

Secret agent



PHOTO: S. BAKER

Serena Rees, co-founder of Agent Provocateur, certainly didn't skimp on the Regent's Park townhouse which she is selling for £15m. **Emma Wells** reports

Serena Rees is best known for satin cutaway corsets, leopard-print suspenders and nipple pasties, loved by secretaries and celebrities alike for their perfect blend of stylishness and smut. Having co-founded the Agent Provocateur lingerie brand, she embarked on a second high-profile business venture, the upmarket chocolate shop Cocomaya, in Marble Arch. Soon, Rees's A-list posse (including Stella McCartney and Madonna) were beating a path to the door for sea-salt caramels and gold-leaf brownies. And as the ex-wife of Joe Corrè, the son of Dame Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren, her fashion credentials are faultless.

But Rees, 48, has a secret passion that goes beyond panties and pasties. "I am crazy about buildings and architecture," she says. "When I was a child, my godfather, the architect Roddy Graddidge, who did interiors for Detmar and Issy Blow, used to have these fabulous parties at his house in Chiswick, and I would fall asleep upstairs in one of the bedrooms in a pile of the women's furs. It gave me a taste for luxury. I was always changing my bedroom around, pulling up carpets or repainting the walls, just trying to create different environments in my private space."

It was a childhood preoccupation that Rees — who famously left London's beau monde gasping in shock when she left Corrè for Paul Simonon, the ex-Clash bassist turned painter, in 2006 — never lost. "What I am good at is creating experiences," she says. "Agent Provocateur was a fantasy place that

existed in my mind, and I made it a reality. And whatever project I am working on, whether it's for a fashion brand or creating a new space, I need an environment that inspires me."

For Rees, who is of Kashmiri Indian descent and today is wearing a flowing pink and green dress by Gucci with chunky gold jewellery, buying, gutting and renovating properties across London — both to live in and as savvy investments — has been something of an obsession. After leaving a rented flat off the King's Road, in Chelsea, in the 1980s, she bought her first property in Notting Hill, moving on to projects in St John's Wood and then a pair of huge townhouses in Pimlico.

An industrial building in Clerkenwell followed ("just a shell when I bought it"). Here her neighbours included the A-list stylist Katie Grand. Then it was on to Charterhouse Square, Clerkenwell, and later Portland Place, in Marylebone, where she created a lateral home inspired by hotel suites on New York's Upper East Side.

"It took me a few years to find the perfect home," says Rees, in what seems something of an understatement. "Every home I own has to be a dream — but this one has to be the ultimate place." It would be hard to disagree. Rees, perched on an outsize pastel-pink felt sofa by

Hay, is speaking in her five-storey grade I listed townhouse overlooking Regent's Park. It is part of a John Nash terrace adorned with neoclassical sculptures, and has five bedrooms and five receptions laid out over 4,700 sq ft of living space.

She shares it with her 19-year-old daughter, the raven-haired Cora Corrè, one of London's most-watched celebrity offspring (along with Rafferty Law and Brooklyn Beckham), who made her modelling debut in one of her grandmother's catwalk shows when she was just four.

Rees bought the house, which was on the market for £12m, three years ago. She reportedly made about £20m from the sale of the lingerie business following her hostile divorce from Corrè in 2007 ("It's all out in the open now, and we did a lot of great things in our time together"). "I've spent several million pounds bringing the property up

Sheer luxury
Serena with one of her terriers and Francis Bacon paintings. The house is part of John Nash's grand terrace beside Regent's Park, right

