

[An interview with Mary-Clare Buckle about textile art, her work as a textile artist, her influences & training in textile art, the techniques she uses and her views about other artists' work](#)

1. When did you start working with textiles?

I've always had an interest in it. I have also always been interested in fashion - I sometimes design and make my own clothes. I knew about feltmaking via Vicki Brown, author of 'Feltmaking', who I was at college with. When I had burnt myself out designing and making jewellery for years that's what I went onto.

2. Were you encouraged to be creative as a child?

Yes, I spent a lot of time drawing, painting or making things - fabric things and things in wood. I was given 2 'craft' sets - one for making cast resin jewellery and one enamelling set, and used them a lot. My father often helped me particularly, but also my 3 other siblings - he was very good at and liked making things. My parents even got 2 of my paintings framed and had them up on the wall which was a bit excessive!

3. What kind of facilities did you have in your Primary and Secondary schools?

Facilities were very limited, even at the private primary school I went to - this was the 60's and 70's - no CDT. At Primary we did a bit of needlework and some painting. Secondary School (a girl's private school) was little better with a bit of pottery added. The facilities were pretty pathetic really with what is available to most pupils now. I also did what was then called 'Needlework and Dress', rather than Textiles. For my 'A' levels I went to a school which had better facilities - I did a bit of screen-printing and a little bit of metalwork.

4. Is anyone else in your family artistic - in what way?

My mother learnt to paint after we had all left home (and exhibits her work locally) and made a lot of clothes for us when we were little. My father used to make things in wood and do carving. He also (unusually for a man) taught himself to embroider, do tapestry and do very complicated Aran knitting while under house arrest under the communists in China during the 'Cultural Revolution' there.

My half brother Chris was an artist (went to the Royal College) and was one of my drawing tutors at the Surrey Institute while I was there. My brother Lawrence ran a business making carved things in wood and also designed his own knitting patterns and knitted (very colourful) jumpers for people. My brother Dave went to John Cass in London to do jewellery. He designed and made clocks for a while and now teaches woodwork at a London Steiner School and also makes models of things for the advertising industry.

5. Did you go to Art College (which one - was this your first choice and why? What type of work did your portfolio contain at the time of entry?)

I did my Art Foundation at the Surrey Institute (Farnham) and a BA (hons) at the University of Central England (Birmingham). For Foundation I got into Portsmouth and Farnham (Farnham was my first choice). My portfolio had some rather tight paintings I'd had to do as part of my 'A' level, some better life drawings (I had gone to a class outside school with my art teacher), some (rather heavy) pottery which the tutors teased me about at my interview, and some screen-printing onto fabric.

Birmingham was my first choice for my degree because I liked the very modern and groovy jewellery they produced, but as it turned out the technical side wasn't as thorough as I'd have liked. My brother Chris helped gather together all the various stuff I'd done on Foundation together and decided with me what to include and helped me mount it (in the old rather difficult way of using wet watered down pva rather than spray mount).

Chris had taught me that the only way to get really good at drawing was to have a sketch book with you all the time and to draw things whenever you were waiting anywhere. Also to use a pen rather than a pencil so you couldn't rub out. Hence I had quite a few sketch books in my portfolio, black and white photographs, some linocut prints, more (mounted) series of drawings and photographs of very large or 3-dimensional pieces.

6. Which Art College route/ path did you follow (eg Foundation, HND, Degree, etc) and what did you specialise in?

Most of this is answered above. I ended up choosing jewellery as I was told I should specialise - I shouldn't try to be a 'jack of all trades'. I had rather liked the sound of the multi-disciplinary courses at Manchester and Crewe & Alsager. Of course I ended up doing jewellery for years until I finally changed to textiles about 7 years ago.

7. How did the environment (or cultural, or political or religious influences) affect your work whilst at art college (or in the early days of your art/ design career?) Discuss themes/ sources of inspiration, materials, techniques covered etc.

