

It's a plant's imperfections that fascinate printmaker Angie Lewin. Anna Burnside meets the artist as she prepares for a major exhibition at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park

NATURAL BEAUTY

Venice: a city where creative spirits have been finding inspiration for hundreds of years. Printmaker Angie Lewin is no exception. The palazzos and Renaissance treasures were not, however, what caught her eye. She sketched a weed sprouting from the pavement. 'I will always look at something growing in the gutter,' she explains. 'I'm attracted to plants I can look at in detail, maybe if they're growing in adversity.' She offers another example. 'I was outside sketching, one warm day at our cottage in Speyside. It's on the side of a moor, on the edge of a magnificent mountain.' Did she cast her eyes up? Certainly not. 'I was sitting on the other side of the stone wall drawing the lichen.'

Lewin's work, familiar to anyone who has opened an interiors magazine or gone wallpaper shopping in recent years, is all about the micro-details: the architecture of a plant, the colour palette of its environment. Whether it is a print, woodcut, watercolour, or one of the printed fabrics or papers that work so well with a vintage G-plan dining-room table, there will be what she describes as 'duller or chalky colours', and the sculptural plant life she observes acutely before rendering it in graphic form.

She traces her singular aesthetic back to her childhood in Cheshire. Her father was a keen plantsman, and young Lewin spent a lot of time drifting around his greenhouses and flower beds. 'I remember that garden vividly. I drew a lot and spent a lot of time just sitting around, looking at

things on my own. I think there is a benefit to that: I often meet other artists who say they had a similar experience, who were also thrown on their own resources.'

Her parents gave her the independence to pursue her own interests while still at primary school. She recalls: 'My best friend was a really talented artist. We would spend a lot of time drawing together, going off with our sketchbooks and a picnic to go drawing.'

There was not much foliage when she studied printmaking at Central St Martins, afterwards staying in London producing magazine illustrations and food packaging. When she and her husband Simon bought a cottage on the Norfolk coast, weekends away had stretched into most of the week. It was career-change time. 'I wanted to be a garden designer,' she says, as if this was the logical step on from making biscuit packets look pretty. 'It was also an opportunity to develop the printmaking; in London I had to do other things to make a living.'

So Lewin enrolled for her RHS qualifications. Being outside, immersed in greenery, soils and botany suited her splendidly. 'Every week we had to study 10 plants,' she recalls. 'Draw them, annotate them, look at their structure, their environment. That, combined with moving to Norfolk and being able to do more drawing and printmaking, was when it all gelled.'

Closer to nature, her already narrow focus shrank again. 'I've always drawn the same subject



Above: *Ramsons and Campion*, screenprint, 39 x 60 cm, 2013
Left: Lewin at work





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matter and continued to develop that. I've never drawn a plant, then a fish, then a bird, then a house. Living closer to nature, this became even more pronounced. 'I moved from Hackney in central London, where you don't particularly notice the seasons, to the north Norfolk coast where you do.'

There, exercising her dogs along the same route every day gave her a greater insight into the way plants change. 'I would do the same walk and pick the seedheads, and only next season I think, oh, it's a campion.' These skeletal plant forms, all ridges and bumps are a dominant theme in Lewin's work. 'It's the structure I'm most drawn to. In the house I might have a vase of peonies, but I wouldn't draw them. A tiny plant like dill can have just as dramatic a structure as a giant hogweed.'

She is also drawn to imperfections and environmental adaptations, maybe a flower that has been stunted by the relentless wind in one of the desolate spots that she prefers. Leaves, for a long time absent from her work, often have something else going on. 'I like when they have slight insect holes, a vein or a notch where a beetle has bitten a piece out. That's what I find fascinating to draw, rather than a perfect botanical specimen.'

Lewin always had a notion to put her designs onto fabric or wallpaper. At her first exhibition in Norfolk, so many visitors mooted the same idea that she and Simon decided they would do it themselves. They named their company St Jude's, after the patron saint of lost causes. Their first pattern, *Dandelion 1*, was nominated for an *Elle Decoration* award and is still in production.

St Jude's, far from being a lost cause, rapidly grew arms and legs. Following in the tradition of David Whitehead in the 50s, the couple wanted to commission fabrics from other artists. Then they needed somewhere to store them. A gallery, they realised, would allow them to show the commercial designs beside the artists' prints and paintings.

Now Lewin's home in Edinburgh – she and Simon relocated from Norfolk five years ago – is full of her collaborators' work. A kitchen blind is made from Old Town's *Native Heath* fabric. There is a Mark Hearld print in the hall. She cites Edward Bawden, John Piper and Eric Ravilious as influences they have in common. 'We all work as artists and printmakers in different mediums and enjoy collaborating. When we exhibit the work seems to hang well together.'



