

# Questions & Answers

Just4Textiles talks to textiles designer Barley Massey



“My inspiration comes from hands-on experimentation and marrying waste materials... with traditional textile techniques”

**How did you get into Textiles?**

“From an early age I always enjoyed making things. Both my grandmothers passed on their knowledge of knitting, hand sewing and embroidery, and engaged me in the process of ‘make do and mend’. These skills have become invaluable to me both for earning a living and my mental wellbeing!”

**Where did you do your degree?**

“I trained at Goldsmith’s College, graduating in 1995 with a BA (Hons) in Textiles. I loved my time at Goldsmith’s – it opened my eyes to various possibilities and hands to the wide range of textile techniques available, enabling me to approach my practice in an intuitive yet conceptual manner, which has stayed with me.”

**So what have you been doing in the last 10 years?**

“For the next 10 years I worked on numerous textiles,

costumes and dressed actors for the film and TV industry, whilst planning and setting up my own textile design business and studio. In 2000 I opened my studio/gallery/shop called ‘Fabrications’ after renovating and refurbishing a disused shop on Broadway Market, East London. Since then my business has really grown in tandem with the changes in Broadway Market. In that time, alongside my own designs, I have also promoted and sold work by over 200 like-minded local designers and artists, and continue to do so.”

**How did you get into sustainable design?**

“Since starting my business in 2000, my focus has been in the arena of sustainable textiles. My particular interest is in the reuse and recycling of both business and post-consumer waste. Initially I chose this way of working for thrifty reasons; first, it gave me the opportunity to be really experimental and second, I had readily available ‘free’ materials to play with.

“Next came the challenge of transforming what someone else considers ‘waste’ into a functional and beautiful object that has value, and that a customer would want to buy or commission. The more I continued to work in this way, the more I started to realise how much

textile waste gets produced in the UK. This fuelled the challenge even more! As interest in my work grew, I also started to look upon the different waste streams as a creative and valuable resource.

“Reading books such as ‘Cradle to Cradle’ (William McDonough and Michael Braungart) inspired me to look at ways of creating a closed loop system within my own practice. I have found ways to reuse the small amount of waste that my own business creates through my educational work and recently launched ‘Rethink Rubbish’ craft kits, which have evolved from some of my workshops, including:

- Learn to knit a phone cover from old plastic bags
- Make your own recycled rosette
- Sustainable gift wrapping
- Weaving on a simple frame with reused materials

“A material can ‘speak’ to me and suggest which technique can be used!”

“All of the kits I produce contain reused materials and the instruction cards and packaging are also eco friendly.”

**Tell us about your recent work**

“In my most recent work, in particular my ‘Remember Me’ commissioning service, I am exploring the emotional attachments that materials and the finished pieces can have with the user, hopefully bringing a different level of ‘consumer contentment’ and ensuring a long life for objects. I have also created a labelling system, informing the user what the object is made from or used to be, and encouraging the user





Barley with her Forget-Me-Not cushion

to treasure the item and pass it on when they have finished.”

### Where does your inspiration come from?

“My inspiration comes from hands on experimentation and marrying waste materials, (bicycle inner tubes, yarns, old clothing, vintage furnishing fabrics) with traditional textile techniques (knitting, rope making and knotting, sewing, weaving) adding a contemporary twist and sprinkling of humour! Often my pieces reference where

the materials have come from or how they were used before. For example I produced a series of woven floor runners/wall hangings made from strips of bicycle inner tubes, wool and reflective thread, based on road markings.

“I gain a lot of inspiration from the people I come into contact with on a daily basis through ‘Fabrications’ and my educational work with all kinds of people of varied ages, backgrounds and cultural beliefs. I get a lot of feedback and I am

“I hope my work goes beyond decoration...and contributes to enriching people’s lives”

constantly observing, listening and learning how to approach things better. I have also been contacted by people for special commissions or projects which have triggered whole new strands to my practice. For instance My ‘Remember Me’ service has developed thanks to a lady who had seen my ‘Shirt + Tie’ cushions and asked if I would consider producing a series of cushions for family members from her deceased husband’s clothes. The commissioned pieces brought a great deal of comfort and joy to the recipients and I realised that I should offer this opportunity to others. Subsequently, I have been approached with very varied requests and items to work with. ‘Remember Me’ is promoted as three strands – ‘Forget-me-not’ (remembering lost loved ones), ‘School days’ (remembering the best days of your life!) and ‘Early years’ (remembering your children’s first moments) but I am open to other memories and life events.

