



# Passions Unite

Cambridge home showcases  
artist's creations  
and her flair for interior  
decorating

BY CAROL JANKOWSKI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISHA TOWNSEND

**I**t began as a traditional raised bungalow in a quiet Cambridge subdivision, but as four children grew up and away, the home of artist Barb Di Renzo was gradually transformed by her hands-on talent and a supportive husband with his own set of skills.

They created a home that is “her” from the white orchids that appear throughout the house, sometimes in unexpected places, to the neutral colour palette that allows her artwork to shine.

It was a gradual process, but Di Renzo has built a career that encompasses all the interests she pursued over 20 or more years. She grew up in Cornwall, near Ottawa, the daughter of a cabinetmaker dad who painted with oils in his leisure time, and a mother, recently deceased, whose creativity emerged in cooking, a passion she shared with Di Renzo.

She married after high school and had a son and daughter. When her daughter was one, Di Renzo began a two-year home-study interior decorating course, then joined a local furniture company where she advised customers on colours and fabrics, and created appealing vignettes for window



displays.

Over the years she became a single mother, and she was working as an assistant superintendent for a telemarketing company when she met John Moore, a Cambridge father of two boys, online.

After they visited back and forth for a year, he asked if she'd move to Waterloo Region. She did, and together they watched the four children grow up.

Her son had the smallest bedroom, her daughter the second bedroom, and Moore's boys took over what was originally a master bedroom. Thanks to the boys' boisterous pastime, their bedroom quickly became

**ABOVE:** A cabinet displays a well organized pantry.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Barb Di Renzo in the living room of her Cambridge home, where her artwork plays the role of statement piece and her passion for white orchids is evident.





In a bedroom too small for both a dresser and a desk, Di Renzo anchored a lightweight board — just wide enough for a laptop computer — to the wall with decorative brackets.

known as “the Wrestling Room.”

Di Renzo and Moore created a bedroom retreat for themselves in the basement. Today the lower level includes a full bathroom, a large family/entertainment room and a combination laundry and storage room which, despite its utilitarian purpose, is as pristine as the rest of the house, thanks in part to heavy floor-length white cotton curtains concealing rows of shelving.

Once the children left the nest, in the spirit of “go big or go home” Moore turned the garage into a highly organized studio, and for the first time Di Renzo had both a workshop and the opportunity to pursue the art she loves.

From the start her art was unusual. She painted subdued landscapes, usually in earth-tone acrylics, and made them immediately recognizable by attaching sculpted pieces of recycled scrap metal, copper or aluminum to the canvas. She named her business Left Align Design Art Studio because of her propensity for positioning the metal sculpture toward the left side of the canvas.

In any discussion of her art, she takes care to say she pays for the metals she uses, usually according to weight, which she finds at sources such as recycling sites and Habitat for Humanity’s ReStore. She also directly buys factory offcuts in metal, sometimes in interesting shapes she can use without too much cutting or polishing.

The next step was getting her work out in public. The first gallery to accept her paintings was in nearby Paris. Then she connected with Murray Tompkins, director of the Adelaide Street Gallery in Barrie. “He has since passed away,” Di Renzo says, “but he was a very kind man. He was very supportive and taught me a lot” about dealing with galleries.

She exhibited her work at Uptown Gallery in Waterloo and the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI). Response to her paintings encouraged her to continue.

Then, six years ago, a friend spotted her container of leftover metal scraps and urged her to try using them to make jewelry. A believer in doing one thing and doing it right, Di Renzo set her large canvases aside and began creating art jewelry. When a few of her favourite pieces sold immediately, she was encouraged to keep going.

Next she tried teaching jewelry-making and discovered another facet of herself: “I come alive when I’m teaching people to do what I love,” Di Renzo says.

Metal jewelry became the foundation of her business. Her work can be seen in gift shops at the Cambridge Centre for the Arts and Nowords gallery in Cambridge, Homer Watson House & Gallery in Kitchener and the Art Gallery of Sudbury.

As well, this year she had an exhibit at the Kitchener Public Library main branch, took part in Globe Studios’ spring art show and was a guest artist in June-July for the Art District Gallery in Kitchener. She will be part of the Cambridge Studio Tour Sept. 22 and 23, and a solo exhibition at Homer Watson House & Gallery is planned for 2019.

She also accepts private commissions. In September 2017, the Family Counselling Centre of Cambridge and North Dumfries commissioned jewelry by Di Renzo to present to Senator Kim Pate, the former executive director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies whose advocacy on behalf of marginalized women led to her appointment as a Member of the Order of Canada in 2014 and to the Canadian Senate in 2016.

A more unusual commission came from Holy Rosary Catholic Church in Guelph for copper sculptures to adorn its tabernacle.

Both commissions were cited when the City of Cambridge awarded Di Renzo 2017 Recognition for Outstanding Arts & Cultural Achievement. In January of this year, she received another commission, this time for a large sculpture and paintings from Cambridge aluminum supplier CAF Innovative Shape Casting.

Her business resides in the garage-turned-



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A neutral colour palette allows Barb Di Renzo's special touches to shine.

studio, which is a model of efficiency. By thinking through how to transform her personal workspace into a party room for jewelry-making, she can quite quickly get her work table out of sight and move in two long tables to accommodate as many as 10 people.

She holds at least two jewelry classes a month, sometimes organizing them herself online although her schedule is often booked with private parties for groups of friends, bridesmaids or work parties. Those she turns into "Sip & Sparkle" social events that begin with appetizers, a glass of wine and background music before guests settle into the studio to make a piece of jewelry for themselves or a gift.

