

Artist Rana Begum: ‘The space is calming and overwhelming at the same time’

An award-winning home-studio overlooking the wildest of London’s cemeteries echoes the artist’s installations focusing on form and light in flux



Helen Barrett / Photographed for the FT by Lydia Goldblatt JULY 19 2024

From the outside, The Mews House, artist Rana Begum’s home-studio, is an enigmatic, larch-clad mass with a heavy door and vast darkened windows.

The windows reflect Stoke Newington’s Abney Park cemetery, perhaps the wildest and most dramatic of 19th-century London’s “Magnificent Seven”. Looking out from Begum’s first-floor living room, the views seem infinite: crumbling gravestones, dense green oaks, pines, birches and ground ivy, as much a part of her house as the walls and furniture.

“It almost feels like the trees are somehow deliberately aligning with each view,” says Begum. For a while, she posted the ever-shifting scenes on Instagram.

Begum’s art practice is concerned with form and light in flux, and is compared to Donald Judd and Agnes Martin. She has exhibited all over the world, with compositions that often refer to the architecture that surrounds them. Her colourful, sculptural, sparse pieces are especially in demand

as site-specific installations. Last year, her bright, angular textile designs for the Bristol Beacon performance space, formerly Colston Hall, brought a new dynamism to one of the UK's most traditional auditoriums. This month, a site-specific installation, "No. 1367 Mesh", will be unveiled above the 18th-century grand staircase of Pallant House Gallery in Chichester, West Sussex — an organic form to "spill out over the landing".

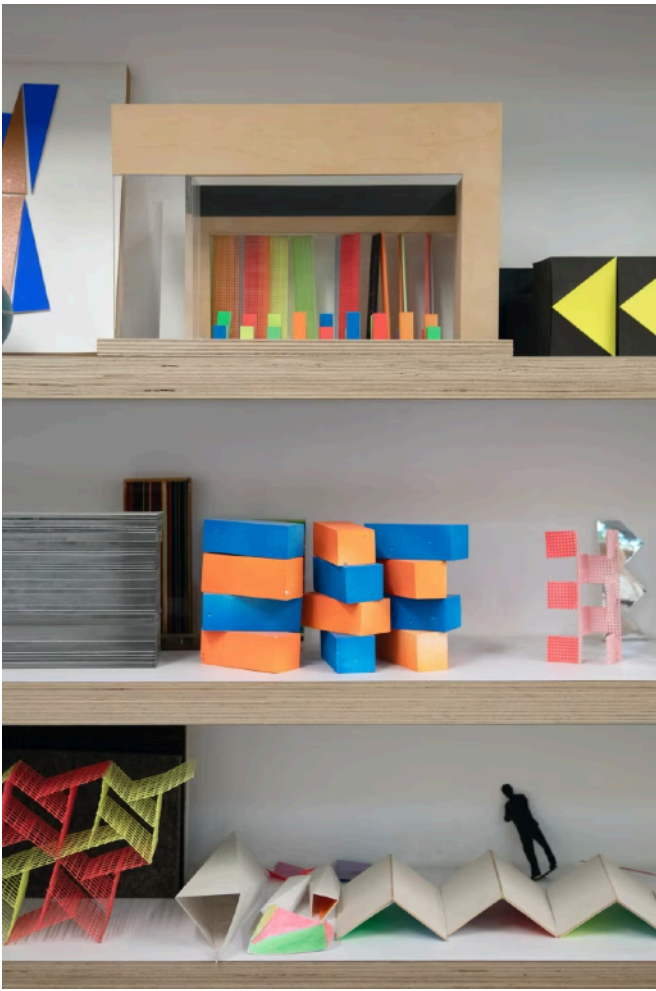


In the living room, a painting by Tess Jaray and an armchair Begum bought for her father when she worked at Habitat as a student; Begum's children are learning circus skills, so their acrobatic apparatus dangles from the ceiling

Begum, 46, bought a former engineering factory in 2011, and had been using it as a studio. But it was dilapidated, full of asbestos and needed to be demolished. In 2017, she asked Peter Culley of London-based architectural practice Spatial Affairs Bureau to start work on a new structure, something like an art campus to include a studio, a family home and a separate, self-contained flat. Culley had worked on several public art galleries in the US, and was keen to work with an artist on a domestic project.

Together, Culley and Begum created a calm, private world set deep within London's fabric. It cost £2.5mn, and was among the winners of the Royal Institute of British Architects' London Awards in 2023; the judges described it as "extraordinary".

