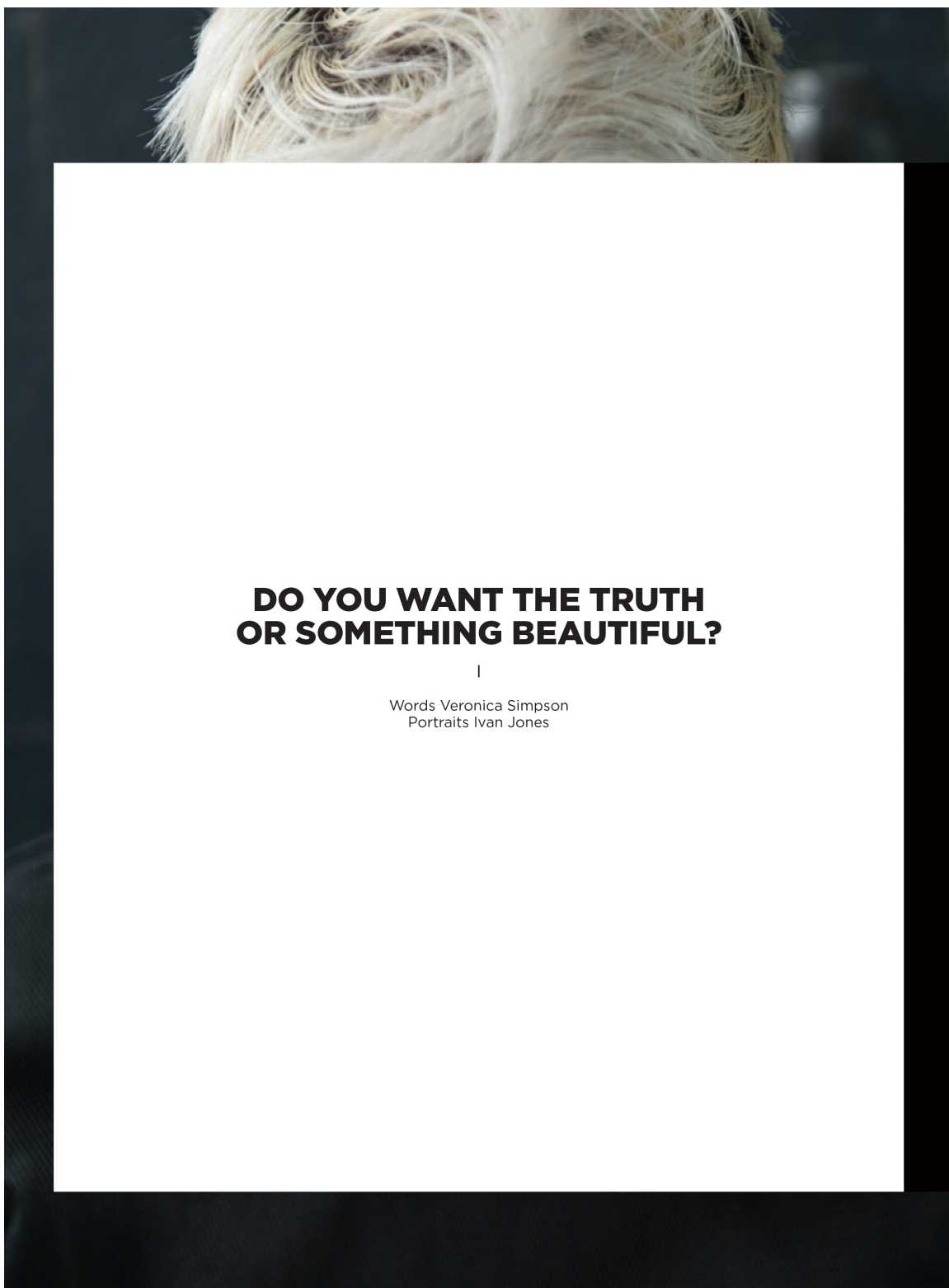




Simpson, Veronica. "Do you want the truth or something beautiful?" *Blueprint 335*, July 2014.