Moving by myself to a city such as Birmingham was quite a shock to me - coming from the country. All the cheaper accommodation tended to also be where the British Asians lived. This was my first contact with the way Indians lived - several generations in one house. They used to give us food that was spare from any Festival they were celebrating - bright yellow saffron rice and spicy stews. This might be the stem of my fascination with India and it's people. (I also remember all the stories my Dad used to tell me about his time in the Indian Army).

8. Who were your early influences - artists, designers, craftspeople, etc. How did they influence you?

I liked the work of jeweller David Watkins and Sculptor Alexander Calder. Also Miro, Picasso, Mondrian. This was the early 80's and bright primary, contrasting colours and very simple minimalist designs were fashionable (at least in my house anyway!) I produced a range of arty, simple, colourful anodised aluminium neckpieces and earrings which you would have to be somewhat pretentious to wear!

9. What expectations did you have on leaving College, and were these fulfilled?

I wanted to run my own business making and selling jewellery. This I did for several years by myself, showing at trade fairs and then with the help of my husband Andrew Green, until we got fed up with it and I taught myself feltmaking.

10. How has your work progressed since leaving Art College? Or since the early days of your art/ design career?

You can see my early feltmaking on my website. I am trying to do more work with lights and digital images now.

11. What are your current themes and subjects?

I'd like to do more flashing light pictures - possibly working with an electronics engineer to program special sequences.

12. How do you start for a piece of work - eg sketching, photographing. Looking at books for inspiration etc?

I get out all the different fibres, think about what I'm going to do, look at the colours and put them together to decide what I'm going to use. I might go to the library or look for images on the internet. I put anything relevant up in front of me.

13. Describe your workplace/ studio etc (eg space, layout, lighting music, silence, examples of work displayed etc.)

I have a very small space. I have a large table beside a window and light my work with several spot lights. Above my work table are pictures of work I like, or images relevant to the piece I am working on. I sometimes work in silence, sometimes have Radio 1 on.

14. What do you see are the essential difference between Fine Arts and Design disciplines and are there overlaps?

I think of myself as an artist, not a craftsperson. Lots of overlaps - there are plenty of people producing what could be described as both.

15. How would you describe your work? - ie under which category does it fall - Craft Design, or Textiles/ Fashion

I describe myself as a Textile Artist or Fibre Artist.

16. Describe your techniques, methods etc

I use my Barnett drum carder for carding very fine layers of wool for the 'Floating felt' pictures and for blending colours and incorporating other fibres. The fine merino felt is very quick to felt.

The felting is done in the following way:

It should really be carded first or buy already carded wool. This is so that the fibres are laying in the same direction. Then grasp the wool in your left hand & pull some fibres out with your right hand. Lay the fibres down on your mat (a reed mat or blind or computer non-slip mesh mat or 'bubble-wrap' packing material - you may have to improvise). Each 'pull' of fibres should slightly overlay the previous one like tiles. Keep going until the mat is covered. Now lay the next layer of 'tiles' at right angles to the previous one - in other words so the fibres are going crossways to the first layer. Now lay out a 3rd layer. 3 layers is enough for most application - 6 for a carpet! Now you will need a piece of fine nylon net (we use old net curtains - you will have to buy some sort of fine, but not too fine, synthetic mesh) to protect the fibres and your design. Put the net over the fibres.

Now I use very hot water (just boiled) to wet it - careful of your hands! Some people don't use hot water, but it makes it felt quicker, but can distort your design. I use a small watering can or I pierce tiny holes in the lid of a used plastic milk bottle, put the water inside & then shake it on. Pour on carefully so you don't end up making everywhere very wet! However, the piece should be completely wet and flat. The wetting is made easier if you use soap (olive oil soap from a health food shop is best) at this stage. You can now start rubbing the work, helped by the soap. Rub all over, or put on the floor & walk on it carefully!

