



THIS IS PAPER

Inaugural Issue

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Studio Toogood's work is probably as strikingly unconventional as was its founder's path to become a designer. Having gone a long way in search of where to locate her creative potential, today Faye Toogood leads a design team multidisciplinary by nature, not just by label. The projects range from interior and furniture design through art installations to fashion design and most recently a make-up collection. And they are still keen to branch out more.

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"I AM HAPPY BOTH LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING
AT THE FUTURE. I FIND THEM EQUALLY INTERESTING."

To begin with, could you tell me about your background? What was your experience with education, your early work, important influences or significant breakthroughs that led you to where you are today?

Probably one of my marks of difference within the design world is that I didn't study design. I studied fine art and the history of art at Bristol University. I'm really glad that I did the combination of history of art and fine arts because it has given me a different view on design in terms of colour, composition, social understanding and also made me open to the past and tradition. Lots of designers are forced to always consider the new, never look back. I, on the other hand, am quite happy both looking back and looking at the future. I find them equally interesting.

My education was a mix of both hands-on and academic work. When I left university I thought I wanted to do interior architecture so I got a job with an architect's firm. In a matter of weeks I realized that the reality of this profession doesn't suit my temperament and personality. Architects design something in a week and it takes 5 years to build it. Then a friend of mine suggested that I investigate working on magazines and I fell into working on the 'World of Interiors' magazine, which is probably one of the most influential

interior design magazines in the world. What I liked about working on that magazine was that it wasn't solely about interiors. It was about the best thing in architecture, the best antiques, the best art, the best decorative arts... We covered everything from embroidery to a house in Africa to an archive of somebody's spectacles. And actually that's where my founding knowledge and instinct for creativity come from. After 8 years I left to set up Studio Toogood. At that point I thought I would continue being a stylist, which is what I was at the magazine. However, I quickly realized that I was quite frustrated with the two-dimensional page and I wanted to start working in three dimensions. So I was asking myself how I could apply all the things that I learnt making sets and telling stories through images. How could I do that with a space? Those investigations led me and the Studio to start designing in a multidisciplinary way. We started to combine scent, food, objects and space to tell stories and create environments. At the time when I set up Studio Toogood there were architects' practices, graphic design practices, product design practices etc. while I employed all of those professionals under one roof. I thought it would be interesting for an architect to work on a chair and for a product designer to work on a build-

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ing. I believe that if you are a designer you can work on everything. It was important to me from the start that the studio was multidisciplinary. After a few years we grew from 3 to 12 people. At the moment the projects range from interiors for commercial and domestic clients through to permanent and temporary installations which involve all of these sensory aspects. In addition to that, over the last three years I have been running a furniture design practice in response to the need I felt for creating some more personal work, independently of the clients' briefs.

So do you, to a certain extent, draw a line between your personal work and that labelled by the Studio?

I did do in the sense that there were two different websites and two teams within the office but I can honestly say that both have my equal attention and the boundaries between the two are blurring more and more. Now when we are asked to create an environment we design all the objects inside it as well, whereas before the Studio would only specify products to fit within the space. This way we developed a much more holistic way of looking at things.

The creative industries recently experience a backlash against disciplinary divisions. However, even a polymath like you would probably agree that in the 21st century it is no longer possible to be a true Renaissance man. You need a team of the Renaissance these days. How do you establish a studio culture that successfully brings a variety of professions together?

We often describe ourselves as a group of misfits. We're a group of people who feel that we couldn't work anywhere else because we wouldn't fit in

anywhere else. Lots of people here have worked previously in big design companies or architectural practices and they've become disillusioned with those jobs. They have taken quite a considerable pay cut to come and work in my studio where we have days in the workshop, we have experimentation and we do everything to stay open-minded. What's also important is that everybody needs to be able to empty the bins and work with top clients. Working within a small business means that you have to be able to use your brain and your hands but also to be quite practical. I would say that's the thing that holds everybody together. What's more, if you have lots of very experimental and interesting people working under one roof you need to have a strong direction. For this reason, with all of our projects the direction starts with me and then the team takes it on. That doesn't mean I'm inflicting a particular style on them. I allow people to have their own creative space. A lot of design companies have one set style but we don't do that here. Every project is looked at completely afresh. True, there is something that holds all our projects together but it's not necessarily the look, it's more the approach.

One could describe your work as balancing between design and art, especially when it comes to the installations. Why do you call yourself a designer rather than an artist? Is it the utilitarian aspect of design that makes such a difference?

Yes. Obviously, art for art's sake means that there is no function behind what you do. And a true artist produces work for themselves not for a market or any commercial benefit. Whereas I am interested in making spaces and objects for people to use and experience. Therefore, in my work

I deal with function which makes me a designer, not an artist.

Apart from what I call 'storytelling', another reason why I'm drawn to design is that it has the power to touch people through references to history and culture embedded in it. As a designer I can use certain references to get an emotion or a reaction out of the people visiting an experience. I feel this allows me to tell a story in a better way. To me design is not just about presenting newness but about communicating something. I don't need to do that through words, I can do it through recalling mental pictures in someone's head. I'm excited to play on that to get a different message across.