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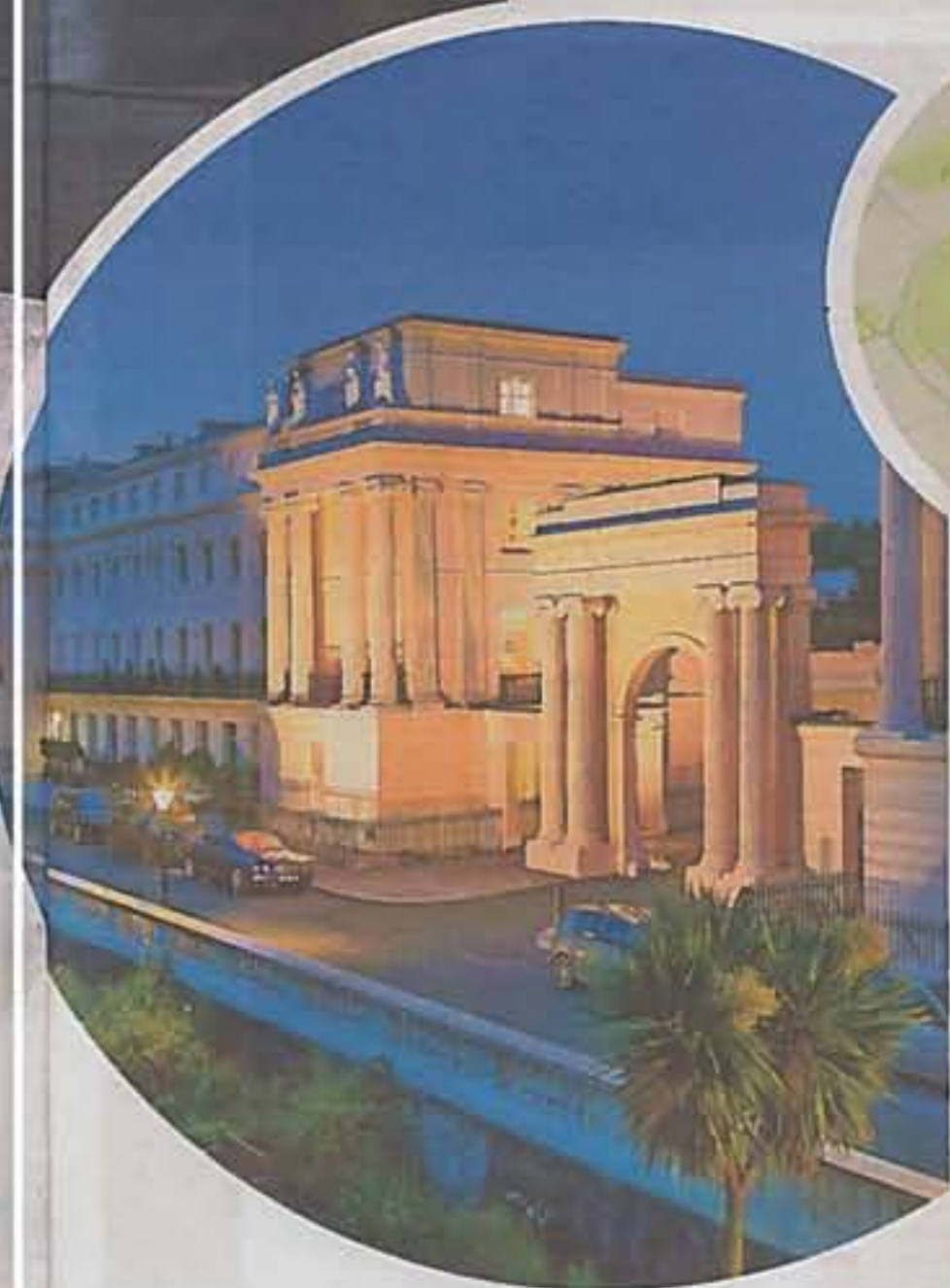
"It took me a few years to find the perfect home, but this has got to be the ultimate place. I've spent millions bringing the property up to my level of finish"

