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MARBLE, STONE & GLASS

The TREASURY

Tom Celliers



LISTENERS
70
COUNTRIES

A UNICORN

LIMERICK LOVE LETTERS

Traditional sign painter Tom Collins uses his time and talents to spread the word about the revived craft and give back to his city.

PHOTOGRAPHY TARMO TULIT WORDS EMMA DWYER

“From October to April, the walls of Limerick glistened with the damp,” Frank McCourt wrote in his memoir *Angela’s Ashes*, which tells the sometimes humorous but often dismal tale of his 1930s childhood in Limerick tenements. Nowadays, the city is far from Frank McCourtesque misery, but it does still get its notable share of rain.

Limerick man Tom Collins is a traditional sign painter who doesn’t have the Internet in his studio for fear of distraction – his biggest challenge is the same one that’s faced sign painters for generations – the weather. “You know that extra heavy rain that we get here in Limerick thanks to Frank McCourt? The weather changes suddenly and I think, ‘that job can’t go ahead now’. I have to be flexible and work between the showers.”

Since the 1980s, the traditional craft of designing and painting a sign by hand has been replaced with digital technologies. Many of the relics from before are now ghost signs, faded reminders of what came before. “Sign painting can’t be written off just yet, although everyone comes up to you while you’re working to tell you that no one does this anymore and you’re a dying breed.” In fact, sign painting is experiencing somewhat of a revival. Consumerism is now geared toward the individual, not the masses and so branding has followed suit, with many bars, cafés and restaurants opting for bespoke signage.

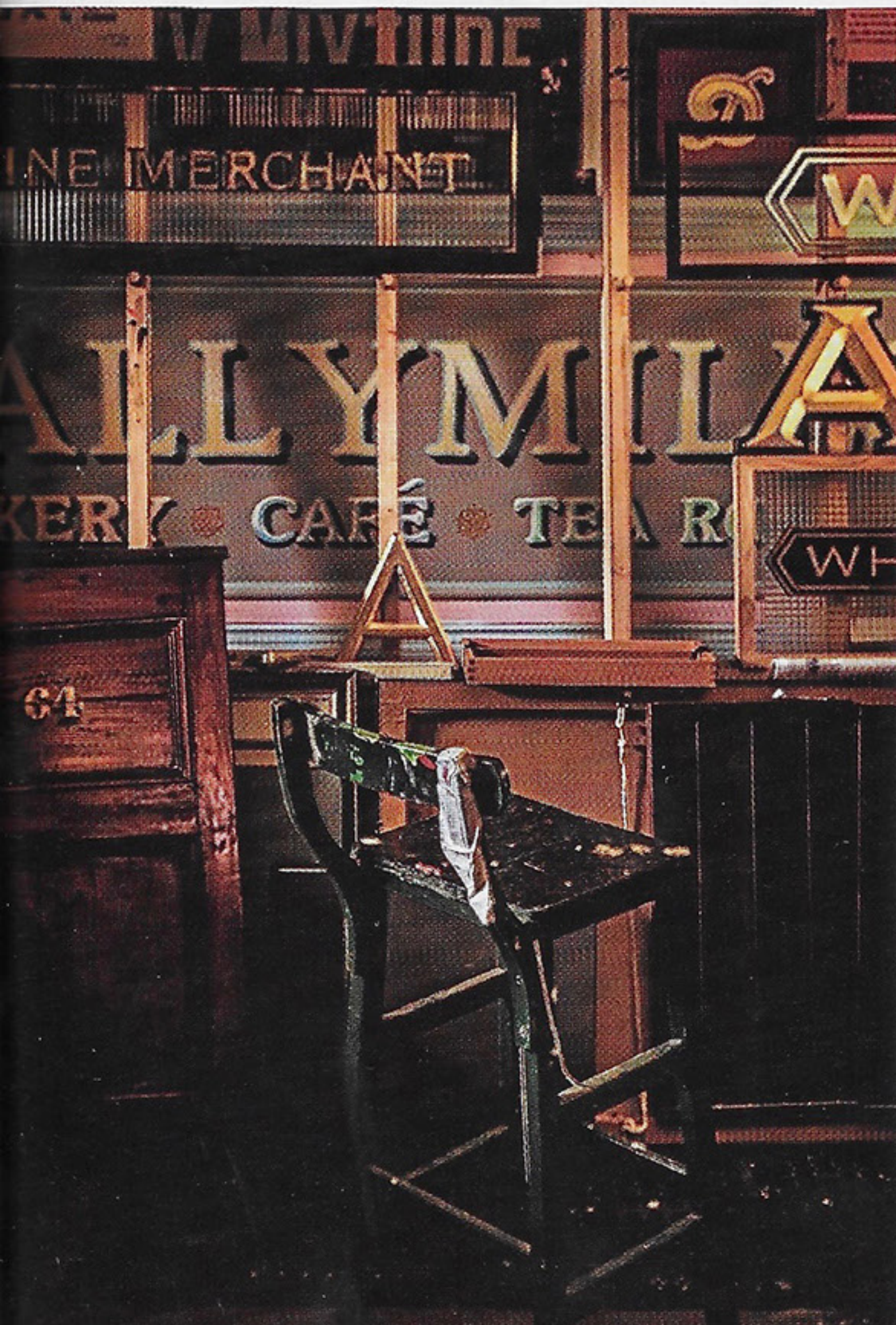
Tom grew up in Limerick city above the family pub, Tom Collins – which is also his father’s name, not to mention the famous cocktail. Unlike Frank McCourt, Tom has fond memories of growing up in the city, playing in large, dilapidated Georgian homes and sliding down banisters from the top of a building to the bottom. Growing up above the pub also gave him an introduction to sign painting, “we used to have a man come and paint the sign in my parents’ bar and I would often find myself looking at what he was doing. He used to wear a shirt and tie, and I thought that was really interesting, but I never said ‘oh I want to be a sign painter’ when I was a kid.”

