



On Repeat

Working intimately with huge rolls of fabric, three British textile printers unravel why ink and cloth is such an irresistible combination.



Photos by ELLIE SMITH

Louisa Loakes

STAMFORD,
LINCOLNSHIRE,
UNITED KINGDOM

Where are you based and do you print from home or at a studio?
My studio is at home in Peckham. I have my studio in the house and my husband, who is a sculptor, has a studio in our garage.

Do you have a background or education in art or textiles?
I studied painting at Wimbledon School of Art. The course in fine art was really open and there were many facilities available to me. Wimbledon had a wonderful print room and I found myself gravitating to it all the time. I experimented with all the different processes from etching to screenprinting to photograms. The negative space and repetition in my photographic work and my line drawings/etchings that I explored then helped to inform the work with block printing that I now do.

What attracted you to printmaking?
After college in 2003 I visited India and block printing caught my attention. I had always been drawn to the processes of different types of printmaking, I enjoy the journey of how you get to somewhere through a process. The fact that printmaking naturally lends itself to repetition was important to me, something I wanted to explore further in my work.

What is your preferred textile printmaking technique and why?
Block printing, because the process feels free, less restricting than some other forms of printing that I have experimented with over the years. I naturally work quite quickly so to see a pattern and feel the results almost instantly is important to my creative process. From cutting the lino and making up the block, the application of the ink and the pressure you apply to the fabric through to the positioning of the block on the fabric by eye, the process is very human. You have to be connected to what you are doing. Block printing itself is very physical and rhythmic, even meditative.

Can you talk a little about the attraction of making handmade fabric and your creative process?
I hand carve my blocks using lino, a process that is very physical. Each mark I make is my own – this is important to me and my work. The mark, the print. The beautiful nuances that run through a length of block printed fabric really appeal to me. The imperfections are to be celebrated, they give the pattern energy and beauty. When printing by eye you have a certain connection and level of control, but the nature of hand printing means it will never be totally 'perfect'. I like the crossover of the block and parts that don't meet up. After printing I hand paint colour onto the fabric, this adds another element to the pattern, another energy, pulling the composition together. To stand back and look at the fabric, I see it as a canvas, a painting that I have just completed.

Are your fabric designs drawn out or composed digitally before making the blocks?
I never use a computer when creating a pattern design. I use the lino directly as my sketch for my design and very often this becomes the final piece – the pattern is honest. I can be free and impulsive and reactive to the design and respond to it how it tells me. Ideas I have been thinking about for years can all come together at one point, they evolve over time. Working with the block, you need to play with it, print with it, listen to it.

Tell us a little about working with repeating patterns and the complexity of this process?
The repeat isn't at the forefront of my mind when designing a pattern. It can become too heavy if you think about it too much, overwhelming.



I prefer a playful approach when it comes to repeat and to respond to the patterns I'm making in a more organic way. I paint a dash of colour in a negative space in a design because it feels right. You need to have the block in your hand to understand it, get to know it and have it in front of you to play with and explore. I have to spend time printing with my blocks, getting to know them, like friends.

And how about the scale/size of the fabrics that you make – and the logistics of printing them?
I print to industry standard width sizes, working within those constraints. Generally my fabric is around 150cm wide. I can remember my first commission to print a few metres of fabric – it felt quite daunting. Over the years I have managed to set up my small studio to print comfortably. I print to order, however many metres people would like. My longest print run to date has been 30m of my Saffron Spot design, which felt like quite an achievement. The beauty of block printing is that you can print in a relatively small space. As long as you have a sturdy table anyone can block print at home, another reason why it attracted me in the first place.

Please share some of your inspirations.
I naturally look to artists for inspiration. I have always loved the work of Agnes Martin, an American painter. The simplicity of her work, her use of line and her attitude towards her work appeals to me. Matisse: when my daughter was born I spent nearly every week at Tate Modern looking at *The Cut-Outs*, his work feels free and playful. Kettle's Yard is full of treasure, from the work hanging on the walls to the rugs on the floor. And my travels to India over the years have been important in informing my work. Traditional Indian block printed textiles along with the overall energy of the country continue to be a big source of inspiration for me.

What are you working on at the moment?
I am currently working on some new designs, alongside a few commissions, a piece for someone's wall and a block printed wrapping design.

Future plans and projects in the pipeline?
I would love to have an exhibition in the future. 