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**DO YOU WANT THE TRUTH
OR SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL?**

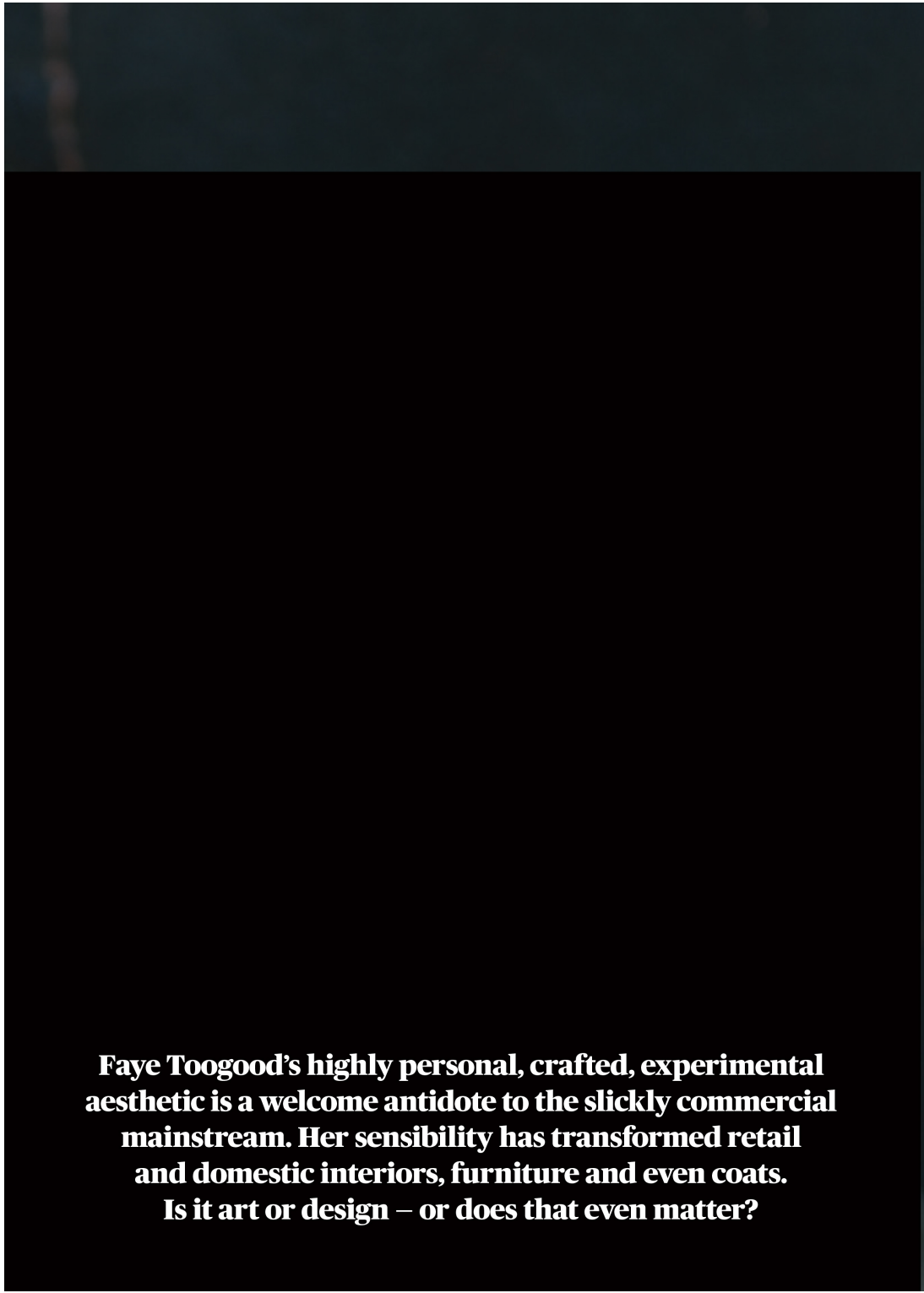
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Words Veronica Simpson
Portraits Ivan Jones

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Faye Toogood's highly personal, crafted, experimental aesthetic is a welcome antidote to the slickly commercial mainstream. Her sensibility has transformed retail and domestic interiors, furniture and even coats. Is it art or design – or does that even matter?

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When was the last time you walked into a branded retail

outlet – or any retail outlet even – and felt genuinely startled by its look and feel? Was it perhaps when Apple launched its first glassy, minimalist shrines to digital consumerism, with product-strewn ‘altars’ instead of showcases, and T-shirted ‘clergy’ circling among the flock, administering the sacraments from their shiny tablets?