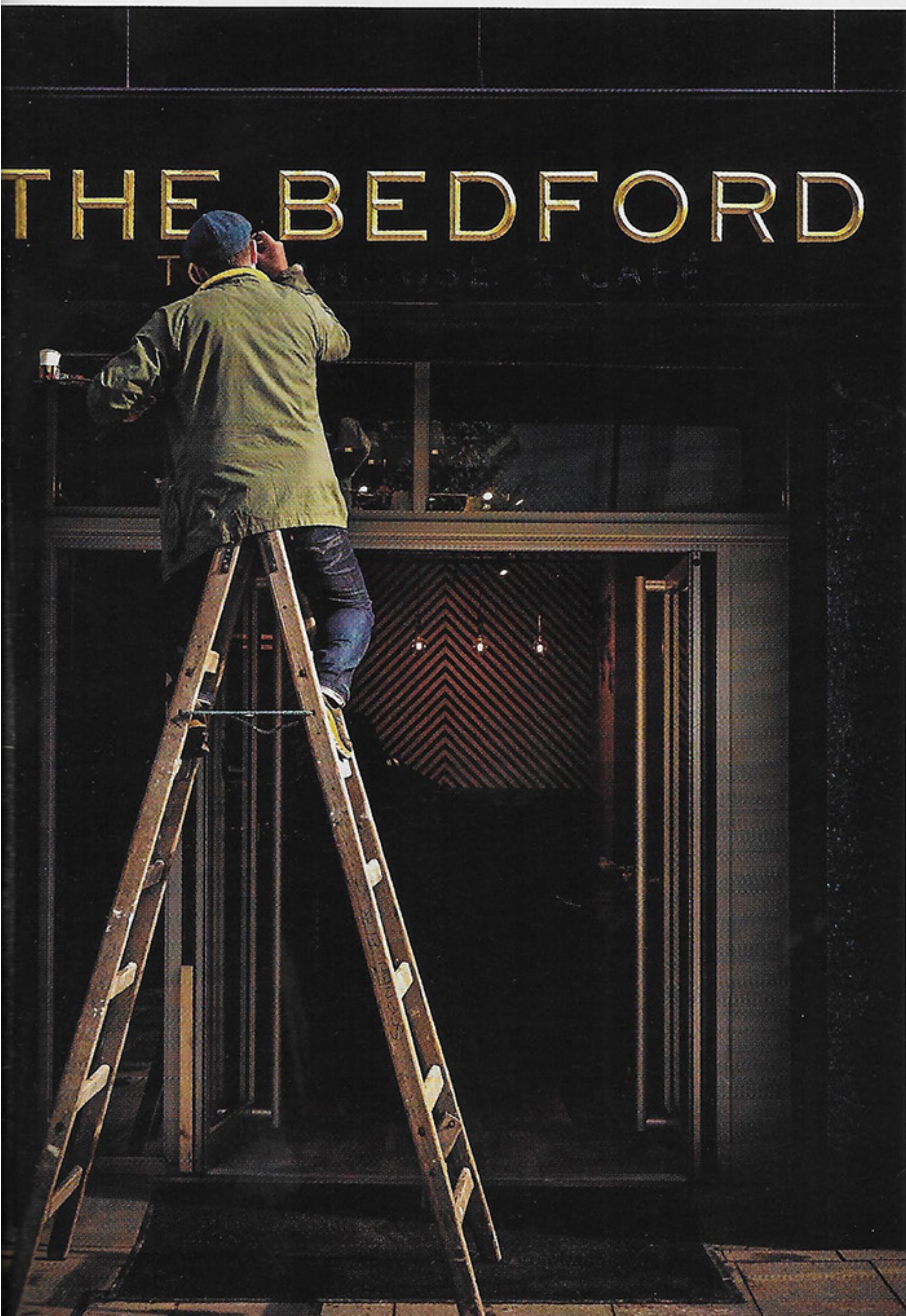
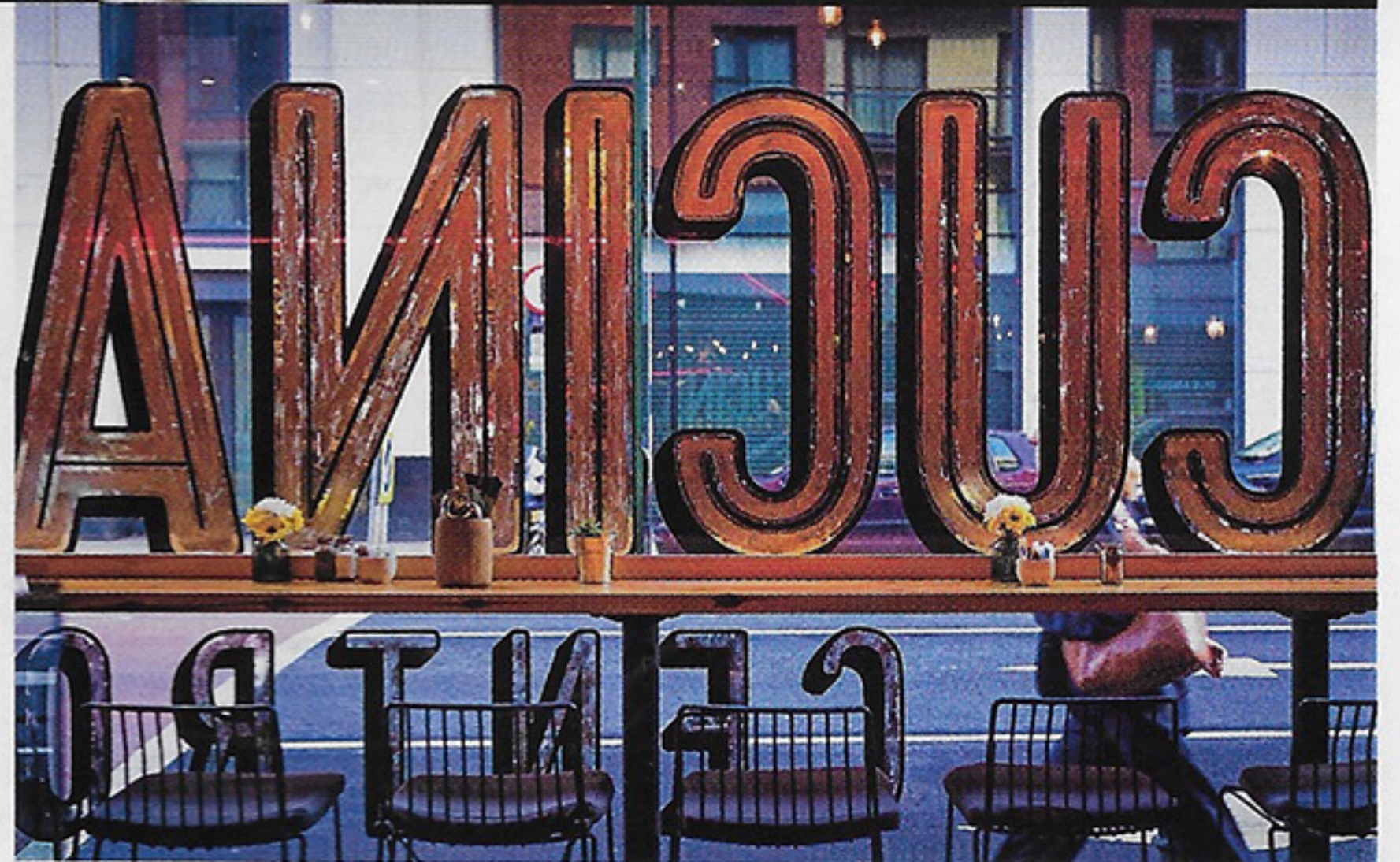
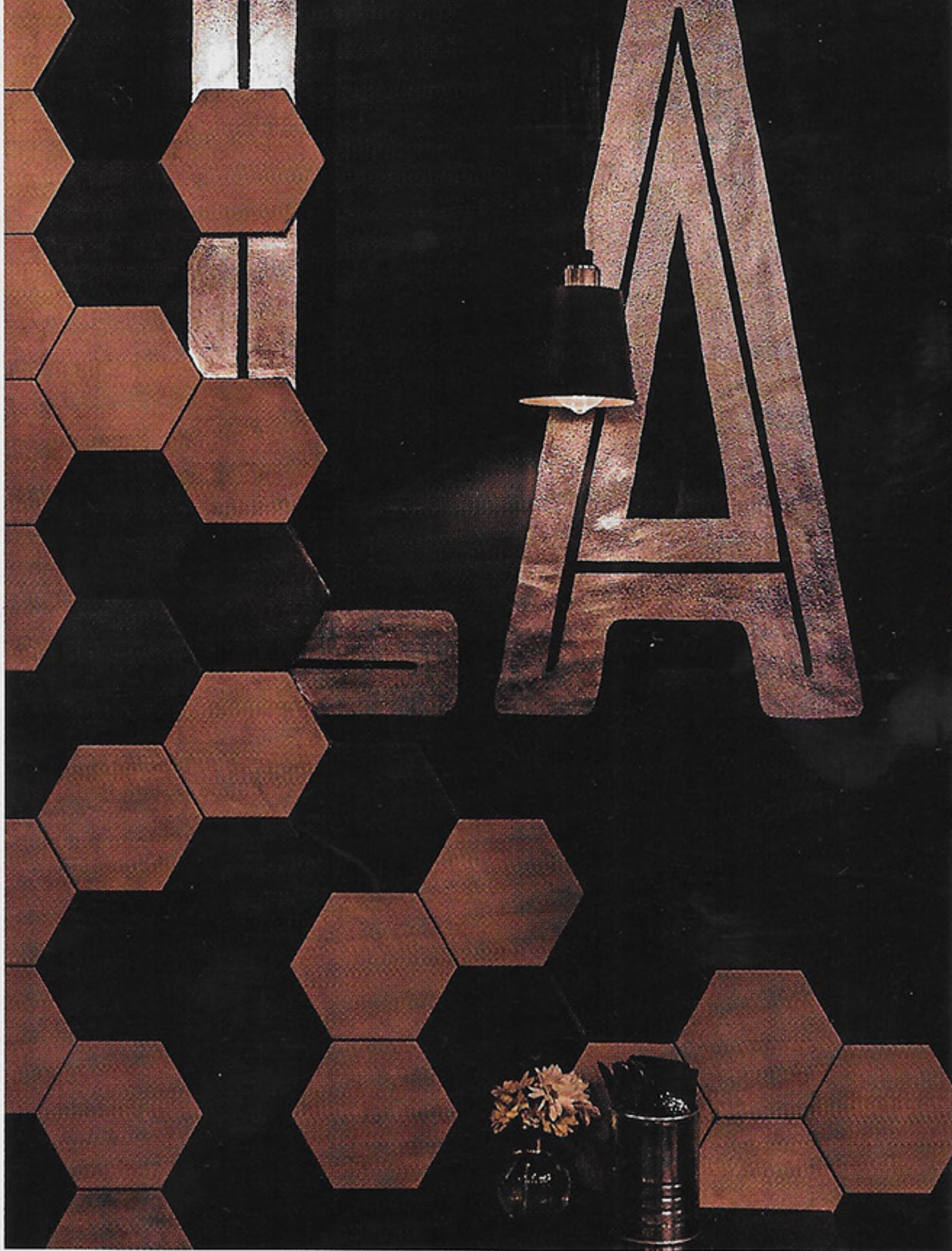
Dissuaded by his parents from pursuing a creative field, Tom went from “pillar to post” trying to figure out what to do with his life. He eventually decided to study art as a mature student. While waiting for the course to begin, he tried a City and Guilds course in traditional sign painting in Cork with no intention of finishing it. But it clicked and he never did study fine art. After the six-month course he set up his own business. “I started doing little cafés around Cork, the first place I ever did a sign for – Eco Douglas – still has it.”

