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# LIFESTYLE

## Made for the job

SOPHIE MACPHERSON'S in-depth knowledge of the art world has made her an industry favourite for advice on everything from recruitment to marketing, and her London home is a showcase for the contemporary art she loves

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Sophie at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac amid the installation of Lee Bull's *After Bruno Taut*



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**S**pend a couple of days with Sophie Macpherson as she whizzes from breakfast meeting to gallery to working lunch to artist's studio and you will emerge invigorated, if a little dazed. This is a woman who seems to know everyone in the art world – from London and New York to Delhi, Shanghai, Istanbul and Doha – as well as everything about them and their businesses.

Her company, SML, was the first recruitment firm to specialise in this area. Clients include art galleries, auction houses, museums, art fairs, private collectors and public institutions. SML provides advice and support, from legal, financial and marketing to choosing the best premises and finding the right people. 'She is an art world Wonder Woman,' says Polly Gaer, who is executive director of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac. Kate Bryan, the head of collections for **Soho House**, describes her as 'endlessly connected and charming'. 'She plays an important role,' says the dealer Patrick Bourne. 'But she does it with a light touch, and is warm, approachable and fantastic fun.'

Sophie, who is 39, seems too young to have accrued so much expertise. 'I did Latin American studies at Southampton University, but aged 20, I had no idea what I wanted to do. My only skill was that I spoke Spanish. I signed up with a temping agency and, at 6pm one Tuesday, they called to say that an art dealer needed some help with translation. I didn't even know what an art dealer was, but that was the job that changed my ▷



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The spare room of Sophie's London house has works by Annie Morris, Ramiro Fernández Saus, Clive Eastland and Cecilia Carlstedt. In the main bedroom are works by Celia Paul, Frank Allison and Sarah Nutley. Sophie with her daughter Evie, son Arlo and the family dogs, Pitchy (on the left) and Little



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LEFT Sophie in her garden with Evie and Arlo. RIGHT The children's bedroom is one of three on the first floor of the Victorian house



**'I BUY WHAT I LOVE WHEN I CAN, WITH A BIAS TOWARDS THE BRIGHT AND COLOURFUL'**

BELOW LEFT Sophie with her father, Lord Strathcarron, and brother Rory, founder of architectural design company Play Associates. Rory remodelled his parents' London flat as well as Sophie's house and office. RIGHT Sophie walking Little and Pitchy, mother and daughter Parson Russell terriers, in Queen's Park near her house



life. The dealer was Thomas Gibson. I stayed for three years and ended up as his gallery manager.'

A natural networker, Sophie was always one to help friends to find jobs. While she was working for Thomas Gibson, a director from Agnews Gallery in Mayfair asked her to help recruit a gallery assistant. Sophie placed an advertisement in *The Guardian*. When 600 people applied, she realised she was onto something and handed in her notice. 'In 2002, I borrowed £5,000 from the bank and set up in the garage of my parents' house. My mother was secretary, my father was chairman and we had "board meetings" in our dressing gowns. When candidates came for interviews, my mother would hide in the bedroom so they would think it was my house.' Fifteen years on, many of those candidates are among her clients. 'We tend to have long-lasting relationships,' says Sophie. 'It's a very intuitive, collaborative business.'

The Macphersons are a close family. Sophie's father, Lord Strathcarron, is the chairman of Unicorn Publishing, with upcoming titles ranging from a history of lawnmowing to a biography of painter Henry Tonks. He is also an author himself and has written biographies of Lord Byron and Mark Twain. He often calls in on Sophie at her office in Wardour Street, W1, the interior of which was designed by her brother Rory, founder of the architectural interior design company Play Associates.

Rory has recently remodelled their parents' London flat. They stayed with Sophie while the work was being done. 'I was a hippy, believe it or not,' says Lord Strathcarron. 'We were very liberal parents - we lived in Spain for a while and Sophie didn't wear shoes for months on end. I have no idea how she and Rory have turned out so well.'