It certainly doesn’t happen too often. Most contemporary retail interiors are designed to bludgeon you into slavish submission with their seductive or edgy feel and finish, or dazzle you with their disco-dark decor, scantily clad attendants or blinking flatscreen TVs depicting achingly desirable lifestyles – all yours for the price of a pair of pants or a sports shoe. Design as foreplay.

Faye Toogood’s interiors are utterly disengaged from this kind of titivation, and yet she is wooed as a collaborator by some of the world’s most prestigious fashion houses, from Alexander McQueen to Vivienne Westwood. Her work interrogates and explores the outer reaches of emotional response, informed by unusual textures and juxtapositions. For Mahani’s first Middle East outlet, in Dubai – a Mecca for opulent and excessive retail interiors – she created a raw concrete cell adorned only with racks of clothes, plus a few pastel-pretty leather stools. For Hermes’ London launch of its ‘Petit h’ range (couture upcycling, transforming discarded Hermes materials or items into new and unique pieces), the brand gave over the ground floor of its Bond Street store to Toogood, who turned it into a white, utilitarian space filled with sculptural displays in raw leather, neon and resin, inspired by the shapes and templates of Hermes bags, while a selection of well-used makers’ tools were displayed alongside as wall art.

Admirers often ruminate on whether her work is art or

design. There is clearly a lot of the artist in her approach – she’s as interested in provocation, in breaking perceived rules, as she is in problem solving. But Toogood always places herself firmly in the design camp, because her work is ‘useful’. What gives her work particular traction now, she suspects, is the storytelling that underpins each project. ‘People have perhaps become more interested in storytelling recently because everything has become so fast,’ she says. Anyone can order anything they want from anywhere, so why should you connect or want to live with anything? The tangible aspects of design and architecture and spaces have become more and more important.’

This is where Toogood’s obsession with craft comes in: she has long been fascinated with hand skills and celebrating industry and making, as she does in using British makers for her furniture, and as she did with her 2012 London Design Festival installation in Covent Garden, called 7x7. Seven ‘washing lines’, each strung with seven oversized workers coats splashed with industrial paint, were displayed along Monmouth Street, labelled to represent the many trades that once flourished there – brewers, potters, puppeteers, furriers, bookbinders. It was this installation, for which she enlisted the help of her clothes-designer sister Erica, that started the pair dreaming up a fashion range, the latest new territory in a career that has seen her design furniture, retail and domestic interiors, glassware and makeup.

Unsurprisingly, her launch into fashion is unorthodox. She’s worked in the sector and knows what a fickle and all-consuming monster it can be, so, to keep it bespoke and manageable, she’s only designing coats and aprons. The concept is – again unsurprisingly – not just any old coats but workers’ coats, and that theme follows through from shape to materials. For example,

3



1 (previous spread) – Faye Toogood, multidiscipline designer of interiors for fashion houses, and now her own fashion garments



2 (opposite page) – Toogood’s interior for luxury bag and scarf retailer Hermes features a display of well-used makers’ tools with upcycled Hermes goods

3 – For Mahani’s debut Middle East store in Dubai, Toogood went against the opulent norm there and used only raw concrete, racks of garments, and leather stools

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4 - The Beekeeper coat, one of four unisex work coats from Toogood's debut fashion collection, created with her sister Erica

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there's the industrial worker (vulcanised rubber); the beekeeper (industrial felt); the oil rigger (waxed cotton), and the mariner (canvas). 'I said if we're going to do clothes we should pick one thing and do it well,' says Toogood. 'We wanted clothes that we could work in, where I don't feel I'm part of a tribe of fashion. It's practical. It's glamorous, but at the same time I can get on a bike.'

The cutting and crafting is all down to sister Erica, she says. 'I don't have a skill. I'm a creative director. I wouldn't know how to begin to make a 3D object out of a flat piece of cloth and some scissors. Erica inherited that from my grandmother, who's a tailor. It's instinctive to her. I'm concentrating on the fabrics, the concept, questioning why we're doing it, contributing to the form.' For this, she applies her skills from working in furniture: 'It's about volume, silhouettes, geometry, finish, how you communicate it. I'd approached it like I would any project. We almost came up with the title and concept and how it would look as you walk in the room before we even cut the first garment.'

