

A PLACE TO WORK, THE ARTIST GEORGIE HOPTON

NICOLA TYSON, UPSTATE DIARY, APRIL 26, 2019



Georgie Hopton in her studio in upstate New York. Photo by Kate Orne

I first met Georgie Hopton in the mid '80s at Central/St Martins School of Art, then situated on the edge of Soho in London's West End. Fresh from the provinces, namely Yorkshire, she stood out — to my cocky Londoner's eye — as an individual with a sophisticated creative identity, evidenced by her clothes, attitude, and then by her work. We were both there to study painting, but she soon abandoned tubes of oil paint in favor of working with found stuff — crazy fabrics, fun fur, novelty wrapping papers and trims sourced from the stores and street markets nearby, making curious collages and intriguing three-dimensional wall pieces, and clever and hilarious Super 8 movies starring herself.

We graduated in '89, and I moved to New York, so we saw each other only occasionally. Meanwhile, the YBA (Young British Artists) scene — instigated by Damien Hirst and fellow Goldsmiths students — was making London the epicenter of the international art world. Georgie married YBA luminary and painter Gary Hume, and while stateside for a big exhibition of his work, they visited me upstate at my renovated old farmhouse, in New Paltz, to which I'd recently decamped from Manhattan. They fell in love with the area and within months they had purchased their own farm fixer-upper — a one-time chicken farm in Accord, NY.

The property is nestled in a secluded dell, surrounded by dense mixed woodland of hickory, tulip, maple, white pine, sassafras and oaks. A handful of agreeable farm buildings occupies the clearing, including a hand-hewn nineteenth-century barn, two fieldstone chicken coops (one converted into a sauna), wooden coops — one kitted-out for rendering maple syrup from sap collected from their Sugar Maples in late winter — and outbuildings converted into studios. Then there is the house itself, much enlarged now, which incorporates the original little nineteenth-century farmhouse. They also excavated two large ponds; one for critters and one kept

clean of weed for swimming. Gary even erected a winding boardwalk through some particularly enchanting marshy woodland, the better to enjoy its mossy ambience. In high summer, the variety of croaking frogs can be quite deafening.

Their London home is a Georgian townhouse in Bloomsbury, a few doors from the Charles Dickens Museum. The area is celebrated for the eccentric Bloomsbury Group, a coterie of artists and writers, notably Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry and Virginia Woolf. It's also where painters Vanessa and Clive Bell formed the arts collective, Omega Workshops, which produced textiles, ceramics, furniture and entire interior design schemes. In October 2017, Gary and Georgie's remarkable home graced the cover of *World of Interiors* and the piece focused on Hopton's own bold vegetable print designs for upholstery, curtains and wallpaper and her unlikely multi-yarn rugs, hand-woven in India, and based on her singular collages.

NT Some might think it odd that your country home is some 3,500 miles away in America. How do you explain that?

GH It was firstly finance — prices in the England were prohibitive. We both needed studios, which meant a house and outbuildings, or a very big house (we fantasized about a wing each!) so we could both work. It was strange, we were driving to visit someone out of town, talking about where we might go and we both said 'America!' at the same time. We decided it would be an adventure; that it would feel as though we were joining a culture of creative pioneers (Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell, Ellsworth Kelly etc.) who'd escaped to the country. We agreed that buying a house in the English countryside would feel like retiring in comparison.

NT I moved here not to become American but to get a distance on the UK and the Old World. Do you feel freer when you come here? In what ways is this an escape for you both?

GH Shaking off the shackles of the intense social life that is the London art scene is instantly freeing and — yes — stepping out of your own culture into another, for any length of time, gives you a fresh perspective. What interested us more, however, was just gaining time with our work, each other and nature. But the desire to escape was tantamount, without a doubt, and I suppose that pioneering spirit I just mentioned meant that on some level we did feel as though we were leaving the Old World for the New.

NT What does home mean to you?

GH A place to work and cook. It still surprises me that as soon as I open either of my studio doors (here or in London), I metaphorically breathe out. It is as though the air in them is particular to me; that it provides the optimum conditions for me to flourish.

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Both my studios have fridges. There are always signs that I've just eaten something. I can't work without the prospect of food — and because I don't like to interrupt the flow of work, I prefer not to leave the studio to eat. When I've a deadline, I very often don't eat at home for weeks and when I get to the house I feel sad, because cooking and eating in a house are such important factors in making it a home.