All four family members have the same high-energy, ▷

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**'WE HAVE LONG-LASTING RELATIONSHIPS – IT'S A COLLABORATIVE BUSINESS'**



entrepreneurial spirit (for some years Sophie's mother had an antiques stall on Portobello Market). When we meet for lunch in the dining room of the Soho club and charity for the homeless, The House of St Barnabas, Lord Strathcarron arrives having just flown in from his younger brother's wedding in Los Angeles and Rory is leaving the next day as he is moving to Cape Town, where he has built a house for himself and his young family. 'I am going to miss him,' says Sophie. 'Though I know he'll be back to oversee his London projects.'

Rory also worked on the house in north London in which Sophie lives with her husband Graham Stanton, their two children, Evie, five, and Arlo, two, plus mother and daughter Parson Russell terriers, Little and Pitchy. In a late-Victorian terrace near Queen's Park, it had already been opened up into a single space on the ground floor. With french windows onto the garden, this serves as sitting room, kitchen and dining room. Upstairs are three bedrooms and a bathroom, as well as the main bedroom, which is built into the roof space. 'The only thing it lacked was a second bathroom,' says Sophie, 'which Rory created by building above the back bedroom.'

Exposed brick walls are hung with the contemporary art that Sophie collects, including works by the likes of Rob and Nick Carter, Tanya Ling, Stephen Chambers, Julian Opie, Melanie Comber and Catherine Yass. 'I buy what I love when I can, with a definite bias towards the bright and colourful,' she says. She also collects trainers, which are lined up neatly at the bottom of the stairs.

Sophie's working week is full-on and often stretches into the evening, with private views and dinners or meetings. She is a founding member of the Association for Women in the Arts (AWITA) and on the membership committee of The Groucho Club: 'Last year, I took part in a talk for AWITA on the subject of mentoring. I am keen to nurture new talent and, although things are changing, there are still not enough women in top positions in ▷



OPPOSITE Sophie with the artist Antony Micallef at his Notting Hill studio. THIS PAGE ANTICLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT Meeting executive director Polly Gaer at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac; the painting is *Für Velimir Chlebnikov: Schicksale der Völker, Neue Lehre vom Krieg* by Anselm Kiefer. With art dealer Patrick Bourne and his wife Cordelia at their gallery in St James's Place, SW1. With artists Rob and Nick Carter at their gallery in Bathurst Street, W2. *Flowers in a Wan-Li Vase* by Rob and Nick Carter



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LEFT Sophie walking near the SML office.  
RIGHT Its interior was designed by her brother Rory. Among the objects on the shelves are bottles by David Shillinglaw



the art world. I found myself correcting my husband the other day when he complimented our daughter on a drawing she'd done of a lady with long hair, saying it looked like a princess. "Or a CEO," I interjected. Then had to spend ages explaining what a CEO does.'

Running her own company has allowed Sophie a certain freedom. 'I don't believe in that dreadful phrase having it all, but I realise I have been unusually lucky. I was back in the office six weeks after having both my children, but I often took them with me, and I still do.'

Graham is chief commercial officer of the currency brokers World First. 'We have a lovely nanny, Vania, and make sure we travel at different times. I have always enjoyed the fact that we work in completely different worlds, though recently there has been some crossover as so many of SML's clients require international bank accounts. And I was invited to an awards ceremony for the National Open Art Competition last year, only to see on the invitation that Graham was giving out an award as his company was the sponsor.'

She and Graham often work until midnight at home: 'But we keep weekends absolutely clear – no appointments, no socialising, unless local and very informal. It's our time with the children. We walk the dogs, feed the ducks, wander down Portobello Road, have a pub lunch. Time for switching off and chilling' □

SML: [sophiemacpherson.com](http://sophiemacpherson.com)

BELOW Sophie with [Soho House's](#) head of collections Kate Bryan at The Vault Bar & Lounge in The Ned hotel in the City of London. Kate curated The Vault's collection of works by women artists, some of which are on the wall behind her

