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AN INTERVIEW WITH PENNY LEAVER GREEN

Penny Leaver Green is an silk-based artist living in Bristol, UK. Here, she reflects on her Theatre Design background, the process to blend vintage and new silks, cultural connections with Japan, and the fragility and beauty of nature.

CG Having studied English, Drama, and Theatre Design, how did these experiences influence your approach to textile art?

PLG Language, literature and the theatre have had an enormous impact on my work. How we interpret the world around us and create stories to frame those interpretations are hopefully evident in the exploration of contemporary ideas in my work. The skills I learnt when training to be a theatre and costume designer in terms of composition, materials and innovative approaches to problem solving have been fundamental in allowing me to explore my practice.

CG Can you describe your process of working with vintage fabrics and silk, and how you decide on the elements to include in your pieces?

PLG I currently work almost exclusively in silk. The infinite variety in terms of colour and weight is inspirational and I particularly enjoy the fact that silk is not only one of the oldest known luxury fibres, but it is a global textile. However, the way in which it is processed allows it to have an individual identity; from the shiny, stiff quality of taffeta and *shantung*¹, to the smooth, silky liquid quality of satin and charmeuse. Depending on the weave and weight, some silks fray readily, for example *dupion*², and some fray very little. Found with Japanese kimono silk, this versatility allows me to employ a range of techniques to achieve diverse effects. Silk has become my 'paint'.

In addition to new silk, I collect vintage silk pieces to incorporate into my work. They embody an aesthetic a cultural history which informs the work made with





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them. In the past I have used vintage silk pieces as a starting point to explore an idea, though most recently I have been using the lining of kimonos to explore landscapes and our connection with the environment.

CG What led to your shift to work with silk, and how do you select and combine different materials in your work?

PLG My work has developed and changed over the years. I have always been interested in textiles and the associated elements including fastenings, threads and adornments. I enjoy the transference of our perception of these elements from the ordinary and practical usage in dressmaking to the aesthetic and metaphorical in pictures, for example, when working on a series of pieces which explored the fragility and engineering sophistication of the human spine, zips and buckles seemed a perfect representation in the work, and when I was given a mountain of buttons it inspired the series made entirely from buttons exploring the condition of button phobia.

In the past I also used stitch within my work- both hand and machine stitching, but I have more recently made pictures which dispense with this confine as I have been enjoying the freedom of collaging different colours and textures together. The technique allows me to create work which has an ambiguity of medium. It is not clear often that the work is made from fabric without close inspection; it could be mistaken for a water colour or an oil painting. However, I hope that I will continue to feel challenged by my medium and fully expect it to become something different in the future.

CG Could you elaborate on the places and your personal experiences that inspire your landscape pieces?

PLG The inspiration for the landscapes depicted comes from memory; places I have been, plants I have studied and walks I have made. I carry a camera with me when I travel to capture land and townscapes as a record for future reference. I prefer not to recreate these exact pictures, instead they serve as a mental note and prompt for a creative process. The resulting works are topographical memories of landscapes, influenced by mood and composition – reflecting an emotional response to the time of day and sense of place. My journey in Japan in 2024 incorporated many more rural locations than before which will provide enormous inspiration for developing work.

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For one series I made the pictures from clothes that I wore on the walks; an act which chimes with the Japanese colour combination work I have been making recently. I am exploring our place in nature, our responsibility to it and our future in it.

CG How has your appreciation for Japanese culture influenced your work, and what specific elements of Japanese tradition do you incorporate into your art?

PLG Over the past 15 years I have travelled to Japan a few times, most recently 2024, and I often return to my memories of the Japanese landscape and culture in my work. It is an amalgamation of aesthetic wonder at art and design, landscape gardening, food, architecture and fashion. It is an appreciation of the cultural priorities of respect, order, balance and harmony and a delight in the 'other', from the ergonomic and beautiful to the quirky and unexpected.

Over time I have made work which is an emotional response to Japan on a number of levels. The 2011 tsunami inspired a piece exhibited at the Royal West of England Art Academy in the same year the tsunami hit.

I also made a series of abstract postcard pieces based on colour combination memories of moments I have had on a variety of trips to Japan. All made from vintage kimono silk in 3D with colour dots and a stitched line identifying a place and moment. These moments can be taken from watching late night salary men cross the road in Akasaka, to staying at the hugely glamorous Benesse House hotel in Naoshima. As well as



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the numerous changing horizons viewed from the *shinkansen*, or the harrowing exhibits at the Peace museum in Hiroshima. Each picture is an attempt to distil that moment into a colour driven emotional response.

CG What influences your choice of colour combinations for your pieces?

PLG In 2020 I began to explore the seasonal kimono colour combinations traditionally worn at particular times of year and wanted to make a series of work utilising these colours through memories of landscapes. There is an apparent harmony in the concept of moving through an environment complementing the seasons with the colour of what you wear.

I was also interested in the way that these colours are not the same as what western aesthetics might draw from the seasons. It is an alternative colour palette that encourages us to look differently at the world around us. Alongside extensive internet research, I have worked from Sanzo Wada's iconic book of Japanese colour combinations to find a resonant seasonal palette.

