

CRAFTS

**NATHALIE ASSI ON
CULTIVATING TALENT**

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PATHS LESS TRODDEN

A background in craft doesn't mean you are restricted to a career creating objects for galleries or brands. *Debika Ray* speaks to nine makers who have forged alternative routes

NATSAI AUDREY CHIEZA

Designer, studio founder and speaker

'We refer to ourselves as edge-dwellers because we tinker at the edge,' says Natsai Audrey Chieza, founder of Faber Futures, a studio that works on the cusp of design and biology. 'No-one is really looking so they give us permission.' She started out in a much more conventional field, studying architecture in Edinburgh, before completing an MA in Materials Futures at Central St Martins, where she speculated on the far-reaching implications of synthetic biology.

Since graduating, she has collaborated with scientists to consider what these developments might mean in the context of today's consumer market; for example, how bacteria can produce pigments to dye textiles. She is conscious that she is something of an outlier in both the worlds of science and arts. 'Even though I now run my own company, I often wonder if I'm employable as most design companies don't know what to do with me,' she says. 'Everything we do, we create space for ourselves – in many ways we're forging our own territory, but we try to do it in a respectful, responsible way so others can follow.'

Building relationships has been a large part of this – to persuade those working in the sciences of the value of her practice. And over time, she feels this kind of work is gaining traction. 'There's a critical mass of people who understand there is space for co-creation, rather than being siloed into different disciplines.'

What advice would she give to others trying to forge a similarly pioneering path? 'Patience – and to keep going. It's been difficult to get heard and demonstrate that the work that you do is meaningful and can contribute to a wider pool of knowledge. But people are starting to adopt our thinking because we stuck at it.'



Above: *Project Coelicolor: Scale, Void, Assemblages*, 2017, Faber Futures x Gingko Bioworks.
Right: *Colour Coded*, 2018, Faber Futures x Gingko Bioworks. A pigment specimen extracted from *Streptomyces coelicolor* that contains a DNA-encrypted label of the project's meta data





CHIEZA: IMMATTERS STUDIO | BOOK: PHOTO THOMAS DANK, COURTESY KELLENBERGER-WHITE | PIGGOTT: COURTESY BENTLEY

THAT CONTINUOUS THING:
ARTISTS AND
THE CERAMICS
STUDIO * 1920
- TODAY BY
SARA MATSON
+ SAM THORNE

Right: *That Continuous Thing: Artists and the Ceramics Studio*, 2016, designed by Kellenberger-White, published by Tate. Above, far right: Lewis Piggott sanding a wood veneer car dash



SEBASTIAN WHITE

Graphic designer

With co-founder Eva Kellenberger, Sebastian White runs graphic design studio Kellenberger-White, which employs five designers. Its work is varied, ranging from developing brand identities, and designing publications, books, exhibitions, wayfinding and digital platforms to collaborating with artists, curators, architects, photographers and cultural institutions.

It was partly his interest in graphic design – developed during his foundation course – that originally led him to do a BA in Textile Design. ‘During our first term, we studied colour exclusively and how to develop surface design through observations in drawing and collage,’ he says. Reading widely during the course allowed him to explore his interest in graphic design, as well as the texture and quality of printed products themselves. ‘Not only reading books, but looking and holding them has been a really important way of learning how things are made.’

After his undergraduate degree, he applied to do an MA in Communication Art & Design at the Royal College of Art – at the time, he says, the only graphic design course in Europe that took on students from other disciplines. The work Kellenberger-White produces continues to have making at its heart – a lot of its designs have a tactile, hand-made quality that reflects White’s interest in craft.

‘The working environment is still very studio-based – we have a large open space with the usual desks, computers, a book-making area, a library and our archive of materials, paper and previous projects,’ he says. ‘We recently met up with an old tutor who called our practice “work-in-progress”, meaning that nothing is final – ideas, methods and process continually feed into each other.’