 [louisaloakes](#)



“The imperfections are to be celebrated, they give the pattern energy and beauty.”
LOUISA LOAKES





Stephen Ellison

PLAISTOW,
EAST LONDON,
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Where are you based and do you print from home or at a studio?
I live in Plaistow in East London, but my print base is Colchester. I'm currently Course Leader of the BA Fashion and Printed Textiles at University College Colchester, and I use the print tables when the students aren't there. I occasionally use East London Printmakers in Mile End too. The dream would be to set myself up at home, but the garden isn't big enough to house a shed at the end of it. I'm originally from the North West of England and my wife is from Yorkshire so we'd love to find a rural tumbledown house or former mill somewhere to convert into a studio.

Do you have a background or education in art or textiles?
My background is solidly in printed textiles. My understanding has been acquired through 20 years of experience in the industry, coupled with a theoretical familiarity with the subject through two courses of degree level study – Printed Textiles at Loughborough University in 2002, then an MA in Textiles at the Royal College of Art.

What attracted you to printmaking?
As a fresh-faced 18-year-old my tutors said I had a natural tendency to texture and I was put into the textile department, but I changed to Fine Art Printmaking. Fusing these two specialisms resulted in Printed Textiles, and ta-da! Particularly attracted to Japanese printmaking, I chanced upon a book in the library called *Modern Japanese Prints: An Art Reborn* by Oliver Statler. It showed the 20th century Japanese woodblock movement Sōsaku-hanga and I loved how it stressed the artist as the sole creator motivated by a desire for self-expression, advocating principles of art that were 'self-drawn'.

What is your preferred textile printmaking technique and why?
I was trained in the traditional process of silkscreen printing at Loughborough and the RCA, and I've stayed unwaveringly loyal to it. It's just so versatile and I've never grown bored. It's a physical process, with the lifting of heavy metal screens, and it's a bit chaotic sometimes, which I actually love!

Can you talk a little about the attraction of making handmade fabric and your creative process?
Handmade fabric is designed to be handled, felt or manipulated with the hands. I use a lot of Japanese fabric in my work – a beautiful linen and cotton mix with a crumpled and creased appearance. I also emphasise my sustainable credentials. I use an English type of balled wool for my cushion fillers made from a by-product of the wool processing system. The wool market has taken a series of dramatic downturns, resulting in British Wool almost halving the price paid for the 2021 clip, meaning the price will not go near covering the cost of shearing in most cases. I hope, in my own small way, I'm helping sheep farmers find alternative ways to market. And, as a northerner, I'm all for that.

Are your fabric designs drawn out or composed digitally before creating screens?
They always start as collage pieces. I have boxes full of 'off-cuts' – various black ink textures on paper that I play with to make a composition. I cut, copy and place until I'm happy with the layout. My work background is in design so repeat work has always been important, and I tend to use Photoshop later on in the process to put designs in half drop repeat and to change or limit the colour.



Tell us a little about working with repeating patterns and the complexity of this process?

For me, repeat work is a combination of using powerful computer software tools and your judgement in creating interesting developments of your design. I've always favoured repeat methods that enable sophisticated editing of my work, without it looking too rigid and computer generated. Repeat work is definitely a design skill in itself and practice and analysis enhance my ability – each design has its own particular problem, or rather opportunity.

And how about the scale/size of the fabrics that you make – and the logistics of printing them?

I tell my students to remember that historically, when wooden blocks were used for printing, much ingenuity was applied to creating flowing designs of great variety within the limitations imposed by the size of a handheld block. We're now much freer to experiment with scale and size, and the bigger and braver the better for me.

Please share some of your inspirations.
My favourite artists and designers that specialise in printmaking include: Terence Conran, Peter Green, Eduardo Paolozzi, Julian Trevelyan, Geoffrey Wales, Henry Cliffe, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Keith Vaughan, John Minton, Corita Kent, Robert Rauschenberg, Alvin Lustig – the list goes on and on... I think it's really important to go to exhibitions – Althea McNish's *Colour Is Mine* show at William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow is fantastic and it's on until September. She was the first black female fashion and textile designer of international standing in Britain who came through in the 1950s at the same time as Lucienne Day and Shirley Craven, but she never achieved the same recognition.

What are you working on at the moment?
The summer is a fallow time regarding my teaching, so I can bring my own work into perspective. I'm currently working on some printed 'wall art' in the form of A3 giclee prints and gift cards.