Most choose to make a pendant necklace rather than earrings or a bracelet. The pendant process begins with creating a stainless steel or copper base that is forged and flattened. For inspiration, Di Renzo hung a panel showing the range of colours and patterns that can be created on copper with the deft use of a blowtorch. Her most popular pendants are also on display, including her best-selling tree of life and an Inukshuk.

Earlier this year she introduced a variation of Sip & Sparkle for groups of 20 or more who meet at a location of their choice. Over the course of about two hours, guests have a glass of wine and assemble a necklace that they personalize by choosing from a variety of base shapes and many charms that Di Renzo prepares in advance. She has held one of these events at Homer Watson House & Gallery; a second was planned for August at Westmount Golf and Country Club.

Participation in house and studio tours also helped raise her profile, and her home's neutral colours allow the artist's touch to shine.

Kitchen cabinets that were once a natural light oak have been painted white or replaced with open shelves. A small oak cabinet that once featured printed panels of farm animals is also painted white, the

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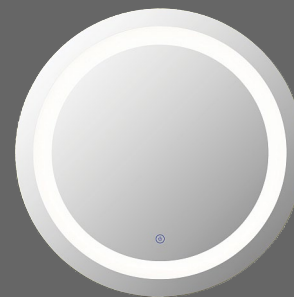
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animal prints replaced with black screen  
stapled to the inside of the cabinets. A  
small dresser was also painted white, and  
the sharp corners of both pieces lightly  
sanded for a shabby-chic effect.


One piece that won't be touched is a sub-  
stantial pine armoire Di Renzo's father built  
for her dining room. The elaborately carved  
doors are folded back to display shelves,  
one of which holds a television set.

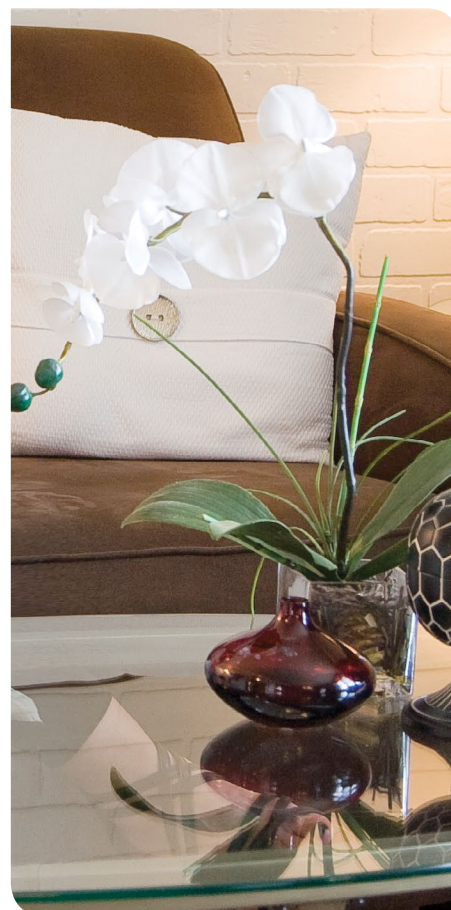
Rather than a coat rack, the small hall  
closet holds a cushioned table where  
women attending jewelry classes can  
quickly pile their coats instead of jostling in  
the narrow hall for hangers.

Traces of the children were removed  
gradually from their bedrooms so they  
wouldn't feel displaced when they visit,  
but her daughter's departure for a home of  
her own and a teaching career meant her  
room could be designated for guests. Most  
of the artwork in it was purchased, but one  
quirky exception is a mannequin swathed  
in white and wearing a striking multi-  
strand necklace Di Renzo fashioned from  
copper and metal wire.

Her son's room is too small to allow for  
both a dresser and a desk, so Di Renzo  
made it efficient for a student by anchoring  
a lightweight board — just wide enough  
for a laptop computer — to the wall with  
decorative brackets. All the art in his room  
is hers.

The "Wrestling Room" has the same  
calming vibe as the rest of the house.  
Neither masculine nor feminine in style,  
its dominant artwork is a large pair of old  
traffic signs she bought for \$5 at South-  
works Antiques. "I like combining modern  
and old for an eclectic effect," Di Renzo  
explains.

The main bathroom has its own small  
art gallery, including Di Renzo's painting,  
Oxygen, which features "bubbles" created  
from factory-stamped cutouts and metal  
washers from a recycling plant. Once the  
pieces were sanded, painted silver and  
positioned on a painted white canvas, they  
found a natural home in the airy bathroom.  
"Oxygen is one of the first pieces I created  
and I still love it," she says. 



## A PASSION FOR ORCHIDS

Barb Di Renzo loves tall white orchids  
and displays them throughout her  
home. They are so true to life they have  
to be touched to believe they are not  
real.

She starts with a pot or container she  
likes — anything from a painted garden  
pot to a glass container — that best  
suits the space where she wants an  
orchid.

Next come the artificial greenery and  
the orchids, which she buys at a crafts  
store. For the finishing touch, she fills  
the container with small stones or twigs  
from her yard. An orchid set in front  
of the floor mirror in her dining room fea-  
tures branches with small white flowers.  
No, not real flowers: they were pulled  
from artificial stems and attached to real  
garden branches.



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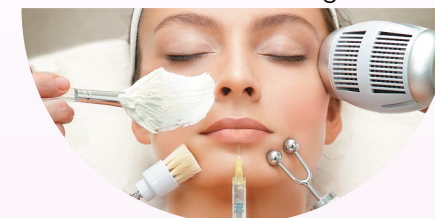
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