

writing her own brief

Karen Walker has put her inimitable stamp on Resene's latest collection of designer colours. *Habitat* talks to her about the inspiration behind the range.





at work

Karen Walker's influence on the international fashion scene cannot be overestimated. With her strong sense of personal style, her confidence, her indisputable design talent, and her business and marketing acumen, the fashion designer has established an international reputation for her clothing.

Now in her mid-30s, Karen has proven yet again that an interest and ability in one field of design can be readily transferred to others. Last year, she launched her new jewellery range at New Zealand Fashion Week, and her colour sense is also influencing the world of interior design.

Four years ago, Karen was approached by Resene to create a Karen Walker paint range exclusively for the company.

"I was asked to do something that expressed the Karen Walker look," she says. "So I created my own brief. Many people lack confidence about colour and become easily overwhelmed by too much choice. I wanted to remove this colour phobia. That's why I initially developed a small chart of only 29 colours.

"The look I was aiming for was that of dusty, worn, antique interiors. Colours that would appear muted and faded; the way they get after they've been around for 20 years. I'm not a minimalist or a fan of feature walls. I like the walls in my own environment to recede into the background – I don't want them to be the star. It's the people in a room that count."

Over a four-month period, Karen collected samples of colours that seemed to her to reflect the dusty, muted qualities she was looking for and threw them into a

box – fabric scraps, ripped out pages from magazines, objects – anything that caught her eye.

"I then laid them all out on a table and grouped them. I built the colour palette using the same process I follow when developing a clothing range. I look for the elements that go well together and work out where the gaps are."

She sent her ideas to Resene and received A4 drawdown swatches back. It took almost three weeks of tweaking the colours and sending samples backwards and forwards from her studio to Resene before she pronounced herself happy with the results. The Karen Walker paint range has now been extended from the original 29 colours to 42 shades, and the new chart was released onto the market in September 2004.

at home

With a keen awareness of the brands that most closely reflect her personal preferences, Karen Walker describes her interior design taste as being more aligned with *Casa Vogue*, which she adores, than with *Wallpaper*. She likes mixing old and new. In her home, you're likely to find Victorian furniture alongside the sleekest of contemporary pieces.

Karen and her husband, advertising agency creative director Mikhail Gherman, live in West Auckland's Swanson, in a distinctive 1933 white stucco house perched on top of a hill overlooking their 12 acres of bush. It's one of the few art deco houses in the Waitakeres.



Get your copy of the Karen Walker chart online from www.resene.co.nz or any Resene-owned ColorShop.

See Karen Walker fashion online at www.karenwalker.com.



In keeping with her desire to keep wall colours firmly in the background, the interior of her home is mainly buttery white.

“We used Resene Karen Walker Bleach White on the exterior, which changes colour according to the time of day and the amount of light,” she says.

Although the couple took advice from friend and architect Nicholas Stevens when they bought the property eight years ago, Karen says that they have planned and implemented any renovations themselves.

“We’ve tried to create a comfy, homely feel in the house. We’re very exposed to the elements and we experience some powerful weather conditions. That’s why it’s so important for us to feel cocooned and protected inside,” she says. “Every aesthetic decision in the house has been set against the mood of the property. In a city apartment, we might have gone for a cleaner look, but out in the Waitakeres, we have so much space around us, both inside and out, that we like to have lots of things around us.”

How do two strong-minded designers, each with their own aesthetic convictions, make joint decisions about what goes into their own interior? Karen gives a cheeky grin.

“Oh, we had lots of arguments negotiating the interior, but we’re both happy with the results we’ve achieved. Most of the furniture is old. The living room has two big, classic, studded, brown leather Chesterfields – very dark and chocolatey. They’ll just get better with age. We toss a couple of rabbit fur cushions over them.

“The coffee table, which is four cubes, is more modern. My big red velvet couch is a bit of a mutt – part Victorian, which has been combined with another couch. It’s all deep red velvet and dark mahogany. For the lighting, we settled on egg and sphere lamps, sunken halogens and candles.”

In the master bedroom, a 150-skin possum rug is draped over the bed, teamed with embroidered and faggoted Victorian linen. A red velvet chair found discarded on the footpath in the early ‘60s enhances the overall look.

Choice pieces of New Zealand art are scattered throughout the house: a Hotere etching, a John Reynolds and Deborah Smith triptych in the kitchen, paintings by John Reynolds, and photographic prints by Derek Henderson, Richard Malloy and Michael Parekowhai. Their most recent purchase was a large Maori wooden carving called *Little Fella* by Lee Ralph.

“Our home is a sanctuary – I love it!” **H**