



Shiny, happy people

ANN CARRINGTON, GERALDINE LARKIN AND DONYA COWARD

Tiny and shiny: sequins and beads are just the sorts of thing to take heart in during an economic downturn. They continue to sparkle in a world where everything else is dull and they are making an appearance, not just on the catwalk, but also in the interiors of our homes. Geraldine Larkin, Ann Carrington and Donya Coward all work with the sparkly and the small, but the outcome couldn't be more different.

When Geraldine Larkin launched her company Seoidra in 1991, her passion for hand-embroidery was directed to the fashion industry. She studied fashion at Central Saint Martins and sequins and beads make a more familiar appearance on our **clothing than in the spaces we inhabit.**

But Larkin describes her work for interiors as "a natural progression". While fashion may seem like the place where anything goes, Larkin reminds me that garments have weight and washing requirements that often rule out heavily embellished work.

Caroline Shamash of Saffron Interiors, who now handles Larkin's interiors work, first encouraged her to explore interiors as a further outlet for her ornate surface decoration. The match may sound like a curious one at first but when reflective materials are stitched onto large wall panels, their surfaces can carry and reflect light much like a mirror or glass. Which all makes sense as it is often mirror and glass beads and sequins that Larkin painstakingly stitches.



In many ways they provide a less restrictive outlet for Larkin's ornate designs. Larkin's ornate designs.

Larkin's style embraces the intricate nature of embroidery. No project seems too large, or pattern too detailed. She refers to embroidery as making the "invisible visible" and her broad vocabulary of hand techniques celebrates details that others might attempt to conceal. Threads securing sequins become another layer to the decorative pattern in their own right. "I am constantly researching, particularly craft and traditional techniques," she explains.

Travel, particularly to India and China, provides rich sources of inspiration. Her most recent work continues to draw inspiration from the structure of embroidery, which has led her to the work of the pointillist painters.

A new collection of cushions that use

thread work with sequins and fabric florets that act like lacquered lace in chiffon are now in the making.

"Materials are there to tell a story," asserts Ann Carrington. But that doesn't mean they need to have experienced a lifetime of use. "Straight off the peg, factory-made objects from China," she explains, can hold just as much interest as "knives, forks and domestic objects." Carrington should know. Her large-scale two and three-dimensional creations magically mix the familiar, such as buttons and beads, to create to create surfaces with unexpected punch.

In 1994 Carrington won a Commonwealth Fellowship to study and travel in southern Africa.



There she saw embroidery work in Zulu land and noticed their use of embroidery needles, which were often left intact as part of the design. The trip taught her that the region's creative output was much more sophisticated and advanced than she had anticipated. African children recycle "objects adults would overlook" she explains. Something like a safety pin is treated as as "rare and beautiful". As a result, what we might consider to be the tools of textile production become integral decorative elements of the design.

Collecting is far from a new pastime for Carrington, who "always collected, kept sketchbooks and collaged visual diaries." Sculpture is an extension of this process of accumulation. A firm believer in lateral thinking and an "awareness of everything in the world", her work celebrates materials others see as mundane. Street culture and outsider art all rate high on her radar.

While the individual components of her work could fit into the palm of your hand, the buttons, pins and needles that make up each large-scale piece are big on impact. Scale change is crucial to these creations, Haberdash Clash is based on the face of a coin.

Where etched lines in metal once appeared, Carrington has used clusters of safety pins. The Peary Queen series refers to another tiny object of domestic use, the postage stamp. But here each individual single ink dot has been translated into a pearl button. Carrington teases out even more of the story, explaining that in the 1880s a shipment of Japanese buttons spilled into the Thames River. The Peary Kings and Queens were in fact itinerant traders who salvaged the spilled shipment and adorned themselves with buttons, signalling their role in the community as the forerunners of trade union leaders.

Carrington's considerable success has taken a route as fiercely independent as her approach to materials. After early success in the gallery scene, she came to realize that she "did not need to sit around waiting for approval to make my art." Until recently her work sold by word-of-mouth. "I don't like the pressure," she explains of conventional gallery relationships.



The approach seems to have done no harm to her career, which began with Paul Smith's purchase of several works from her Royal College exhibition in 1987. A number of high profile collaborations have followed, including work with companies such as Levis Strauss, Clarks and Lulu Guinness as well as work for a new boutique hotel that opens in New York City next Easter.

Do these high profile commissions come with their own compromises and pressures? "Commissions really stretch you," she explains.

explains of the benefits of working this way. While buttons and beads are far from the only materials to grace her visual vocabulary, these new projects continue to be created as she has always worked, very much on her own terms.

"Veggie taxidermy" is the name Donya Coward has coined for her range of

richly decorated

animal heads launched in 2007.

She admits her current success was "born out of boredom. It has

escalated to something I enjoy and now don't know what I would

do without it!" First inspired to simply "use up some materials"

that were hanging about, Coward began making brooches out of

scraps as an independent project while studying at Nottingham

Trent University. "Initially I quickly put things together with a glue gun and loads of beads."

A children's story followed, which she wrote and then illustrated

using fifties style drawings and fabric faces. Coward admits that

as a fashion/knitwear student it took time for her to realize her

new style of work had a receptive audience waiting. "My degree

tutor encouraged me to continue making brooches out of scraps,"

she explains. "It was only then that I realised they were desirable."

Today Coward continues to stick to her "original ethos to use what I have",

although she "buys certain materials to create the right personality." Creating

new creatures has also become Coward's "excuse to wander and shop!"

Shopping online for things like seed beads and even scouring skips for

thread, ribbons and wool usually sates her appetite for materials.

Jessica Hemmings