

## IMMERSED IN INDIGO

*A test of faith: shibori and the work of Jane Callender*



For over thirty years, Jane Callender has committed herself to the slow art of shibori – thinking, planning, and stitching geometric structures that burst with pattern, rhythm and movement on cloth.

Her process is acutely time-consuming. She describes herself as ‘engrossed’ in her practice – a friend describes her as ‘ploughing her own furrow’. As her life has evolved, so changing circumstances have impacted on time and access to facilities; but Jane Callender’s fascination with her craft has remained steadfast, and her attention to detail, the exactness of her application, and the control of her materials and techniques have resulted in richly decorative works of extraordinary refinement.

As a student of Deryn O’Connor and the late Susan Bosence at the West Surrey College of Art and Design, Farnham (now the University for the Creative Arts), resist patterning and dyeing was an important element of the curriculum. For Jane, it became a creative obsession. As a fellow student, I remember her joy in the work. While some found the processes too labour intensive, Jane remained focused - stitching, gathering and binding her manipulated compositions for days at a time. While others held their breath at the potential risk of immersing their bundles of cloth in the indigo vats, Jane relished the revelation of her designs, as the first glimpses of white patterning emerged through the dark, ‘inky’ residue of indigo dye.

The natural world is her reference. Jane was born in Penang, Malaya, to a mother born in Kashmir and a father born in Egypt. She has spoken of early childhood memories, following her father as he managed rubber plantations on the Malayan Peninsula; and while her work cannot be directly attributed to these roots, there is a sense of the exotic suggested in her striking compositions and organic forms. Her practice extends beyond stitch and gathered surfaces (i.e. mokume shibori). The work incorporates the clamping of larger shapes and blocks (itajime), and the cylindrical wrapping of threads (bo maki shibori), to achieve continuous linear compositions.

Indigo, with its unique qualities and special relationship to resist-dyeing, is central to her art. But her palette has expanded into other natural dyes, including minerals (iron rust) and plants (madder and pomegranate). In the warmer months, her indigo vats move to the garden, and she considers ‘the outside to be my studio’. Her dye baths can vary from large containers to small vessels, selected according to the scale of the work. While the ingredients are proportionately increased or decreased in relation to size, the indigo content may vary - much of her work displays a passion for dark grounds, with as many as twenty immersions in indigo to achieve the deepest of tones.

All aspects of the process are valued – from the intricacy of stitches and ties, through to the development of dye on cloth, to the remains of unpicked threads left behind after oxidizing, rinsing, drying, and unwrapping. The ordered distribution of mark and the regularity of the colour demonstrate exceptional control, but the larger compositions – Indigo Spring, Kaleidoscope, Indigo Squared – go beyond technical accomplishment. They are evidence of an intensely personal connection with cloth. While a maker’s intuitive understanding might anticipate the outcome, the practice is inevitably ‘a test of vision and faith’.

These works are distinctive as ‘whole cloth’ shibori – the study of block-printing and screen-printing – alongside resist-dyeing is clear, and repeating pattern remains fundamental. Geometry underpins each composition. The placement of floral motifs against dense pattern and open space are critically judged in the planning of each square. Lines meander, circles spin and shapes cluster. Together, these form a collection of works that express the principles of European decorative art through the traditions of Japanese textile craft.

There is an intimacy to this practice. Jane describes it as a ‘small world’, but this is a misrepresentation. Her website demonstrates a spirit of sharing across an international community. Recipes, descriptions and demonstrations communicate her techniques and offer inspiration. Introductory ‘mini-projects’ are available to establish confidence and encourage exploration. Her experience and understanding are disseminated through workshops at her studio in Norfolk, national and international summer schools – in August 2015, she will deliver a Selvedge masterclass at the Chateau Dumas, France. Her expertise has also been recognized through her collaboration with the Aranya Naturals dye facility in Munnar, India, the Maiwa Symposium, Vancouver and in Australia.

Her publications uncover much of the mystery surrounding indigo and resist-dyed textiles. A new publication, *Stitched Shibori Techniques* is planned for 2015 and is expected to contribute new knowledge to the field, with innovations in stitching plans and previously undocumented formats for design.

Jane Callender has remained at the forefront of shibori in the UK. For over three decades she has demonstrated the relevance of these ancient processes in the context of contemporary textiles. Her experience of pattern cutting and tailoring, together with her understanding of traditional craft, continue to move her work forward, most recently into three-dimensions, trapping elements within her dyed layers. These intricate pieces emphasise making, structure and repetition, and resonate with energy and oscillating pattern. As Jane Callender explains; ‘Geometry has been holding it all together for many years and will continue to do so’, a description that is testament to her skill, integrity and resolve.

••• Linda Brassington