NT You've had your house here since 2001. What are your fondest memories of those early years — what were your ambitions and obsessions, what did you look forward to doing when you arrived from London?

GH Our priorities were a kitchen you wanted to cook and sit in and working studios for us both. This involved a lot of extra windows! Back then, the house was wooden and painted white and looked like a typical American farmhouse — which we loved. We quickly bought ourselves dungarees to recreate the American Gothic painting, by Grant Wood, in front of it. Oh dear! We adored discovering yard and barn sales and were always out rummaging, reveling in the difference between American cast-offs and English — and laughing at the use of the word 'antique' for something no more than 30 years old. I collected a chicken coop full of broken chairs, fondly referred to as the chair hospital, which became a funeral home as the years passed and the chairs remained unfixed, useless. I wanted to know every edible plant, the name of every tree and to recognize all the birds by their song. I collected milk glass. I imagined I'd bake something wild and wonderful every day, rear an abandoned fawn and learn the names of all the stars... I could go on!

NT Gary's old studio — formerly the slaughterhouse — is now yours as he's built himself a gigantic new one. What's changed for you now that you have this extra space?

GH It feels so luxurious that I don't have to tidy up after myself constantly. I can work on many things at once, scatter things in progress on the floor and not have to make gymnastic leaps trying not to step on them! I can see how the different series I'm working on relate to each other — or not. I can see how all of it relates to the view — something which thrills me.

NT In Bloomsbury you have a lovely walled garden, but at the time you bought this farm you were living in a gardenless wedge-shaped building — originally a pub — in relatively treeless Hoxton, East London. Did you discover your love of gardening — vegetables particularly — on your trips here or was it something you'd always longed to do?

GH I'd only experienced gardening in the form of pots, but knew I loved nature — it's impossible not to admire the magnificence of London plane trees, and an English hedgerow in spring makes me cry. As soon as we came here I got my hands dirty — and kept them that way for a very long time because it was such an addictive pleasure. Growing vegetables was a particular revelation — there's so much magic inherent in a tiny seed and if your collaboration with it and the weather goes well, miracles occur! I didn't

realize I hadn't known the taste of fresh picked/pulled vegetables until I grew them — it has ruined me for most any meal that lacks them — and I'm already famous for being fussy!

NT How did vegetables migrate from your garden and kitchen into your work — both your artwork and textile designs?

GH The realization that the studio often laid neglected and work wasn't developing here, as I had imagined it would, distressed me. Somehow, the only thing for it was to push a wheelbarrow full of produce in there. Soon afterwards I found myself completely naked or barely hiding my modesty behind a 1950s apron; in the studio or vegetable gardens, strewn or contorted amongst my crop; posing for portraits of it and me. I did that for about five summers and, eventually not being unable to bear scrutinizing myself any longer, I began to cut up the vegetables and make prints with them, just the way a child does a potato print. This was not even close to how I had ever worked before and it was incredibly liberating. The vegetables became the catalyst for change: I had previously been bound creatively by so many rules, debilitating ideas of what I could and couldn't do — and these had now been cut from me by a pair of secateurs!

NT It can seem unfair, this division between art and design, how much one gets paid for it or not. Art can have this bizarre dollar value unattached to use or often even merit. How do you psychologically straddle that tricky divide when working in both fields — after all, it's all just creativity, right?

GH Absolutely — my vegetable prints became repeat patterns because it just seemed a natural progression. I tend to think in terms of worlds more than I do in singular objects on white walls. I have a desire to fill the view, not pepper it. Plus, I've never thought much of hierarchies; I've always admired a lot of craft and design and believe that if you appreciate something, then it's valuable. My mother knitted and made quilts to earn extra money and this made a big impression on me — I thought her creations marvelous and believed them to spring from some mysterious source (her imagination), which beguiled me.

NT What's it been like — as a woman artist — being seen primarily as the wife of a successful man?

GH How I have been perceived and treated by the art world has often been baffling, caused, I am convinced, by the 'complicated' duality that I am a woman and married to a successful man. The art world needs to seriously address its prevailing sexism (and not just by pushing female artists as the latest undiscovered asset) and admit its condescension to the artistic partners of successful male artists! Until then, it will never be a level playing field and talent will go undiscovered or extinguish from lack of nurture.

Georgie Hopton's art and design can be found at Lyndsey Ingram Gallery and Babyforest.

Nicola Tyson is represented by Petzel Gallery in the US and Sadie Coles in the UK.

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