Future plans and projects in the pipeline?
I'm going to develop more prints and gradually phase out old designs. My background has mainly been in homeware design, so I'm always looking to expand my products. I think lampshades and bedroom textiles are next on my to-do list. T

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"I hope, in my own small way, I'm helping sheep farmers find alternative ways to market."
STEPHEN ELLISON





Nicola Cliffe

STAMFORD,
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Where are you based and do you print from home or at a studio?
Madder Cutch & Co has its base in Stamford, Lincolnshire. I designed an eco-conscious wooden box to be built in the garden to house the seven metre long printing table. It is such a great place to work and the commute is so easy.

Do you have a background or education in art or textiles?
I am originally a chemistry graduate and spent 20 years teaching. I broke out of the classroom in 2014 and escaped to Chelsea College of Art and Design where I studied for a masters in Sustainable Textile Design at the ripe old age of 47. It was a fantastic year of learning and creating, one I will cherish forever.

What attracted you to printmaking?
I took A-Level art at school and bizarrely, followed the printmaking syllabus – strange how these things come back to you in life. I love pattern, colour and making things. Fabrics have been a major part of my home life and hobbies so designing and printing my own fabrics was quite a driving force.

What is your preferred textile printmaking technique and why?
Screenprinting! I hadn't really considered there was any other way for me, despite my research around printing textiles with natural dyes. Although I love using blocks, I feel my own print paste recipes work much better when applied with the squeegee through a screen.

Can you talk a little about the attraction of making handmade fabric and your creative process?
The best bit about handmade is the bit that scares me the most – the imperfections! I love visiting the Fashion and Textile Museum in Bermondsey and it was the Collier and Campbell exhibition in 2015 that made me relax about the repeat joins in my fabric runs. Handmade may have its imperfections, which everyone does seem to love, but for me the attraction is being in control of every metre that is produced – we see every part we print. In fact we can remember most orders for something that didn't quite go to plan, or even better, how perfect it was.

Are your fabric designs drawn out or composed digitally before creating screens?
My process has always started with a drawing. I love to draw and if I can't take my paints away with me, I will always have a sketchbook and a pencil, collecting ideas from anywhere. When I am ready to create a new design I usually know what it will be and then I set to work transforming it into a repeating pattern, usually on paper first and then a full size repeat using photoshop (a skill I had to work hard to pick up at college).

Tell us a little about working with repeating patterns and the complexity of this process?
Roughing it out on paper is a good starting place. For fabric designs that are mainly to be used for soft furnishings, the scale of the design and the size of the vertical repeat are quite important – it is quite wasteful to have a repeat that is greater than 30cm. So I always need to consider this as well as the repeat on the horizontal, for joining. Using Photoshop makes this all very easy. There are formulas you can use when making the design, but not having a textile design undergraduate degree means I have



so many skills missing so I rely on my own intuition. I am sure it makes it harder work for me but I love the challenge of sorting it all out, spatially.

And how about the scale/size of the fabrics that you make – and the logistics of printing them?

My aim when starting my studios was to print metres of fabric using plant based dyes. I then worked backwards to get there. So screenprinting using textile size screens and squeegees was the only way to make it work for me. I looked at the work of the Hull Traders from the '50s and '60s as inspiration, and knew I wanted to design and produce my own fabrics in a similar way. My table is very, very small and the screens are the same height as me, but everyone who visits the studio for the first time is always blown away by the drama of it all and I think it is quite good fun to watch. Of course, not being able to print on my own may be seen as a downside, but over the years I have had some brilliant and interesting friends, interns and retirees at the other side of the squeegee, and that part I have loved a great deal.

Please share some of your inspirations.
I suspect the Arts and Crafts movement has had the biggest influence on my designs and my colour palette, which is restricted to what I can get from nature. It is the colours of the dyes that gives Madder Cutch & Co its very distinctive style. I am very keen on botanical gardens, museums and art galleries. My designs are quite organic and inspired from nature – I love visiting gardens and enjoy drawing plants. I am inspired by so much, I struggle to narrow my ideas down most of the time.

What are you working on at the moment?
A design of an old man's beard for a 'winter's walk' collection which should be done for November time.

Future plans and projects in the pipeline?
What's the saying? You can take the teacher out of the classroom but you can't take the classroom out of the teacher? I am always busy running workshops in the studio or places I am invited to, teaching design, screen or block print. I have a week-long course at Marlborough College Summer School this July coming up, and I am looking forward to exhibiting at Decorex later in the year with a group of other Blue Patch members. [T](#)

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Photos by ALEXANDRA WALLACE



“I will always have a sketchbook and a pencil, collecting ideas from anywhere”
NICOLA CLIFFE