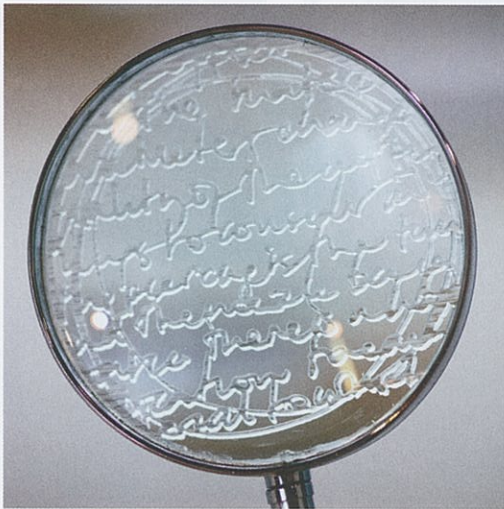
LEWIS PIGGOTT

Apprentice at a car manufacturer

‘I’ve learned many hand and craft skills, including matching and cutting veneer, sanding, the lacquer process and polishing,’ says Lewis Piggott, an apprentice in the wood workshop at Bentley Motors. ‘Apprenticeships offer a valuable way to learn, work and get paid at the same time, while also being in a position to go straight into a job where you already know what’s required.’

Piggott’s route in was through woodwork – an interest sparked during his GCSE in resistant materials, which involved planning, researching, producing and evaluating a cabinet. But he points out that automotive manufacturers offer a wealth of opportunities to deploy craft skills: at Bentley, for example, apprentices can also train in leatherwork, painting the body of cars and in mechatronics, which is the final assembly.

Entering into an apprenticeship rather than pursuing higher education does not mean he has sacrificed the opportunity to gain qualifications. The apprenticeship itself is an NVQ level 3 in automotive engineering, and Piggott has studied for certification in manufacturing engineering, among others, on the side. As well as working on the cars themselves, he has represented the brand at customer events around Europe, demonstrating the wood shop’s processes to fans of the brand. ‘I have also joined the launch team, which works on the Bentleys of the future – a fascinating team to be a part of.’



CUTLER: PHOTO SIMON BRUNTNELL | HARTLEY: PHOTO CHRIS PROCTOR

VANESSA CUTLER

Glass artist and engineering consultant

Vanessa Cutler trained in the art of stained glass, but her career took a turn towards the technical when she did a PhD in Sunderland investigating the use of industrialised CNC for creative practice. Since then, she has advised several businesses on how glass-cutting technology can be applied.

Crucial to entering into this world was building a network of contacts through attending conferences and industry events. 'I found common ground with engineers and over time made good links in the waterjet industry, giving papers and classes on working with delicate materials and the foibles of the machine from a more hands-on, less engineering, perspective,' she says.

Clients so far have included companies operating in the US aerospace industry, as well as British waterjet cutting machine-maker Omax, for which she has tested out machines and software and trained customers, as well as encouraging the company to cater more to makers and artistic studios, in addition to its core market of engineers. She advises creative practitioners looking to work in an industrial context to learn to see things from a business's points of view. 'Artists don't always go in understanding their language, but it's about seeing what they need, not just what you can get out of a collaboration.'

Nonetheless, her work with industry has helped develop her own skills as an artist. 'Working with such technology enables me to explore new developments and stay inquisitive.'

Above left: part of Vanessa Cutler's 'Scrutiny' project, which investigates how machines might replicate handwriting. Above: Caren Hartley in her workshop, and below, her Austins Ex Machina bike

CAREN HARTLEY

Founder of a bespoke bicycle company

'It was a love of making and working with metal that inspired me to follow this path,' says Caren Hartley, founder of Hartley Cycles, which makes bespoke and production bicycle frames and complete bikes. (In 2017 Hartley was shortlisted for the Woman's Hour Craft Prize.)