That recognition was partly down to the building's technical and environmental complexity. Culley says each zone works like "a carefully balanced organism", with air supply filtered and temperature modified via heat exchangers. It meets stringent local authority regulations for materials, energy performance and noise reduction. Windows and skylights are triple glazed and walls are super insulated. We are close to a buzzy thoroughfare, but as Begum's front door swings shut, the sounds of the city fall away.



While this is a significant building, it is also a family house. Begum says that she, her partner Steve Webb and her two children had to learn to occupy the generous home. “Initially we found the living space a bit too much,” she says. “Before, we rented a tiny two-bed so it was kind of strange. I found myself in the [smaller] bedrooms a lot . . . The space is so calming and quite overwhelming at the same time.”

But gradually, they claimed the living room.

Today, an accordion lies on the floor and board games sit on the table. Begum’s children are learning circus skills, so their acrobatic apparatus dangles from the ceiling. War-game paraphernalia is strewn on Begum’s plan chest. Someone has meddled with a whiteboard in the kitchen, on which Begum has carefully written the house rules. The “No” in “No phones at the table” has been wiped off.

Begum laughs a lot as she apologises for the clutter of family life.

She demonstrates an art installation made for her concrete staircase by her friend, the British artist Haroon Mirza. Booming, discordant electronic music blares out over a cascade of flashing lights. “The children love it,” she shouts. Do they ever turn it on in the middle of the night? “Ha, yeah.”

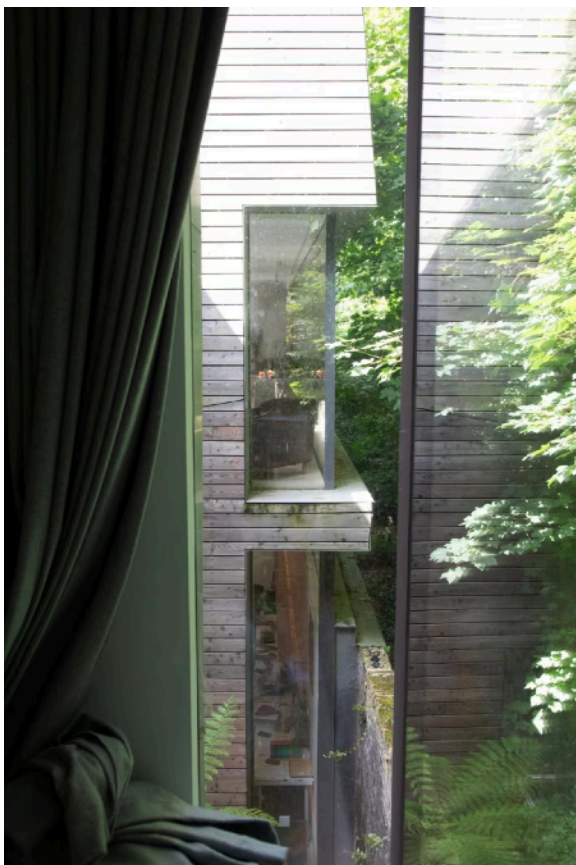
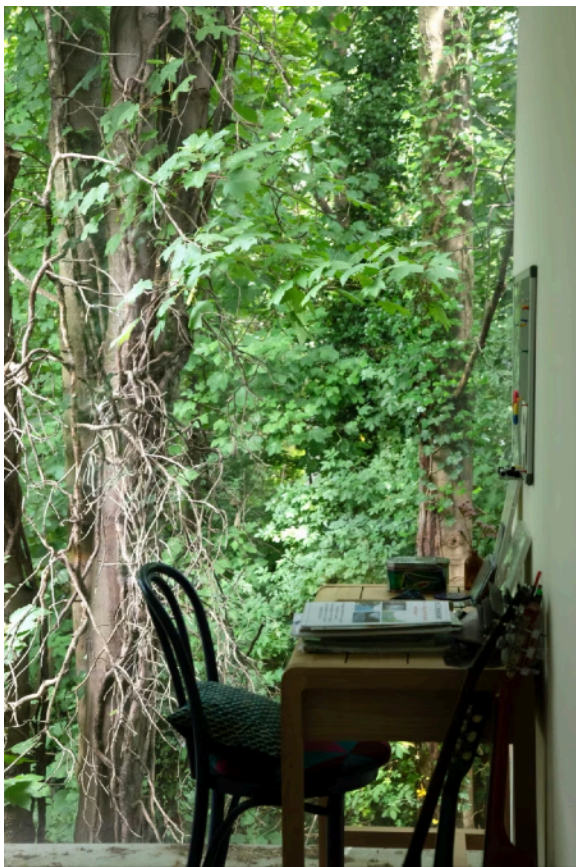


In Begum’s living room, one of her own wall-mounted “Fold” compositions — a metal sheet with precisely creased corners — catches the sunlight and directs it across the room like a blade.

