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AN INTERVIEW WITH ROSE VICKERS

Rose Vickers is a British artist based in Bristol, UK. Here, Rose delves into her chance discovery of vintage school rulers, the techniques she developed working with repurposed objects, and how she combines practicality with storytelling in her handmade craft.

CG Your early work mainly used found and collected materials. What inspired you to start incorporating vintage school rulers and yardsticks into your art, and how has this shift affected your creative process?

RV I was always the student at Art School rummaging through the bins for offcuts and unfinished projects to reappropriate or make into something else but starting to work with rulers was purely happenstance.

I found a bundle of 10 old school rulers in a junk shop and something about their dilapidation, their patina and the fact they'd been discarded really caught my interest. After buying them I left them on my studio shelf for a few months and occasionally I'd glimpse them and wonder what to do with them. In the way that the brain will sometimes solve your creative dilemmas if you leave it to its own devices I was lying in bed one evening in that liminal space between waking and sleeping and, as unlikely as it sounds, I had the fully formed idea of a quilt sized piece of work entirely constructed from rulers. Maybe at another time I might have dismissed the idea as an outlandish notion but the next day I was in the studio working out how to pursue it. I could talk at length now about rulers, yardsticks and how and why I collect them and put them together but at that point it was just a kernel of an idea which I chose to explore.





AN INTERVIEW WITH ROSE VICKERS

In terms of shifting my creative process, I think that there is a definite framework when you're working with only what you can find, and there is a particular rigour in the limitation in working with one specific material which I really enjoy. In the case of rulers and yardsticks you're considering how to achieve a uniformity of size for instance, or working out how to deal with the fact that your palette is limited, you might be dealing with printed text or marks of use that you want to emphasise or celebrate, and all the while you're attempting to make the incoherent become something harmonious to the eye without obscuring the origins of your materials. Working in this way has slowed me down a lot I think, but I'm still always trying to find that balance between process and creativity.

CG Have you faced any challenges shifting to this medium and technique?

RV It might be surprising to know that I've never considered myself to be a particularly accurate or mathematical type of person. In fact I seem to remember one of my maths teachers at school remarking that I was unable to draw a straight line. I suppose that my intellectual understanding of geometry has increased massively since then, and I've been fortunate enough to collaborate with professional mathematicians on a couple of projects which has helped enormously. Though, I've also discovered that you can learn a lot through the actual process of doing something, of putting something together and working out the shapes and tessellations involved in a practical way.

I did do a lot of woodworking as part of my degree so I had a grasp of the of the physical skills necessary for the construction of my pieces, but I've found that over time I've devised my own techniques, systems and methods of working - designing jigs or specific clamps for instance to ensure accuracy and uniformity. I believe most artists have a version of this, I think I see it as a kind of knowledge only available to you through experience.

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CG Can you describe your step-by-step process for creating a piece?

RV I'll select the materials I think I might need and cut them to the appropriate size, assembling and sorting by colour and tone as I go, rather like assembling a palette of colours and shapes which I can draw on as the work comes together. I rarely cut all of the components at this stage, just enough to get me started.

I might have made a small maquette before I start on a bigger piece just to check how a certain tessellation might work, but I often don't have a finished design in mind before I start so I'll place my pieces one by one on the marine ply board and make creative decisions as I go. This often involves moving the elements around multiple times, cutting additional segments, swapping, adding and removing sections until I feel happy with what I've got. It's not unusual for me to go through many iterations before the final piece emerges. I'll take multiple photos throughout to help me stand back and scrutinise what's working and to get a sense of the overall layout.

At this stage I will spend some time straightening everything up and making sure all the pieces fit together well before moving on to the glueing part of the process. I'll lift



AN INTERVIEW WITH ROSE VICKERS

each piece individually and apply adhesive before carefully replacing it. It's a procedure which requires me to be both quick and accurate whilst maintaining really good attention to detail throughout so I always make sure I have minimal distractions whilst I'm doing it. I'll apply a scrap of tape to each piece I've glued as I go otherwise it's very easy to lose track.

Finally, I'll carefully trim the edges then buff and polish the whole piece before sending it to be framed.

I'm sure this may seem a very long and laborious process to some but it's important to say that I enjoy the physical process of making just as much as the more creative parts of my work - it's all part of the whole to me.