SERENA'S MOVING TIPS

- 1 Moving house is difficult because it is such an emotional decision. Homes have so many memories and sometimes we're scared to leave those behind. However, the memory isn't just in the bricks and mortar, it is in your mind. Remember that you can take memories with you when you move.
- 2 Embrace the process — moving on is always exciting.
- 3 As for removal companies, get recommendations. I have had some bad experiences in the past. You need trustworthy, efficient people who truly care about other people's belongings. Do not go out and leave them to it; be there to oversee it.
- 4 Good inventory lists are vital. And label every box clearly on the top, bottom and sides.
- 5 Pack systematically, room by room.
- 6 Sort as you pack — throw away items you no longer need, set aside what can go to charity and what is coming with you.
- 7 As soon as you arrive in your new pad, the most important thing is to put on some music that's really uplifting.
- 8 Once you're in, crack open a bottle of champagne.
- 9 Get the bed made, because the most exciting thing about moving is your first night's sleep in a new home.
- 10 Get friends over amid the chaos to share the experience. They can help you celebrate a whole new chapter in your life.



Above, the bespoke kitchen with huge marble worktop slabs, and carefully styled shelves on the lower ground floor. Below, Rees's study, with snake prints by Polly Morgan, and the first-floor drawing room. Her key finds have been at London auction houses such as Bonhams, and the antique shop Les Couilles du Chien in Notting Hill



to my level of finish. Working with the Crown Estate [which owns the freehold of the terrace] and English Heritage on a grade I listed building is not the easiest feat," Rees says. "I live in a quite grand, contemporary way, with lots of entertaining, but it also had to be right for a modern family."

To this end, walls were knocked through and joists were removed to create the light-filled, big-volume living spaces Rees wanted. There were frustrations along the way, of course — she was forbidden from creating a private roof terrace garden and has to make do with luxuriant planting on all the balconies instead.

Once she had the spaces sorted, Rees (who also owns a summer home in Mallorca) set about filling the house with what she describes as beautiful one-off collectables — and what the rest of us would probably call Tate worthy. There are unnervingly visceral paintings by Francis Bacon in the lofty ground-floor and first-floor sitting rooms, as well as a collection of creamy abstract plaster casts by the sculptor Frederick Leslie Kenett, displayed on striking black plinths that jut from the walls.

Breaking up a generally sumptuous art-deco feel are works by artist friends: in her ground-floor study (with its mint and brass furniture and antique desk) is a series of prints of snake sculptures by Polly Morgan, best known for her taxidermy. In one of the lower stairwells hangs a moody photograph of a north London street light, taken by the film-maker Sam Taylor-Johnson.

Nowhere is there any sign of her pairings with England's punk royalty — Corrè clearly took any Sex Pistols memorabilia (he planned to burn it this weekend), and Simonon lives and works from his own flat in west London. "This house is usually filled with Paul's amps and guitars, though," Rees says. "It's good living separately — that way we can't tell each other what to put on the walls."

The master bedroom suite, which takes up the entire second floor, is not so much girly as dramatic, with a huge velvet-draped bed, antique marble tables and endless park views. She reveals a vintage-style bar hidden in a cupboard, stocked with Grey Goose vodka — "it's great for getting ready with the girls before a night out". Sadly, her knicker drawer is off limits, but one imagines it's coded by colour (and redness).

It's little wonder Rees's friends beg her to "do" their houses for them — requests that she has so far resisted, insisting she is not an interior designer. Yet her dream, she says, is to design a hotel — should the right opportunity present itself.

Now, with new business projects keeping her busy in New York and around the world, Rees has decided to put her Regent's Park home on the market for £15m. She might just be able to squeeze in one more Christmas party at the house, though. Her bashes are the stuff of legend, featuring rivers of booze, food by Giorgio and Plaxy Locatelli, and even the odd assembling of a supergroup (band members have included Noel Gallagher, Chrissie Hynde, and Damon Albarn).

"Part of me feels that selling up is a terrible idea," she sighs. "But I've made up my mind, so I am going to go through with it. And it's always exciting moving on to the next home."

■ The house is for sale through Carter Jonas (020 7493 0676, carterjonas.co.uk) and Knight Frank (020 7861 1758, knightfrank.co.uk)