The range will vary slightly from season to season – a new tone, a new detail, a new material, but the shapes will be eternal – and unisex. They go up in sizes 1 to 5, and can be chosen according to whether customers want to hide or enhance their shape. Says Toogood: 'The point is if you find yourself loving the beekeeper, the beekeeper will always be in the range. I like consistency. I like opening my wardrobe and knowing I can put this thing on and I can get the same thing next year. Consistency is a very nice thing in a world that's constantly changing.'

See the provocation? To opt for consistency in the most fickle and inconsistent of all design fields has a delicious contrarian ring to it. Freedom of thought matters more to Toogood than building a reputation and sales in any particular design genre. This, she

says, is something that her first mentor, design editor Min Hogg, taught her through her eight years working as stylist and then creative director on *World of Interiors* magazine (Toogood's first proper job after a history of art and fine art degree, landed after she arrived in Hogg's office with a suitcase full of inspirational items and pieces). The freedom to take risks and experiment also drove her choice of setting up a multidisciplinary studio, long before multidisciplinary became the norm.

Established five years ago, the Studio Toogood team has grown from three to around 12 and includes product and interior designers, artists, architects and at least two graduates from Central Saint Martins' vanguard textile futures (now renamed material futures) MA course. Experimentation and cross-fertilisation are positively encouraged. She says: 'Unlike other design practices. I've never been interested in having one style that we all have to follow or one group of people all trained in one way. From the outset I wanted a company where people like myself, who consider themselves designers, would get the opportunity to work on different projects – furniture designers working on interior projects or interior designers working on coats.'

'Our style is unexpected every time we do a project. It's the approach that marries everything together and the emotional content to what we do. Somehow we have managed to produce projects that are relevant to people.'

Not just relevant but increasingly admired. Leading UK furniture designer Tom Lloyd of Pearson Lloyd is a fan. He says: 'She manages to go across boundaries between product, interior and installation in a very seamless way, where you don't really know where the roots of her practice are. It feels like a stream of consciousness almost. It feels very effortless. It also feels surprising

5 (opposite page top) – Roly Poly is Toogood's fourth Assemblage collection, encompassing furniture items with soft lines and childlike rounded edges

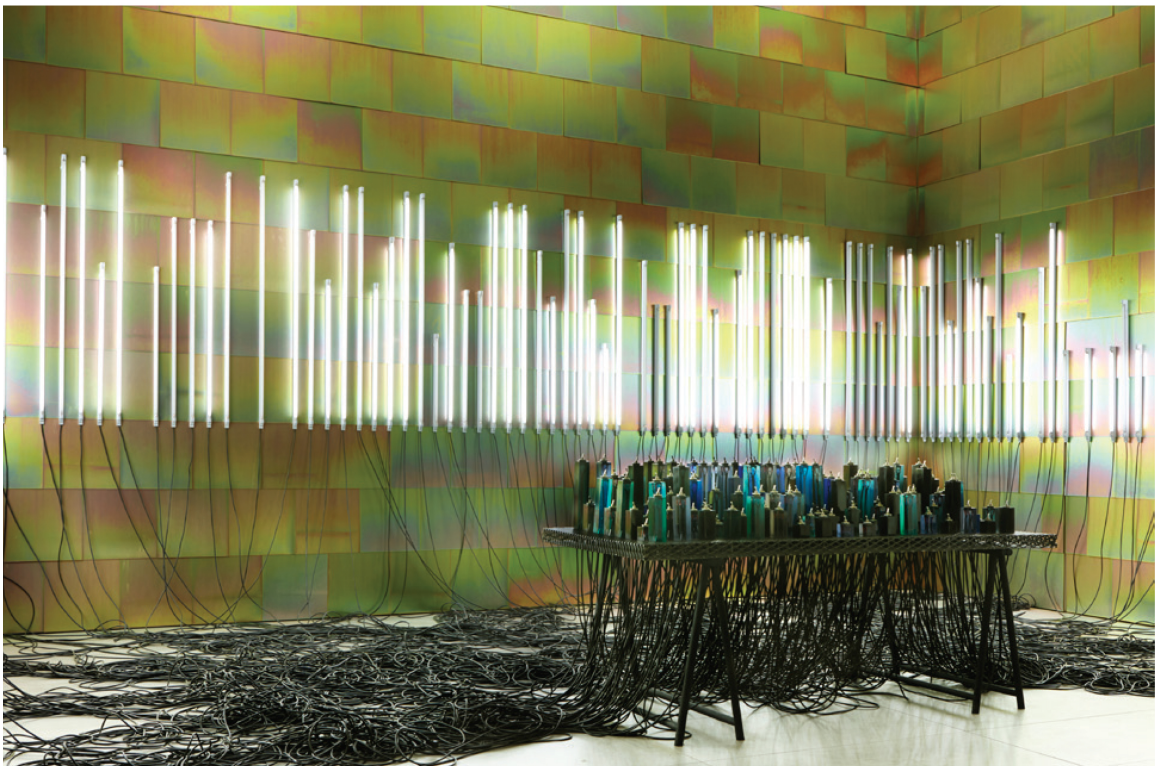
6 (opposite page below) – Installation *The Conductor*, has 160 fluorescent bulbs fed by a skein of wires and cables, that can be 'conducted' by the viewer from a centrepiece switchboard

