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CHEMICAL IMBALANCE

Nicola Cliffe: on the road to rediscovery



Tucked away in a tiny sample box is a precious scrap of fabric that represents Nicola Cliffe's determination to revive the ancient use of natural plant dyes to produce beautiful, hand-printed linens. The deep indigo of this early design was final confirmation that her technique worked, and the result was every bit as stunning as she had hoped. 'My aim was to bring back the rich colours of the old days using sustainable plant dyes, and with that piece of fabric I knew I could do it,' she said.

Nicola was disillusioned with the use of synthetic dyes worldwide. As an artist and scientist, she was uniquely placed to rediscover natural plant and pigment dyes – and the best way to use them. But it was to prove a challenge, and has taken four years of careful research and study, trials and testing. Patience, hard work and a dogged refusal to be beaten have been rewarded in the establishment of Madder Cutch & Co, renowned for its range of floral inspired linens in all manner of gorgeous shades. Throughout the process Nicola never lost sight of her original goal. 'We can't just let these colours go,' she explains, 'when they are so beautiful and they have been around for so long – they are part of history.'

The story actually began at school as she studied for art A-level and she longed to go on to Art College, but life took a different turn and instead she eventually studied for a chemistry degree and became a teacher. Over the years she found an outlet for her creative side through an interest in home interiors, crafts and a natural

ability to make anything with a sewing machine; from quilts to curtains and clothes.

Four years ago she suddenly had the opportunity to resign from teaching and take up a place at Chelsea College of Art and Design to study for an MA in sustainable textile design. The decision was life changing. For a year she had the luxury of devoting herself to everything she was passionate about and she credits the Chelsea screen printing technician, Margaret Campbell, for helping her master the complexities of the craft. The task ahead was daunting though and she had to ignore doubters within the industry who were unconvinced she could get the plant dyes scaled up to production levels.

Undeterred, Nicola pressed on using her skills as a chemist to adjust the dyes, testing meticulously every step of the way to see how they responded to sunlight and wear and tear. She said: 'It took me a long time to work out how to get the colours right. There were a lot of hours spent weighing things out and my experience as a chemist was invaluable.' Generous advice from the makers at Rapture and Wright finally convinced her she was on the right track, and when those early experiments proved successful she was on her way.

Nicola produces all the designs herself drawing from a love of nature, gardens and plants. The dyes come from all manner of plants and pigments including woad, madder, cutch, weld and charcoal, the colours merging together in a way ▶

Alexandra Wallace Photography



synthetic dyes can't. Reds, pinks, gold, blues and greys are a strong feature and all work well together like the plants they are derived from. Designs are hand screen printed on 100 per cent linen and Nicola does all the production herself to ensure standards are maintained and her concern for the environment is protected.

To test the market she exhibited at craft and furnishing fairs where her fabrics attracted attention from enthusiasts at home and abroad. The work was picked up by Helen Cormack, the force behind Tissus d'Helene, a boutique showroom at Chelsea Harbour, well known for specialising in artisanal fabrics and wallpapers. Stock comes from England, France, Belgium, Italy and America and Helen's passion for prints is reflected in the hugely diverse ranges – most are hand blocked or hand screen printed.

With Helen as a mentor Nicola was able to tackle design and production issues, and a contemporary wooden studio at her Stamford home in Lincolnshire houses the seven metre print table. Outside a carpet of wildflowers reflects nature at its best and serves as further artistic inspiration. Says Nicola: 'I draw from the nature that surrounds me. The other day I spotted a piece of ivy struggling to escape from a brick wall and I imagined what it was running away from. When a neighbour's clematis tumbled over my garden fence I suddenly thought it preferred my garden to theirs, and wondered why.'

Appreciation of the fabrics and the concept ▶







behind them has won her many plaudits, and orders have increased steadily, seeing them used in homes, hotels and commercial properties. There has been solid interest from Australia and America where the use of natural dyes has been enthusiastically embraced. Nicola also makes a range of homewares and accessories in a bid to reduce waste and make the most of offcuts. 'I can't compete with mass production on price but I am not trying to -- this is a craft product. By printing only on linen, which is more sustainable, I order only what I need which controls the waste I produce and is part of my philosophy.'

For Nicola, her success is the culmination of an ambition that began in school. As a scientist she wanted to do something about the harmful side effects of synthetic dyes and she has made an impressive contribution. She also has the satisfaction of seeing the beautiful old colours she so revered come back into use. She said: 'In the 1850s everything was produced using natural dyes but by the 1930s they had completely gone out of fashion. We can't just let them go when they are so beautiful. I can't change the world but this is my contribution.'

A long-lasting testament to her impressive achievements are the beautiful fabrics she now produces, and that precious piece in her sample box. *** Sandra Barrowman

Nicola Cliffe will be exhibiting her work at the Selvedge Fair, 1 December 2018, Mary Ward House, 5-7 Tavistock Place, Bloomsbury, London WC1H 9SN

Alexandra Wallace Photography