Rub until the fibres start coming up through the net a bit. Now carefully pull the net off, holding down the piece if it is sticking. Now roll up in the mat into a roll, tie with some string or put rubber bands round or wrap with an old towel. It is easier to roll if there is a towel underneath to stop it slipping. It is also easier if there is a piece of round tube or a round wooden stick inside to roll it on. You may need to wet it again if it has got too dry. Roll in both directions (either on the floor with your feet sitting on a chair or with your hands) for quite a while until it has become a strong meshed together fabric and doesn't feel 'spongy'. If it does - it probably isn't a good felter! It should have shrunk up to a third of it's original size.

Rinse out the soap until water runs clear and add a drop of vinegar to final rinse to restore ph balance. Admire!

17. Who/ What are your present influences? In what way do they influence you or your work?

I collect postcards and images of particular colour combinations or artist's work that I like and have them on the wall above where I work. Artists such as Odilon Redon, Miro, Alexander Calder, Patrick Heron, David Bachelor, Mark Rothko, Gerry Dudgeon, Jim Lambie, Martyn Brewster, Gustav Klimpt. Also textiles from India and South America and the lighting in clubs in the dance music scene and the visuals behind the DJ's box. The landscape around where I live here in Dorset, etc,etc.

I sometimes just come up with a particular idea, like 'It's Raining Men' to illustrate, or sometimes I just start a picture without any particular idea in mind.

In contrast to Jackson Pollock's assertion that - despite his technique of dripping or splashing paint onto the canvas - he "denied the accidental", I like the accidental or 'surprise' element in my work, whereby the actual felting process can move the fibres - and thus the design - around slightly.

Even though experience in the technique reduces this, I still encourage this aspect of my work. Also, it could be argued that nothing is 'accidental', since any artist - immersed in his or her work - is in touch with the intuitive.

18. What is your opinion of contemporary art/ craft/ photography in NI, Europe?

I don't know enough about craft and photography to comment. Lots of interesting stuff happening in the art world. Tracey Emin, The Chapman brothers, David Bachelor, Grayson Perry et al.

19. Do you think that your upbringing has affected your work and if so in what ways?

Obviously it helped that there were so many artistic people in the family. I had a privileged upbringing and had lots of space to run about and a lot of freedom. I would have liked to have gone to a school which had better art and craft facilities (I don't mean the school where I did my 'A' levels which was pretty good in that respect). As to your question, it obviously did and does affect my work but I'm not sure in what particular way.

20. Is there anyone whose work does not appeal to you, and if so why?

Magritte, Dali - ugly, stiff, over studied, mannered, pretentious, over-intellectual.

Some Picassos, because some of them are so ugly! However, there is always something worth looking at and considering in the output of this immensely talented, clever and prodigious artist.

Brueghel - dreadfully gruesome and unpleasant to look at!

Some of those semi-professional artists who produce abstract work which I would describe as 'dead'. When working representationally, there is an immediate communication with the viewer, of the object(s) represented; in contrast, an abstract artist has to communicate an idea, feeling, or emotion. Therefore a lack of intensity, inspiration or originality in that idea, feeling or emotion will produce that feeling in the viewer that there is nothing 'behind' the work - that it is lifeless and devoid of meaning. There are countless struggling 'professional' artists who demonstrate this lack. In contrast, the true 'greats' amongst abstract artists (and one could argue that there are very few of these) manage to produce work of beauty (in form and/or colour) and the work has great energy and life.

21. What advice would you give to someone hoping to take up a career in a similar field to yourself

I think it is very difficult to earn a living from art and even more difficult with textiles because as an artform it doesn't tend to be taken very seriously. It is probably slightly easier to do it as a craft - selling something like cushion covers, bags, hats etc which you can then sell at craft fairs, or wholesale to galleries, but it is still a hard slog and you will need to endlessly promote yourself (which takes a lot of confidence). You may still need to do teaching or something else so as you have some other income to back it up.

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