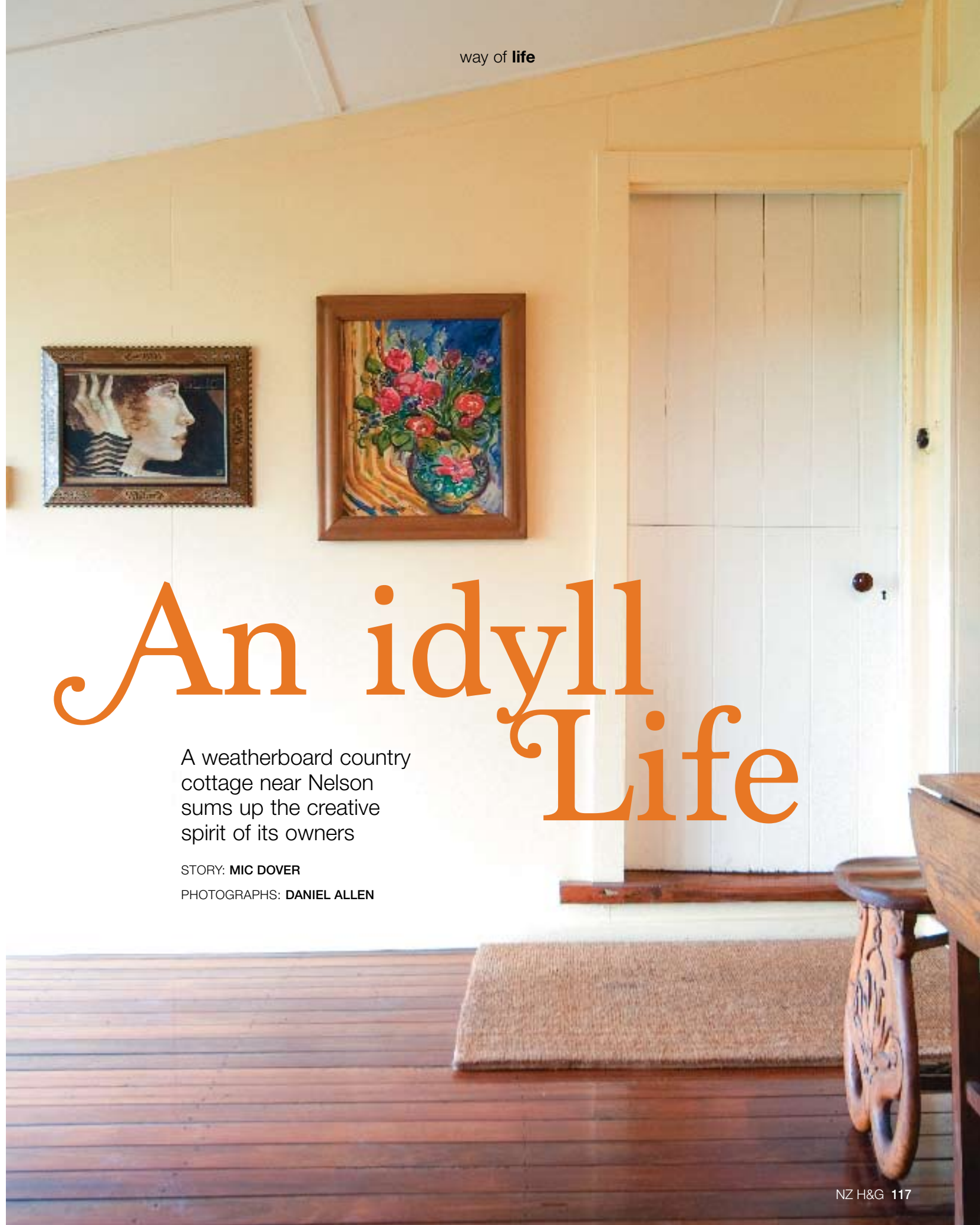




way of life



An idyll Life

A weatherboard country cottage near Nelson sums up the creative spirit of its owners

STORY: MIC DOVER

PHOTOGRAPHS: DANIEL ALLEN

THESE PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Weatherboards gleam in the Nelson sun. Comfortable seating in the sunroom. The main living room flows into the country-style kitchen. A koru-themed kauri chair handmade by Sally; the painting is *Cornflowers*, by Sally. The old workbench from the barn is now the kitchen table. A comfortable leather sofa faces the fire. Painted portraits of Sally's great-grandparents.

PREVIOUS PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Indoor-outdoor flow beneath a curved tin roof. One of Sally's works in progress. *Gluck* by Sally (on the left) and *Still Life of Flowers* by Jane Evans (right). Sally Burton. The sunroom.



The laid-back lifestyle, great light and inspiring landscapes of Nelson have always been a magnet for artists. The list of creative Nelson residents past and present, which runs to such celebrated names as Colin McCahon and Toss Woollaston, now includes ceramicist Christine Boswijk and painters Jane Evans, Austin Davies and Sally Burton.