She studied 3D Design Metalwork and Jewellery at the Surrey Institute of Art, before doing a residency at the Bishopsland Educational Trust, and then enrolling on an MA in Goldsmithing, Silversmithing, Metalwork and Jewellery at the Royal College of Art.

Her work today continues to draw on those craft skills, but running her own business has its own demands. 'I've often had to do things that I don't enjoy or find uncomfortable, such as being photographed for press articles, which is an integral part of promoting my company,' she says. 'Balancing money and time is also a constant challenge as earnings are never high for the hours that go into the work you do.'

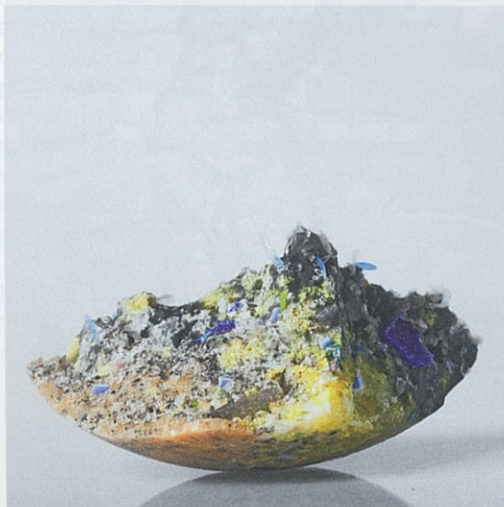
In other ways, her career resembles those of more traditional craftspeople. 'You will work hard and are unlikely to earn a high salary,' she says. 'You also need to develop a good level of resilience as competition is high.'

Her advice to others following a similar path to her is to expect setbacks, but know that the pay-off is a varied and rewarding career. 'Try to take every opportunity you are given, as seemingly irrelevant ones can lead to better, more connected ones and are a really good way to meet people. Try to be objective if something doesn't go to plan, and think if there is something you can change or improve for next time. Most of these downsides also mean it can be really interesting. You have a high level of autonomy over what you do and you will never stop learning.'





Above: Yesenia Thibault-Picazo's *Cumbria Bone Marble*, her concept for a rock derived from the millions of cattle buried after the foot-and-mouth outbreak in 2001, and below: *Mediterranean Plastic Sediment*, part of her 2013 'Craft in the Anthropocene' project. Above, right: cushions by Isabel Fletcher for Squire & Partner



THIBAUT-PICAZO: © THE ARTIST | FLETCHER, COURTESY SQUIRE & PARTNERS

YESENIA THIBAUT-PICAZO

Researcher, designer and art director

Yesenia Thibault-Picazo describes herself as a 'Material Teller': she uses materials to create works of fiction and speculation – installations, exhibitions, artwork and films – that explore ecological concerns. She started out training as a textile designer at the Duperré School of Applied Arts in Paris, but quickly became restless. 'I was unfulfilled with the how and why we were making. I needed to question the bigger picture: what was my purpose as a designer at a time when we urgently need to re-evaluate how we make things?'

She went on to do an MA in Material Futures at Central Saint Martins in London, where she sharpened her research and critical-thinking skills. 'It really opened my eyes to the power of design as a catalyst for societal change,' she says. While her training in craft gave her an understanding of aesthetics and process, her studies did not prepare her for the realities of running a business. 'I sought precious advice – and still do – from experts and fellow designers and artists,' she says.

Working closely with specialists in subjects such as geology and anthropology also proved to be a challenge. 'Being confronted with academic language could at first be intimidating, but I always remembered to acknowledge and respect that I had my own set of skills and language that was as valuable,' she says. A combination of resilience and collaboration, she believes, is the key to success. 'Don't hesitate to put yourself in places and contexts, even if you believe you are not welcomed or you feel uncomfortable. There is not only one way to be an artist or a designer, but an infinity of approaches.'

ISABEL FLETCHER

Textile designer at an architecture studio

The role of in-house textile designer at architecture practice Squire & Partners was created for Isabel Fletcher after she held a fashion exhibition at its offices during London Design Festival, and secured a commission to create a rug and other items for the space. 'They realised they could have someone like me on a permanent basis,' says the designer, who did an art foundation course at Kingston and a degree in fashion design at Leeds University.

