

LONDON

# ON THE CREST OF A WAVE

Who do you turn to when you want high-end, site-specific art for your superyacht? For many, the surprising answer is a studio in south London. Caroline White steps into a world where creativity meets the challenges of life at sea

*Photographs by JACK LAWSON*



ABOVE One of DKT Artworks' team of 40 craftspeople carves an art-deco-inspired panel for a yacht

*'We once mounted sculpted glass panels up some stairs, making it a bit like an armadillo – so the glass could move and flex with the staircase'*

'I remember being about six years old, sitting on my granny's stairs, looking at the baseboard, and thinking "That wood doesn't look quite right,"' recalls Steve Keeling, co-founder of DKT Artworks. Keeling's father was a skilled painter-decorator, and the finish Keeling was critiquing was *faux bois*. Perhaps this early introduction to ornamental special effects opened a window in the young Keeling's imagination, because a few decades later his Balham studio produces supremely imaginative, illusory and magical decorative finishes found in some of the most exclusive locations on earth. To

Design, until they were on speed dial for any creative worth their sea salt.

DKT, in turn, developed to meet the specialised demands of a superyacht. Whether you own a tanker or a £100 million pleasure craft, materials onboard must adhere to the International Maritime Organisation's fire prevention regulations. That – along with strict weight

methods to fulfil them: take the triptych designed to sit behind a spa pool in 322ft *Aviva*. 'The client really loved orange, and the one material where we could get a really good burst of bright orange was acrylic. We put gold leaf behind it, to make it almost glow,' says Keeling. DKT collaborated with K2, an acrylic specialist, to piece it together: 'There's a support layer, and a gilding layer, and a layer of bubbles created by a laser, then there was the clear liquid cement – and that goes off if you leave it too long...' Adding yet another complication, the central panel of the triptych concealed an escape hatch, so the



appraise a Keeling *faux bois* today, you might well have to be sitting on the staircase of a superyacht.

Keeling founded DKT in 1979 with painter Niki Davies and industrial designer Sean Trowbridge, friends he met while studying sculpture at the Bath Academy of Arts. Today, he and Trowbridge work with a team of about 40 artists and craftspeople, who specialise in high-end artworks and finishes that are site-specific. An affinity for challenging spaces has made it a favourite among superyacht designers. DKT work graces many of the largest boats afloat, including 512ft *Dilbar*, the world's third largest yacht by volume (once owned by the Russian oligarch Alisher Usmanov, it has been seized by the German government), 295ft shark-inspired *DAR*, and 312ft *Kismet* (just sold by Fulham FC owner Shahid Khan, with an asking price of €149 million).

They cracked into this guarded world in the late 1990s, when French superyacht designer Pascale Reymond knocked on the door of London studio Carvers & Gilders – traditional craftsmen whose conservation portfolio includes the Throne of England. Superyacht work wasn't quite their cup of tea, so they pointed Reymond to the arrivistes who'd rented the studio upstairs: 'Basically they said, "They'll do anything,"' recalls Keeling. And in a way, they were right – DKT can do almost anything, extremely useful in luxury yachting, where a single room might feature etched glass panels, wood carvings and mother-of-pearl inlays.

The breadth of DKT's skill set led to commissions from superyacht designers Donald Starkey, Bannenberg & Rowell, Terence Disdale Design, Winch Design and, of course, Reymond's studio Reymond Langton

ABOVE, FROM LEFT Work in progress on a bespoke bas relief artwork for a private client; final touch-ups on a floral-themed artwork in stone-like material; the main stairwell on the superyacht *DAR*, with a balustrade and fish-themed bas relief

restrictions – means that DKT spends a lot of time making light, fireproof things look like heavy, flammable things. For a carved panel, that might mean using an aluminium honeycomb substrate, fronted with a 'hollow cast' carving just four millimetres thick, 'but which looks really deep and heavily profiled', says Keeling. Faux marble is a particular area of expertise since stone is weighty. Think it's tacky? If you know you've seen it, you haven't seen it done well.

Movement, like weight, is a complication that residential designers don't have to contend with. On a yacht, vibrations can work an inadequate fitting loose over time, creating an infuriating buzz or rattle that is near impossible to locate because of the way sound travels around a boat. 'And then there's the yaw and pitch and roll of a yacht on the high seas,' says Keeling, 'which add additional significant stresses.' For this reason, DKT uses fixings about two and a half to three times stronger than those needed for supporting a similar artwork on land. Multi-deck staircases, where the studio has done some of its most beautiful and delicate work – for example the school of hand-carved fish wending their way up the stairwell of the Nuvolari Lenard-designed *DAR* – move and twist more than any other space onboard. 'We once had to create a system for mounting sculpted glass panels that went all the way up the stairs,' says Keeling. 'We made it a bit like an armadillo – so the glass could move and flex with the staircase.'

Requests are often so specific that DKT invents new

artwork also features a secret button that opens the weighted door behind it. The result is spectacular – and only likely to be seen by a handful of people.

Such flexibility is essential in this demanding world. When a yacht is inaccessible because it's halfway round the world, the DKT team will craft the artwork to size in the studio and then send it off for installation – see the vast mosaic they created for 216ft *Elysian*. When an owner wants something personal, they'll dig deep: for a classic 125ft yacht, built in 1929 and currently being refitted by a well-known US yard, the studio is producing a stone-effect bas relief panel depicting the life of the yacht, rendered in art-deco style to match the yacht's interior.

They're also open to improving existing artwork. For 279ft *Solandge*, the designer, Rodriguez Interiors, wanted to add interest to a cast-glass panel that had already been installed in the master cabin. Envisioning branches overhanging a river, DKT waterjet-cut tree limbs in silhouette from steel, gold-leafed them and inlaid them with mother-of-pearl, laying them over the panel. It is noteworthy enough to have provided the backdrop for a scene from an early episode of *Succession*.

What's next for DKT? In a move that says more about the studio's art-school roots than its jetsetting present, the directors have just made DKT an Employee Ownership Trust (think John Lewis). 'We felt it was better that the people here now continue to run it and build it up in the way they want to,' says Keeling, as he and Trowbridge prepare to step back. Logan Roy would certainly not approve – but if he'd chosen this solution, *Succession* might have ended amicably after series one, on an artfully decorated superyacht. ●