7 – Toogood's Indigo Storm ceramic set of plates, bowls and cups in Delft blue and cream, for British ceramics firm 1882 Ltd, made its debut at this year's Salone del Mobile



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but very familiar. Some of the furniture pieces look like they could have come out of any period of the past 100 years. There's a conscious timelessness. You could argue that it's very much of the zeitgeist but it doesn't feel like she's following anything other than her own path.'

A fine art background is a blessing if you don't want to be bound by any rules, says Toogood: 'I can reference the past without being worried about that. Designers are told not to create a pastiche of the past – always to move forward and not look back. I notice that in young designers. They don't pick up a pre-1950 book now. Their knowledge is quite limited.'

Her maverick tastes and sensibility means she has learned over the years to pick her clients carefully. 'We turn down a lot of projects. After initial meetings, if I feel we're not connecting, they're not going to get the best out of us. If you work with someone who is going to block what you do, it's so destructive. Those are the projects that kill us financially, because the mix isn't right. It does seem frightening to turn down work because I'm paying wages at the end of the month. But I've learned that costs me dearly, because we care. In a way the best designers potentially let their ego get in the way of making money because they can't bear to leave something that's not perfect. The most successful commercial people are happy to leave it and walk away.'

And yet branded fashion houses of a certain calibre seem to like that independence of spirit. Says Toogood: 'A lot of brands come because in-house they've not been able to be brave enough to get out of the box they have put themselves in. They come to us and often sit down and say that they want something totally different. We want people to see us in a totally different light. That's great. And that's happening more and more.'

Again, bucking against the prevailing trends, Toogood says she has no interest in multimedia, 24/7 connectivity. 'I don't read magazines any more. I feel overloaded by information in magazines and online. So I spend a lot of time and money on books. There are a lot of books in the studio, available to everyone – history, art, decorative art, ceramics, sculpture. A big part of me wishes to be a sculptor. There's nothing like nothingness to give you inspiration. I'm so bombarded by visual stimuli that to get an idea or thought or inspiration I need nothing but to be quiet, to be in a landscape or away.' Her preferred locations are in Suffolk, ideally, or taking walks along the canal behind her house in north London.

'I do want to be relevant but the moment I start to scratch the surface and find out what people think of the projects we've done I can't handle the comments. I need to be in this bubble in order to create, or I get too concerned. It's not that I don't care. I actually care a bit too much. It's best if I just shut down and carry on doing what I'm doing. And if people are still going to the events and buying the coats then that's fine.'

For this multifaceted designer and her studio there are still ambitions to be realised: 'I'd love to have someone here only concentrating on materials and experimentation. That would be incredible because it would filter through to the interiors and clothes.' And there are genres yet to crack, she says: 'I think to revisit hotel design would be a fantastic opportunity. I think we've come to the end of boutique hotel interiors, all of which are looking pretty generic. If someone asked me to do a hotel I would relish that opportunity. How could we come up with a new way of how we spend time in a hotel? It's time, nowadays, that is the great luxury.' ■