Would you turn a commission down for the sake of principles?

We've turned down work when we believed that the client was not going to get the best from us, mostly because they didn't understand the way we work and would be better off with a more traditional design company. The ethical side of what I do is based around relations. Both we and the client need to feel good about every project. It's very rewarding when clients end up being our friends and come back to us. Sometimes I can predict that this is not the right mix, that we are not the right people for that client to work with. That's the reason I would turn down work. The design process is long so there needs to be a good dynamic between people.

A lot of your commissions come from the retail sector. How do you navigate your way in environments predominantly driven by and aimed at commercial success?

This is another reason why I'm not an artist and why I'm better suited to design. It's that I'm not frightened of commerce. I'm really interested in business and commerce because I run my own business. Retail is sometimes seen as something fast and therefore with no substance or integrity. I, on the other hand, think that the fashion world is incredibly interesting and important to what we do, as is commerce and money. None of us would be a designer without commerce. I am interested in how you can work from within the commercial world rather than sit outside it.

What are the origins of the Batch collection and the idea of, as you call it, 'industrializing craftsmanship'? When and why came this shift from one-off gallery pieces and limited editions towards more democratic design?

That's a really big and important issue to me. To begin with, I started designing furniture because I was desperate to express myself in terms of objects. It was my personal work and my personal money went into making the first collection. I produced a series of one-off wooden pieces that were made in England by local craftsmen and then launched at London Design Festival 2010. I made the first collection, Assemblage 1, without really thinking about how I was going to make any money out of it. Essentially, if you are a designer, there is no point in making something if you are not able to sell it. I haven't really thought it through and so this collection ended up not being affordable for people. I just didn't have the means to make it affordable. I didn't have a huge production company or the money to order thousands of these chairs to make them cheaper. The second and third collections were



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more gallery-based because that was the opportunity presented to me. Assemblage 3 was commissioned by Phillips de Pury, who asked me to do ten pieces. The gallery provided me with a budget and a platform to work on a level that I could never work on my own. I soon realized that people were quite quick to pigeonhole me as a designer who only does limited editions, as if I was only interested in £25 000 dressing tables. That was not what I wanted to tell the world. I just took the opportunity that was given to me as any designer would. The reason why this dressing table was that expensive was because so many people have contributed to making it in a beautiful, hand-made way. After I finished those three collections I still wanted to produce some furniture that was more affordable and democratic. I

decided that small batch production was a way for me to stick to my integrity but also bring the price down. So I have invested in the Batch collection to make my objects more accessible and also as a designer to retain control over my rights on these designs. The pieces are still made in the UK, using the local manufacturing we have here, but instead of making one we are making a hundred which lowers the price.

In an interview for the Victoria and Albert Museum a postmodern graphic design icon Paula Scher says: 'In the '70s when I first started designing there was a predominance of the international style where the ultimate goal was to be clean and I always felt that that was like trying to clean up your room. So I was looking for ways of designing typography that could be more



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expressive, that were not about creating order but were about creating spirit.' Where would you place yourself between the two extremes of simplicity and complexity?

I feel like I have one foot in history, tradition, decoration (which to me is not superfluous) and another foot in the purity of form. The Element Table sums that up well. I'm not interested in creating a new silhouette because I think the classical, pure forms of a square and a sphere and a cylinder don't need to be messed with. So I really like the elegance of clean geometry but then I also like to express myself in terms of materials. I love how by playing with materials I can turn simple forms into something more expressive. We often use patinated metals or heavily decorated surfaces. I like the idea of craft, luxury and ornamentation. I think I have one foot in both camps. I do consider myself to some extent a follower of modernism. But then I love oil paintings, I love tradition... because of the emotion and the instinct behind it.

You mentioned the Element Table as the best representation of your position in terms of simplicity and complexity but I would argue that the Spade Chair is an equally illustrative example. Its form is simple

and quite stark but at the same time it has appeared in so many different guises, notably at the La Cura exhibition.

Absolutely. And we keep redoing this chair in different materials. When I first launched it everyone said that it's very rural, very rustic. Then we did it in black leather and it took on a totally different feeling in that material. After that we cast it in the most incredible blue-patinated bronze and it was suddenly £12 000. Finally we sand-cast it in aluminum. I've worked closely on this chair and I think it has a classic form. I'm now interested in reinterpreting that form in different materials. Because that to me brings enough newness. I don't have to keep reinventing the wheel.

Let's conclude with a simple but ambiguous question: what's your mission?

It's actually a question I ask myself occasionally, maybe not regularly enough. My mission is to follow my instinct and my heart and to be true to myself. What I end up doing I have no idea. And I'm not worried about that as long as I am happy and I feel that I'm true to myself and my own beliefs and that I'm relevant. That actually is important to me. So my mission is that I remain relevant.