CG How do you find and then select the combination of rulers and yardsticks for your pieces such as the difference between 'Wedding Ring' and 'Anyone's Flower Garden'?

RV The question about how I find the materials I use is probably the one I'm asked most frequently - essentially I'm always on the lookout. I'll rummage through tangles of spanners in the bottom of toolboxes at car-boot sales, I search in junk stores, scan shelves of bric- a -brac in charity shops,

CUBE GALLERY

scroll through online listings, phone up school stationery suppliers, message enthusiasts, pursue relationships with collectors both near and far and sometimes generous people who know what I do will get in touch and offer to send me something they've found or owned themselves. It's an ongoing and time consuming pursuit which I see as being integral to the whole process.

Over time I've built up an extensive collection which are bundled and stacked in the studio-it's really important to me to have a broad range to choose from. Particular selections of colours and prints will often inspire and dictate the design and feel of what I make. For instance, in the case of Anyone's Flower Garden I'd been collecting specific black folding rulers made by Rabone as well as a broad range of colourful advertising yardsticks for a couple of years until I had enough to incorporate into a larger work. Using the colourfulness in contrast with the black details led to something which is to an extent more decorative than my usual work and probably only possible with that selection of materials.

For something like Wedding Ring I think I had gathered together a bundle of old American yardsticks, and I wanted to celebrate their more graphic qualities by paring back the overall design to something more structural so that the text and print had a chance to emerge.

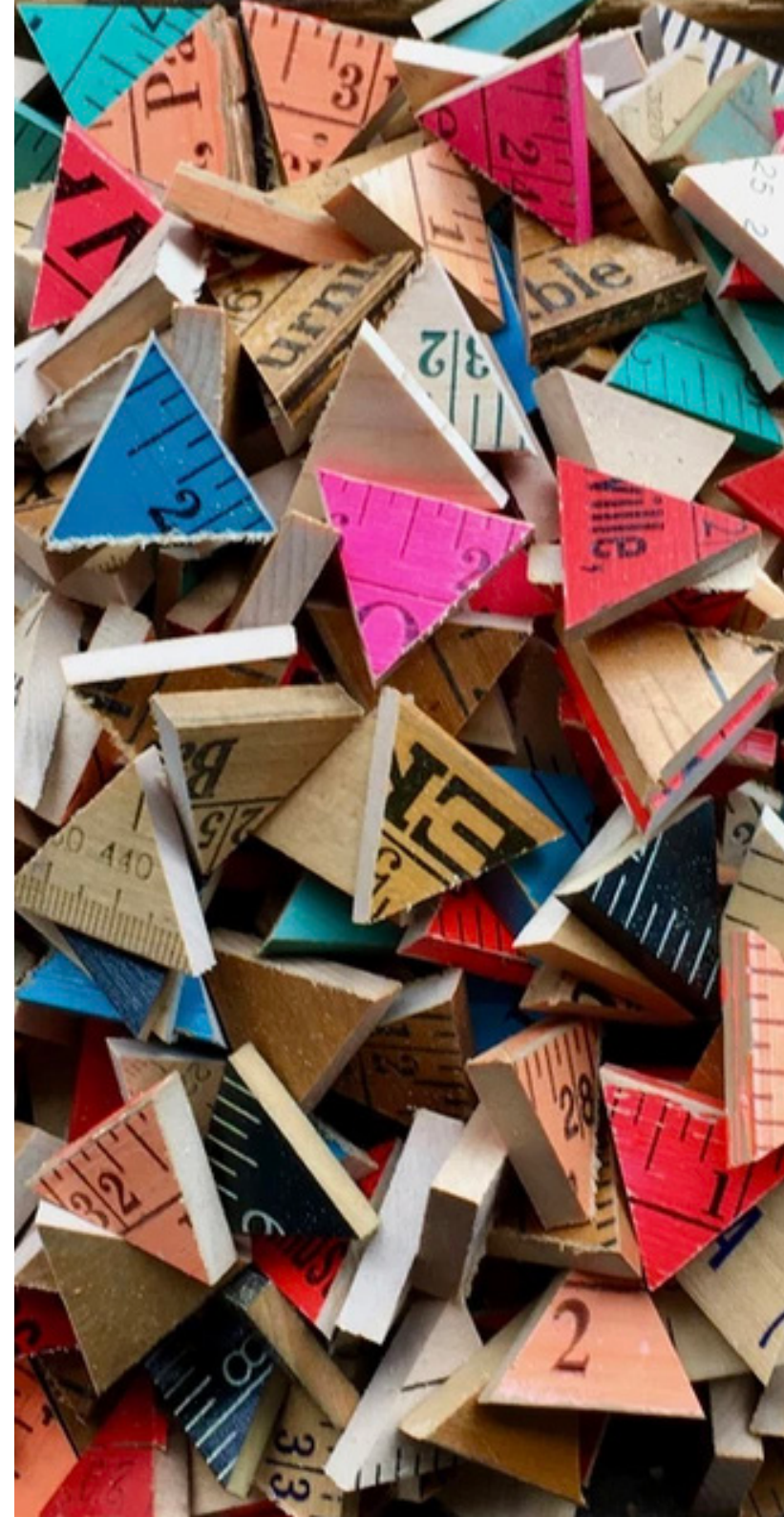
CG Is up-cycling an important part of your work?