Sally's home on the Waimea Plains near Nelson is in a quiet country cul-de-sac, marked by a red painted mailbox that's almost completely masked by a bountiful camellia. A weather-beaten path leads past the welcoming scent of daphne flowers into a massive garden. It is landscaped, yet worked in and softened by time so that its features seem random and natural.

Sharing the two-hectare plot is a gleaming white weatherboard cottage. "When we bought it in 1985 it was a classic 'eyes and nose' house," says Sally with a laugh. "Quite ordinary really." As we chat in the cosy, rimu-panelled kitchen, Sally is breaking out a batch of miniature cheese muffins – "It's my mother's recipe."

The muffins cool on a kitchen table that was a workbench in the ancient barn when it was found by Sally and her partner David Morley. It has numerous saw cuts and there are scattered small holes filled with paua shell. This kind of artistic "repurposing" is a recurring theme in the household – functional objects near the end of one kind of life are altered, mended or transformed to take their place in a new one.

A kitchen shelf supports a row of colourful crockery, some by ceramic artist Mirek Smisek, others by long-time friend Christine Boswijk. "Smisek was the first Nelson potter really and his studio was just behind my school. I used to hop over the fence and buy threepence worth of clay," says Sally. ▸





THIS PAGE: Sally's favourite room – her twenty-five-year-old studio.

FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Sea of Milk*, one of Sally's recent works. The studio, facing east from the pot-bellied stove. The studio, partially obscured by a huge liquid amber tree. A Christine Boswijk bowl, filled with found objects, sits next to *Horse's Head* by Jake Yocum, Sally's son.

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Kitchen talk revives childhood memories of the red and white awnings of Burton's Coffee House, the first coffee shop in Nelson, opened by Sally's father in 1958. "He was an early foodie," she recalls. "We were the only family I knew with tins of truffles and frogs' legs in the cupboard."

Sally was born in Nelson, one of six children. When she left home at seventeen to go to Christchurch's Ilam art school, she thought it was "never to return". Sydney beckoned after graduation and Sally headed off for her rebel yell of liberated youth. "There was so much to see – shows, galleries, gigs. I thought I would be a city girl forever."

However, she found herself pregnant at twenty-one and adult responsibilities loomed. "I had two small children and I wanted to be a painter. I needed to connect back with family." So in 1975 she returned to Nelson.

Then in 1977 she met David Morley, a toolmaker from Liverpool who had spent five years in India on the hippie trail before deciding to become a dairy farmer. He looked at the sunshine and rainfall charts for New Zealand and realised Nelson had everything he needed. Including Sally.

Their home together features polished wooden floors with tribal rugs and an open fire that lends a warm glow to the cream and burgundy living room. An elegant writing desk sits beneath a gilt-framed picture of a bowl of cherries. ▶

"We opened up the house to the sun, bit by bit, when we could afford it"





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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: A built-in window seat. The painting over the bed is an early example of Sally's bowl theme, called *Nine Bowls*. Sally's partner David with the hungry farmyard trio of Al, Trevor and Pedro.

"It was always in my family home and was left to me when my mother died last year. It's my most treasured possession. It was probably this picture that first fired me up to paint."

Sally's favourite room – her studio – is across the deck. Its cute red windows frame uninterrupted pastoral views to the east, mountains to the west, the sea to the north. Suddenly, an unlikely farmyard trio steps into this vista – Al the retired racehorse, Pedro the miniature donkey and Trevor the sheep – all curious to see what's going on.

Taking pride of place in the studio is Sally's ancient paint-splattered easel, which has acquired a composite colour and texture from a thousand paintings. "My stepfather made it for me after he saw me sitting on the floor, trying to paint."

Recently completed paintings are also on display, many of which feature her trademark cups or bowls. "I love the shape, the open tops – open for ideas, open to interpretation. Things should always be open-ended, not closed off."

Unframed on the wall, a large painting called *Sea of Milk* encapsulates Sally's sharp sense of humour. Asked about influences and mentors, she mentions Caravaggio for his form and light, Bonnard and Rothko for their colour, Rudi Gopas as a teacher and Austin Davies – when he was director of Nelson's Suter Gallery – as a mentor. Sally has recently taken on a mentoring role herself, as an adviser to the World of Wearable Art Awards. She has previously been a resident judge for WOW, from its early years onwards.

The quirky, organic feel of her home captures that creative spirit. "Really it's all been about light," says Sally. "About opening up the house to the sun, bit by bit, when we could afford it. To be honest, a lot of what you see has been more to do with damage control than a grand plan."

Sally explains that, apart from some inherited feature trees – the Lombardy poplar, the liquid amber and a line of ash – everything in the garden has been planted from scratch, including a herb garden, hazelnuts, nectarines, passionfruit, blueberries, figs and more.

After twenty-two years of honing, there are no false notes at Sally and David's place. This is the genuine article – a country cottage created by two people working patiently to realise dreams incubated long before the word "lifestyle" was invented. Sally and David have turned an ordinary house into an enviable idyll. ■

The 2007 Montana World of Wearable Art Awards show takes place in Wellington at the TSB Bank Arena, Queens Wharf, September 20-30.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIET NICHOLAS