“Ideas also develop as I have built relationships with local businesses and discovered better and reliable sources for reused materials, or seeing what materials there are in certain waste streams, which triggers new work and gives me the confidence to pursue certain ideas because I know I can source more of a certain material (it may vary in colour and texture but this adds to the ‘one-off’ batch produced).

“Once I have created sample pieces, ‘Fabrications’ becomes a

testing ground for new ideas and products. From time to time I have also launched products at trade fairs.”

**What is the importance of knowing how materials work?**

“Having an underlying knowledge or understanding of materials also feeds into my design practice. It is an informed intuitive knowledge gained through hands on experience of working directly with materials, discovering/exploiting their properties, mixing and matching, complementing and contrasting, exploring sentimental value, stories, and trusting that sometimes unlikely combinations can work! I continue to add to my material knowledge which started from an early age.

“As well as a keen understanding of materials, having knowledge of different textile techniques has also helped me. Goldsmith’s was a great starting block, here I was introduced to wide range of techniques, skills and equipment and very patient and supportive technicians.

“At Goldsmith’s, textile students were actively encouraged to work in a multi disciplinary, multi skilled way and I have continued with this attitude. I find that different techniques can lend themselves to certain materials. A material can ‘speak’ to me and suggest which technique should be used!

“That said I enjoy learning new techniques or revisiting an existing technique differently. Through ‘Fabrications’ and other creative networks such as ‘Hidden Art’ and ‘Re Design’, I have been given access to a creative community and I have been blessed in meeting fellow creatives that have passed on their skills and knowledge, and vice versa.

“From time to time I get the opportunity to conduct research

for commissions or specific projects, where I have discovered new techniques. For example, searching on the internet I found information about the Japanese art of ‘Furoshiki’ (a method of folding and wrapping paper), whilst I was researching ideas for different forms of sustainable gift wrapping. I developed ideas for a service I offered at Hidden Art’s last Christmas Design fair and subsequently included it in my ‘Rethink Rubbish’ range.”

**How do you reach your customers?**

“Having my own studio/shop and ‘Fabrications’ website has really helped. Although it has taken people a while to discover and venture into Hackney! Meeting and selling directly to your customer is very rewarding. This is particularly important with the ‘Remember Me’ service as the consultation is very integral to the process. In my shop I have also tried to create a personal shopping experience, sourcing local eco friendly products, gifts, cards and supplies to sit alongside my own designs, keeping displays fresh and changing, and giving opportunities to new local talent to showcase their work.

“I’m not sure how this would translate online but my website is a great marketing tool and certainly brings me into contact with new people and encourages people to visit me. I also sell through a few online eco shops such as ‘Eco Centric’, who sell my ‘Shirt + Tie’ cushions; they inform the customer on the site that they can specify a colour but the appearance will be different to the picture shown. I am toying with the idea of my own e-shop but this is a future development and market to explore.”

**Developing ideas**

“My practice is multi disciplinary, made up of a number of strands:

- Design and production of recycled textile home furnishings and gifts
- Bespoke commissions, one-offs, consultancy
- Shop keeper, display, merchandising, PR and marketing
- Education, workshops and personal development

“I have learnt to wear lots of different hats and embrace other business skills, which don’t come naturally to me in order to survive!

“I am a textile designer and maker, but I hope my work goes beyond decoration and is thought-provoking, opens up discussions, raises environmental and social awareness and contributes to enriching people’s lives in a low impact way.”

**Barley’s 5 top tips in considering using reused, repurposing old textiles:**  
 Keep the energy moving! Don’t hoard and hold onto things if you no longer use or need them – alter and redesign, breathe new life into them, go to a swap shop event or pass onto someone else who will use it.

Have faith! There is a magic to this way of working, the right materials seem to come along when you need them!

Develop your own sorting systems, maybe by colour, texture or fibre content, so you have a fantastic palette to work with.

Be experimental and inventive. See and realise the potential of this valuable resource!

Discover stories around the materials, it could be emotional or cultural attachments, pre-loved fabrics or vintage.

[www.fabrications1.co.uk](http://www.fabrications1.co.uk)