During the latter, she did a six-month internship in pattern-cutting at fashion brand Roksanda, where she learned practical skills, as well as gaining experience of working within a business. Today, she is based at the architect's model-making workshop three days a week, working on a range of internal and external projects. For the practice, she has made everything from rugs and cushions to bespoke smocks for her co-workers and fabric-bound folders to present materials to clients. 'I'm the general hands-on person in the office, applying my maker brain to lots of different types of work,' she says.

The firm also draws on her skills for its architectural projects – for example, if a client wants a material or textile element in a project, Fletcher advises them or finds an expert. As the only person in her role, good planning and organisational skills have been invaluable, and she's doing a business enterprise programme with The Prince's Trust to expand her knowledge.

Her world expanded beyond fashion, she says, because she didn't limit her thinking. 'Don't feel you have to fit into a box. I make clothing and hold exhibitions, but I also do rugs, boxes, folders. All these things have a common thread and distinctive style.'



AMY CONGDON

Biological designer

'It's such a shame to tell students from a young age that you are either creative or scientific, and that somehow the two are mutually exclusive, which is not the case at all,' says Amy Congdon.

She combines both skills in her role as associate director of materials design at Modern Meadow, a New York-based start-up that designs yeast cells to grow animal-free collagen for sustainable materials. She also runs her own practice, which works with tissue engineers to deploy textile craft techniques for both future materials and regenerative medicine.

Her career has certainly not been linear: she trained in and worked with traditional textile techniques for 10 years, as well as doing residencies in scientific laboratories to develop her skills in tissue engineering. It was during one of these that she learned to seed cells onto embroidered and crocheted scaffolds, eventually going on to develop her own PhD project in tissue-engineered textiles.

'The main guiding principle I've always used when making decisions about my career path is to follow what fascinates me,' she says. Working with a variety of companies and in various contexts has been invaluable, but ultimately craft has remained crucial to her work. 'I cannot stress enough the importance of learning hands-on skills. I am not a scientist, and I don't need to be as we have so many talented ones at the company already. What I bring to the table is my textile knowledge and way of approaching problems that creates a truly diverse work environment.'



Top left: tissue-engineered textile tools by Amy Congdon. Top: *NunoZoku* exhibition at Ruthin Craft Centre, 2017, curated by Gregory Parsons, and above: *Tulip Futures* by Neil Wilkin which appeared on Ruthin's stand at Collect 2019, also curated by Parsons

GREGORY PARSONS

Curator and retail consultant

Gregory Parsons is preparing to take on a new part-time role within the curatorial team at the Goldsmiths' Company, having worked for the past decade as a freelance curator, design and exhibition consultant, as well as mentoring makers and working with arts institutions.

He studied textile design and worked as a designer and maker for several years, including at brands such as Burberry, before starting to work with the Ruthin Craft Centre in Wales, where he had previously done a residency, to set up its retail gallery and curate its exhibitions. Since then, he has worked with institutions such as the Design & Crafts Council of Ireland, Pitzhanger Manor Gallery, as well as continuing to advise commercial brands.

'This portfolio career that I have developed has been based around my initial textile training and the experiences I have had along the way,' Parsons says. As he works increasingly with craftspeople in all genres, his understanding of different making methods and materials is developing, which in turn informs his own creative practice as a maker. It has also led him to become an external assessor on BA degree courses in textiles, ceramics and jewellery. 'It's really a very fulfilling occupation – there are always new people to meet and things to learn in varying areas and disciplines.'

For those who feel they lack the diversity of experience to follow a similar path, he advises thinking carefully about the transferable skills you pick up as a maker. 'You will more than likely realise you have more experience to draw from than you first thought. If you feel there is something missing, then look for people to talk to who can help.'