CG Why do you consider silk to be the best medium for your subject matter? And, how do you source your materials?

PLG My works are made from vintage *bokashi hakkake* (the silk linings of kimonos) which, to me, have the quality of traditional wood block prints. For me these linings evoke landscapes: skies, seas, mists, and they have become the ground of the pictures for this series. The silks come from kimonos which have been worn and

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so in places have the marks of wear, an integral element of the work.

When I am travelling, I buy silk in shops and markets, quite often people will give me pieces they no longer have use for. I also scour second hand shops for silk clothes and scarfs to use in my work, and sometimes once started I may source something specific online. This cashe provides a starting point for a piece of work.

Hakakke are made in a variety of colours and can be seen at the extremities of kimonos. The *bokashi* (ombre dye) design was conceived to mask dirt when worn and the *hakkake* can be replaced to maintain the appearance of the kimono. When new they are sold in one piece of continuous silk, dyed in specific places in order that it can be cut accurately for any kimono.

While the *hakkake* I generally use have been taken from used kimonos, they can be bought in a huge variety of colours to work with the outer silk of the kimono. I collect them as I find them and have large store in my studio. Obviously, the size of the works is dictated by the shape of the dyed pieces and dimensions of *hakkake*.

The landscapes are then layered from silks of a variety of weights: organza, satin, crepe, etc and include some from vintage kimonos. Not necessarily evident at distance but close up they reveal the textures, fibres and worn history of the fabrics.

CG Could you discuss more about how you encourage viewers to engage with your work, in particular to contemplate their relationship with the environment? Could you share an example of a piece that connects your art to our relationship with nature.

PLG In the break between Lockdowns in November 2020, there was an opportunity for me to visit the wonderful Royal Botanical Gardens Edinburgh and I persuaded a generous gardener to give me a selection of redundant horticultural labels which had been consigned to a bucket as the plants had died. They were resonant of the depletion of our plant species and the necessity to remind ourselves of the importance to preserve the environment in which they can flourish.

I took my inspiration from the fabulous Mrs Delaney and her magnificent paper cut flowers, although mine were from silk, we used the same black ground. They are 'non' illustrations - in that they are a representation of the notion of a plant no longer with us. The particular plants that were identified by these particular labels no longer exist and so the resultant pictures are an impression, an imagined representation, perhaps similar to the drawings of the dodo made after it no longer existed and based on archived descriptions.



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In 1976 my father spent about 6 months helping to set up a medical school in Ife, in Nigeria. Times were different then and he collected butterflies which he brought back in Tupperware boxes between sheets of loo paper, and remained under his desk until the 1990s when I found them, then attempting to set and frame them.

While working on the ideas of transience, beauty and fragility, I realised just how resonant these butterflies are to these memorials to plants, and so decided to incorporate them into the image.

CG What are you working on at the moment, could you share more on your current series featuring various flora?

PLG The most recent work I have been focusing on is the result of my most recent trip to Japan. Inspired by a citizens' *ikebana* exhibition I went to at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Tokyo in March, these pictures seek to recreate the beauty *ikebana* displays from a visitor's perspective.

They are a memory of plants, compositions and displays. These are an emotional response to the structure, colour palette and unfamiliar combinations of flowers and foliage. The plants only exist in my memory and so are composites of those I saw rather than identifiable species.

Additionally, I loved the shadows in the displays, adding a dramatic element to the small enclosed installations. They became part of the piece, extending beyond the parameters of the boundaries of the piece in the same way that the shadows worked within the display booths.

The process of placing and moving the pieces in my pictures felt similar to arranging flowers and plants; finding balance and harmony in composition and colour. The work is on a silk kimono and silk dupion ground and I am using mid-century *ikebana* vase shapes as a starting point. I have also used traditional seasonal colour combinations as a starting point with each piece. The intention is that the display becomes the focal point and the vase becomes part of the background ie. the scaffolding.

In September I intend to pause and embark on a series of research and development trips to explore different ideas and techniques.

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CG What has been the most memorable exhibition or project in your career, specifically working with a community?

PLG A piece of work I was commissioned to make to raise awareness about organ donation was inspired by a trip made to Kyoto and Tokyo during the *sakura* (cherry blossom season).

The experience was extraordinary – nature and culture celebrating the beauty, fragility and transience of life. For me this conceit reflected perfectly the nature of the gift of life through organ donation, and so it became the aesthetic thread of the commission.

The process involved contacting recipients of organ donations and those whose family members had donated organs and using their words in a three-dimensional stitched piece. The process was an emotional one for everyone involved.

The final piece, entitled 'A Few Words' is a silk cherry blossom branch made from those words and sits outside the Intensive Care Department of Southmead Hospital.

¹Shantung is a type of silk plain weave fabric historically from the Chinese province of Shandong. It is similar to Dupioni, but is slightly thinner and less irregular.

²Dupion fabric is a type of silk fabric that is known for its distinct slubbed or uneven texture and sheen.



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