Opposite: *Autumn Garden, Norfolk*, screenprint, 58.5 x 41 cm, 2013
Left: *Dandelion 1* fabric for St Jude's, screenprinted heavyweight cotton, 2005
Below: *Spey, Bark and Stem*, collaboration with Knockando Woolmill and St Jude's, lambswool, 2012

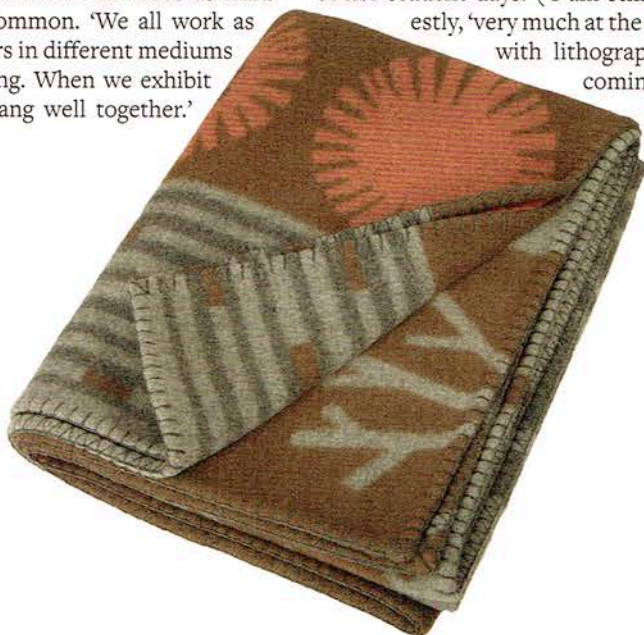
They all, she says, get a blast out of seeing their work on a cushion or a scarf. 'I really like to see my work transposed into other mediums, I find it really exciting. We all enjoy seeing our work on a wallpaper, a bag, a book jacket.'

Splitting her time between the city and Speyside, Lewin has been using the facilities at Edinburgh Printmakers to rediscover the techniques of her student days. ('I am still,' she says modestly, 'very much at the relearning phase with lithographs.') Her forthcoming show at Yorkshire Sculpture

Park will feature watercolours, prints and a relatively new departure, collage. Curator Amanda Peach is excited about these: 'I'm particularly keen to see the collages she is creating using driftwood collected from the shoreline near her Speyside home. This marks a significant move into mixed media, almost 3D work.'

The collages include other found objects, including old wallpaper. Lewin can't resist unpeeling a layer. If at all possible she liberates some samples for future collage work. And she does, always, ask first.

In preparation for the YSP show, a row of



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Clockwise from above:
Winterthistle, dress fabric
 for Liberty, Autumn/
 Winter collection,
 printed cotton, 2010;
Wintersten, dress fabric
 for Liberty, Autumn/
 Winter collection,
 printed cotton, 2010;
Lakeside Teasels, linocut,
 32 x 42 cm, 2013;
Stellar, cushion for
 St Jude's, screenprinted
 on oatmeal linen, 2013

watercolours in various stages, some enhanced with pencil detailing, hangs on a mini-washing line in the studio. The prints, many of them featuring plants from around the park in Wakefield, are stashed in drawers. She was there in spring, drawing the ramsons and campion. The teasels and grasses from the edge of the lake also caught her eye.

'Each time I invite an artist to exhibit their work in a solo show I ask them to respond to the landscape, environment, architecture or wildlife we have at YSP,' explains Peach. For Lewin, this included a Land Rover tour of the 500-acre site, including remote corners only recently opened to the public.

'Being based in Scotland, the natural elements of Angie's rugged surroundings have a resonance with the landscape of Yorkshire and YSP in particular, so it was easy to find common ground. She is a very considered artist, studying her subject matter carefully from the root upwards and executing her work with tremendous skill and ability; something that fits well with the way we work at YSP and with the kind of artists we like to work with.'

Having tested the waters in the shop - 'We've shown Angie's prints both in-store and online for a few years now, and have always had a great response to them, our customers love her work' - Peach had no qualms about asking Lewin to fill the park's prestigious winter exhibition slot.

'I knew she would be capable of producing a wonderfully rich body of work for us. Technically, Angie is one of the best printmakers working in the UK today, and with her background of running St Jude's, she has the commercial awareness necessary to pull off a successful solo exhibition of this scale.'

Lewin is far too self-effacing to say anything like that about herself. She is in this for the results rather than the glory. 'Even though I've been doing it for quite a long time, and I have a strong idea of the image, it will still be different at the end. There's still that thing when the first pull comes off a screenprint. The transformation still surprises you slightly. And sometimes you do a two-colour print and it's just there.' She smiles. 'That's the joy of it.'

'Angie Lewin: A Natural Line' is at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Bretton, Wakefield, Yorkshire WF4 4LG, 16 November - 23 February 2014.
www.ysp.co.uk, www.angielewin.co.uk





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AMANDA PEACH