved about this home." Since moving in, they've sweetened the shade to be slightly more buttery: "It's bright and cheerful and really sets the tone in this large room and out into the foyer," Kate says.



Chameleon Shades

In a house filled with color, the hue on the dining room walls (Farrell-Calhoun Rocky Mountain 0128) might be the pair's favorite for its many moods: "Sometimes it's purply," Kate says. "Other times it's almost pink. On the chip, it looks brown." Perhaps because of its shifting ability, it looks great against many different kinds of pieces—including the flame stitch love seat Leslie thrifted during grad school, a vintage hanging tapestry, and an antique Hoosier cabinet. In this room, as in others, touches of deep red add unexpected contrast.



Artist in Residence

Art has a way of mirroring the space you give it. When Kate lived in a 400-square-foot studio apartment, she painted matchboxes and miniatures, "and it still took half an hour to stash away my supplies," she says. In this house, Kate's art studio is painted to reflect her passion. "I'm obsessed with goldenrod yellow and pink," as seen on the doors and walls. She painted the flowers on the doors as an homage to the ones blooming in the garden.

"A LOT OF DIFFERENT AESTHETICS ARE GOING ON IN THIS ROOM, BUT THAT'S ONE OF THE THINGS I'VE LEARNED FROM KATE. SHE'S SHOWN ME THAT MORE CAN BE BETTER." —LESLIE JOBLIN, homeowner



Feel for Teal

The guest room-library has been painted three times—all versions of a greenish blue. The first two cans were mixed during a paint shortage in 2022, and the second can didn't quite match. "I thought it was taking forever to dry before I realized it is dry; it's just a darker color," Leslie says. So they called it a happy accident and redid the room in the darker hue, only to decide a year later that it was too lively for a reading room and painted yet again. To lean into the coziness of the space, they also painted the built-ins and ceiling. "It was kind of that book *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, where it was all a logical progression," Leslie jokes.



Coats of Many Colors

There's a saying in the South, "If it doesn't move, monogram it." Kate and Leslie, however, have another suggestion for inanimate objects—paint them. "It's like we painted all the rooms but had paint left over, and we applied it to everything," Kate says.



Flora and Fond of It

The tapestry was the first thing the couple bought for their new home, even before they moved in. "It reminds me of the Matisse cutouts, and we knew we wanted to use it as our headboard," Kate says. To maximize coziness in the room, they created a nook for the bed by flanking it with bookcases and painted the walls a soothing deep blue. For contrast, they brought in light peach pillows and bedding.

"WHAT IF WE PAINTED VASES?
LAMPS? TRAYS? THE KITCHEN TABLE?
WHAT IF WE JUST KEEP GOING?"

—KATE DONOVAN, homeowner



Red, White, and View

To give the patriotic color scheme a modern touch, Kate incorporated shibori fabric and golden yellow accents.

Late in the pandemic, the couple both worked from the front porch and loved getting to know the rhythms of their neighborhood. "We practically lived out here," Leslie recalls. "We'd say, 'There's Rick in his red truck.' Or 'Hi, Brett; enjoy the gym!'"



Bright Creations

Kate's art meanders throughout the entire house and its furnishings, but nothing is too precious. That's why she and Leslie might decide on a whim to bring the kitchen table outside for the afternoon or to paint that same kitchen table a cool shade of blue. After all, Kate's work is often drawn from the intimacy of everyday life and the outdoors that surrounds it, like the front yard's pollinator garden and her memories of growing up in central Pennsylvania. □

