



'It felt like the one moment in my life when I could take a big leap into the unknown'

'I'm cutting it as a curator'

Joanna Moorhead, 47, lives in South London with her husband Gary, 48, and daughters Rosie, 17, Elinor, 15, Miranda, 11, and Catriona, seven. Nurturing four babies, one way or another, took up the end of my 20s, all my 30s and the first three years of my 40s. When the day finally arrived when I didn't have small children to look after any more, I was dazzled by the freedom and possibilities.

We had moved into a fairly dilapidated house, and it would have been sensible to knuckle down to my job as a freelance journalist and concentrate on doing it up. But my nesting instinct seemed to have dried up: all that home-building suddenly seemed boring. I was downhearted about domesticity and – given that I've always worked at home – I felt a bit depressed about being stuck in the house. I wanted something with wider horizons.

The perfect project came in 2007 when a gallery director I met through my work told me he wanted to organise an exhibition of women surrealists. I got involved because I'm related to one of the artists – the painter Leonora Carrington, my father's cousin

– and became immersed in it. When the time came to find a curator, I thought: it's got to be me! The fact that I've got no background in exhibition organising or art history would have previously put me off. But I was hooked, and it felt like the one moment in my life when I could take a big leap into the unknown.

Two years on, I'm having a ball. Researching the exhibition has taken me to Mexico, New York, Paris and Venice. It's brought me a new circle of friends and colleagues, it's made me an unlikely expert in a forgotten episode of art history – and I've realised that I'm not all that bad at curating an exhibition.

It's been the adventure of a lifetime, but in some ways a selfish one: my family have to survive without me for long periods, and art curating isn't as lucrative as journalism so we've had to tighten our belts financially – the work on our house has been put on hold, there's not as much cash for treats like meals out and last year our holiday was a week in Devon instead of a fortnight in the Mediterranean.

My daughters, especially the older two, find it irksome that I disappear for weeks on end, and that I'm often on the phone to Mexico instead of making

supper. But in my heart I know – and in their hearts I think they know, too – that what I'm doing is the right thing, because there should be space in every family for each person to achieve their ambitions. I'm showing my daughters that your dreams don't have to end in your 20s, and travel doesn't finish after your gap year. I believe in role models, and I hope I'm the opposite of the doormat mother. I don't, won't and can't sacrifice myself for my family, crucial though they are to my life. I matter too.

Gary and my daughters don't say it often, but I know that they're proud of me – and I know, too, that our family is more exciting because I'm happier and more fulfilled. I'm a zestier person to be around and my girls benefit from that. And there are practical advantages too – it's amazing how my children have found they can iron their own school shirts and cook their own tea when I'm in Mexico or out at the gallery and can't do it for them. **■** *Surreal Friends, an exhibition of the work of Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna, will open at Pallant House Gallery in Chichester on 19 June. Visit pallant.org.uk for more information*