RV I've probably always used what I could find when I've been making things, from sewing tiny toys out of scraps of fabric as a child to disassembling sheds and taking apart wooden cubicles to make into other things at Art School. However, I think I find the term 'up-cycling' really difficult - there's something in there which indicates an obscuring of the original material to me - so, I think I prefer to think in terms of reusing or reappropriating.

Whatever the term though, am I interested in finding materials that have had another life and responding to them? Well yes, that's the essence of what I do.

CG Your work often evokes the tradition of patchwork quilts. How does this influence your creative process, especially regarding the narrative qualities?

RV Quilt blocks are sometimes a starting place for the pieces I make, and obviously those patterns have a narrative that threads back through time via all of those who have, and continue



CUBE GALLERY

to employ them in what they make. I'm aware that there is a long line of amateur (and professional) geometers in this field using both their scraps and ingenuity to create their work, and I always enjoy and feel an affinity for the juxtaposition of the (perceived) domestic rubbing up against the scientific and mathematic. In brief, if I am part of that tradition of making something out of other things, that's something I'm at home with.

Now and then I might further reference a specific block or design in the title of a piece like Wedding Ring for example, which is very loosely based on a quilt design of the same name, traditionally made to celebrate a marriage. In my mind I intended this piece to represent a kind of interlinking or overlapping of bonds, but I'm aware others may perceive something more structural or architectural and I would tend to steer away from being too prescriptive as to what others might see-just as I am adding my own adaptation and meaning to a pattern I think a viewer will always respond by accessing their own experiences and powers of interpretation

CG Your work celebrates the practicality of simple tools as well as having a strong handmade aesthetic. Do these aspects reflect your views on art and its connection to everyday life?

RV To answer the first part of that question I think I just like useful things; I find that the commonplace can be incredibly relatable and evocative. In terms of school rulers for instance, I especially like the marks and patination they acquire over time - years of being held by small fingers underlining titles and measuring things in maths lessons. And, I've come to realise that most people, of a certain age at least, have the experience of the physical sensation of holding a ruler in their hand and a memory of using one; it's very equalising.

Handmade aesthetic is a really interesting term, I worry that it's been hijacked a bit to sell us things, but in its truest (non commodified) sense,

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROSE VICKERS

I take it to mean something which has been made in which it is possible to see and appreciate the hand of the maker and all the idiosyncrasies of that process which it might reveal. I often think that when it works, then we can sort of feel our way into the mind of the maker whether the object in question is a painting, or a chair, or a quilt. In the simplest of terms, I think that people just want to live with things that make them feel a sense of connection, whether it be with the materials or with the maker.

I remember that as I left Art School one of my tutors explaining to me that I would have a difficult time because they thought my work fell between the Fine Art and Applied Arts camps - I don't think I really took it to heart but I knew what they meant. In the last decade it seems like there has been a resurgence in the appreciation of craft in Art, as well as an increasing recognition for the so called self taught (I'm thinking of the Gee's Bend Quilters here and the celebration of Folk Artists, particularly in the United States). Have those boundaries between (the inappropriately named) High and Low Art dissolved a bit so that there is a place for those of us who are in the middle? I think so, I hope so.



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