He now takes on apprentices in his city centre studio, though he acknowledges it takes more than six months to learn the craft. “It takes many years to build up muscle memory, and stamina and technique. It’s hard to put a number on it, but suddenly you turn a corner with it. When someone comes in who has been using a



OPPOSITE Tom with his mahlstick, which steadies his hand and allows for accurate, uninterrupted brush strokes. **TOP** Tom restoring the gilding on an old pew door. **ABOVE** Letters for The Bedford café are gilded before burnishing. **BELOW** The pew door in Tom’s workspace.





mouse and keyboard it takes a long time for them to unlearn that.”

The streets of Limerick are evidence that Tom is busy; he has a certain recognisable style – heavy on the gold leaf, contemporary and perfectly executed. He does, however, often find himself volunteering his talents, “I’ve been distracted in a nice way with lots of side projects over the years. I have people coming in and asking me to get involved in local events and you want to be a part of what is happening in the city.” One of said side projects was Love Letters From Limerick, a month-long series of events delivered in 2015 with the support of the city and county councils. Ten of the world’s leading sign artists travelled to Limerick to take part, “the reason they came was because they wanted to show off. We’re all show-offs.” Events included an exhibition of sign work, sign painting demonstrations, film screenings, talks, and an auction with proceeds going to local charity Corbett Suicide Prevention.

A major outcome of Love Letters From Limerick was a sign that Tom gifted to the city. Tom and American sign painter Sean Starr designed it and collaboratively executed it on a dozen or so boards, “all these artists came in to work on it while they were here”. Tom chose the lyrics that are on the

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The La Cucina window is gilded in 12-carat white gold leaf and oil-gilded silver leaf that’s outlined in black enamel and heavily distressed. Tom working on letters in his studio. “When you’re working outside, it is a little bit like theatre. People aren’t used to seeing it so you do get their attention.”



sign, "Everybody else is doing it, so why can't we?", the title of Limerick band The Cranberries' first album. "As I was going through the lyrics, the equality marriage referendum was happening, and when I saw the title of the album I thought it was really cool because of what was going on in the country." He designed it to look like an old medicine label, "as a tonic for the people of Limerick".

If Frank McCourt could write about Limerick today, I wonder what he would make of the walls and windows of Limerick glistening, not from rainwater but gold leaf? tomcollinssigns.ie

Tom's studio is full of his own decommissioned signs from the past 20 years, many of which were recovered from builders' skips or returned by the people who wish to see these signs live on.