The Mews House turns out to be two structures linked by a bridge. “The North House” is Begum’s offices: ground floor and basement studios where eight people, including Begum, work four days a week. The artist’s home — a living room, kitchen and private workspace — is on the first floor, separate from the studio and offices with its own front door.

“The Gate House” is the family’s private bedrooms, bathrooms and a second-floor, self-contained apartment for Begum’s artists’ residency programme.

Between the two is a courtyard which will eventually become a sculpture garden, but for now houses artworks piled on pallets.



Odd remnants of concrete are visible along the courtyard wall. “That was an air-raid shelter,” says Culley, a frequent visitor. “They built them next to cemeteries because the walls go deep. People would have to stand in a concrete tunnel underground for hours. So we left the concrete as a reference to that.”

At ground level, The Mews House is enclosed by surrounding buildings. Begum’s three roof terraces are invisible from the street. Light comes from the vast cemetery-facing windows on the first floor, and several jumbo skylights — feats of structural geometry.

Artists’ studios are usually hot messes. Begum’s is as neat and uncluttered as her sculptures. Stacks of cut wood lie in an orderly pile. Shelves are lined with boxes, their labels neatly typed: “DRYWALL SCREW”, “FLANGE”, “MAGNETS”.

“I mean, it does get chaotic,” says Begum. “And there will be moments where I can’t look. I need space, I need clarity, and that’s the way Peter has designed the house.”



Begum was born in rural Bangladesh in 1977 to a farming family, and her first home doubled as a workplace. “The farm was connected to the house,” she says. “There was a block with the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedrooms. Anything to do with the farm was at the front. There was no separation between work and living. So there are echoes there.”

Begum and her siblings emigrated to England when she was eight, her father having moved “to open opportunities for us”. They lived in a council house in St Albans, a huge upheaval, though Begum says she loved her new home. She recently posted a picture on Instagram of the modest

pebble-dashed house, where family life was secure and neighbours mostly welcoming. But she also lived near people who were openly racist, which affected how safe she felt home to be.

“It was scary. If my brothers played out in the front garden, we’d have to keep an eye on them. It left a horrible feeling.”

Begum recently staged *Ordered Form*, a solo exhibition in her hometown, which she says helped to resolve difficult memories. “St Albans is mixed now. It doesn’t feel like you’re the only Asian there, which is how it used to feel. It’s wonderful.”



She credits her primary and secondary teachers with her career. “My dad didn’t want me to carry on with art. [He said] you’ll have to have an arranged marriage. But my headmistress and my art teacher went to my home to speak to my family, to convince them.”

They succeeded. After a fine art degree at Chelsea College of Art and a masters in painting at the Slade School, Begum’s first solo show was for the Haines Gallery in San Francisco in 2004. Today, she is represented by galleries in London, Mumbai, New York and Cologne.

Recently, Begum invited pupils from her old primary school to The Mews House. She shows me a book of hand-illustrated letters the children wrote about their visit. “Adorable — they had so many questions about being an artist.”

Her furniture, which looks expensive, turns out to be nothing of the sort. A sculptural bookshelf was handmade by Webb, a structural engineer. Begum says she knew nothing of interior design until she took a student job as a part-time sales assistant at Habitat. “That gave me an insight into furniture.”

She points to an armchair, which she bought at the high-street store for her father when he became ill in later life.

Begum's sofas and coffee table are chic, low-slung — all mink-hued upholstery and tubular steel. They could be 1970s Italian pieces. "They're Designers Guild, which was up the road when I was studying at Chelsea," she says. "I bought them on eBay for £10 and had them reupholstered."

Begum says she asked Culley to design a home that could adapt to her career, her family and her changing needs as she ages. The latter, she says, became pressing after she cared for her father. She wants to live here for ever.

She says she is now comfortable with so much peace and space, the contrast with the daily drama unfolding in the burial ground outside. "It didn't feel like it was mine for a long time," she says. "It's taken me a while to take ownership."

Rana Begum at Pallant House



Begum's site-specific installation, "No. 1367 Mesh", will be unveiled on July 20 above the 18th-century grand staircase of Pallant House Gallery in West Sussex — an organic form to "spill out over the landing".

*"Rana Begum: No. 1367 Mesh" will be in the staircase of the historic house at Pallant House Gallery
July 20-July 2026*