



Breakdown Printing

New dimensions for texture & colour

Claire Benn & Leslie Morgan, Committed to Cloth

Acknowledgements

We're eternally grateful for the unwavering support of our partners and friends, who may not understand our total passion for what we do, but accept it and even embrace it with us.

Our student base is also a great source of stimulation, inspiration and revelation. "To teach is to learn twice" is a great truism, and our students help us stay out of the comfort zone and explore new territory.

Jane Dunnewold (the U.S. textile artist and founder of the concept of art cloth) has been a great guide and friend.

Laura Beehler set us on the path with this process of 'Breakdown' screen printing. Claire worked at the next bench to her whilst at Jane's studio in San Antonio and was fascinated and inspired by her experiments with 'dye-on-screen'. On returning to England, Claire began to play with the possibilities herself, and dragged Leslie in too! So, a big 'thank you' Laura for investing in her own curiosity, and driving ours!



Claire Benn



Leslie Morgan

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'New Life Rising' (detail),
Leslie Morgan



'Fragments of Survival',
Leslie Morgan



'Contrasting States' (detail),
Claire Benn

Preface

Both of us love 'wet work'; the act of using dyes, discharge media, textile paints and metal leaf to create cloth that is multi-layered and rich in depth. The possibilities seem never-ending and the more we explore, the more exciting the journey becomes.

We would exhort you to be willing to have a go, play and practice just for the sake of finding out what can happen. At the same time, you'll be producing cloth that's based on your experiments and samples, your subsequent observations, your modifications, your choices – truly your own, personal cloth.

How you then use that cloth is up to you. Leslie is a quilt maker who loves to piece in a free, improvisational and spontaneous way. She cuts up her cloth and sews it back together again with new room-mates, or in different configurations. Claire tends to work with whole cloth. If the piece works as 'art cloth' or 'complex cloth' it's left to be art in its own right, free-hanging or sometimes stretched or mounted on to canvas. Other pieces may be stitched, quilted, used for soft furnishing items such as cushions and throws, or used as yardage for clothing. The use of cloth is almost unlimited.

In our experience, people fear the (silk) screen. This is perhaps due to its history and use in precise registration printing. But it doesn't have to be like that. Using a screen can be a free and spontaneous affair and this book aims to introduce you to one of the many approaches it has to offer.

Simply put, 'breakdown' printing involves applying thick dye paints or print paste directly on to the back of the screen. This is left to dry and then printed off with more dye paint or print

paste, or a combination thereof. This print 'media' (the dye) is gradually dissolving the dried-on dye on the screen – it's breaking down and printing an ever-changing array of colours, marks, textures and distressed, organic and disintegrating effects.

This is not a process for those who are oriented to the precise! Whilst, with practice, the process is controllable, one of its joys is never quite knowing how quickly things will happen and how – exactly – the imagery and textures may change.

So, we encourage you to give it a go and embark on your own journey. And if you get grabbed by screen printing and want to learn more, we explore the subject in great depth in our fifth book; **'Screen Printing: layering textiles with colour, texture & imagery'**.



'Pressure Point' (detail),
Claire Benn



Using This Book

This is not a comprehensive guide to every option available to you when screen printing. However, we have provided some background information about the (silk) screen itself, setting up your workspace and general printing tips and techniques. For a detailed guide to a greater range of screen printing approaches, we recommend Jane Dunnewold's book 'Improvisational Screen Printing' (self published, see the 'Further Reading' section).

There is only one rule for this process; only use dye paints or clear, thick chemical paste/print paste on the screen. Do not use screen inks – if left to dry on the screen, they will seal the mesh forever and render the screen useless!

The first printing approach in the 'Get Going' section covers 'Making an Impression' and also explains the general technique of using dye-on-screen. The other variables will refer you back to this section as we wanted to avoid repetition and once you've had a couple of goes, we're confident you'll get the hang of it!

In the beginning, work at samples – don't lay down a 2 metre length of fabric and go at it. With a standard size (30x44cm) screen, 50-75cm lengths are more than adequate. In fact, a standard screen won't go the distance with this particular approach on large pieces of cloth; you'll either need a larger screen, or several screens at once. Worry about that once you've understood the key principles and made some discoveries of your own.

Buying a book is one thing. Implementing what's in it is another. Different things drive different people, and the way we approach learning anything new can vary enormously from one individual to another. A theory exists from educationalist Peter Honey that poses four different learning 'styles'. We've taken a light-hearted twist on it below, so see if you can recognise yourself...

- *Activists*; look at the pictures, get excited, skim the text and jump right in.
- *Reflectors*; mull over what they've seen and read, stroke the pictures, daydream about the possibilities, start eventually.
- *Theorists*; read the book from cover to cover, decide on a logical place to start (which isn't necessarily where we recommend), write their own list of what to do, double check everything and then start.
- *Pragmatists*; consider if the contents are of any use to their discipline and speculate as to whether it really is a process that can be done in the kitchen. If the end result seems to have potential, they'll give it a go.

Some people have a very dominant style. Others might have a preference for two styles. Some may even be fairly balanced across all four. It doesn't matter what your style is, just get started somehow, sometime!

Nothing contained in this book is meant to be restrictive or set in concrete. Every time we use this particular screen printing process, we discover something new and exciting or think of other ways of going at it. A key question to constantly ask is "what if?"

Experimentation, combining approaches and practice, practice, practice will enable you to make discoveries and create some great cloth. And remember, to get really good cloth generally takes at least three processes (often more) and you can combine different processes to achieve that 'Complex Cloth' look (Jane Dunnewold, Fibre Studio Press, 1996). Experiment and work at it and you'll get cloth that works for you.

The key thing is not to be intimidated. Be inspired; "every journey begins with a single step". For a detailed guide to screen printing, take a look at our fifth book - **'Screen Printing: layering textiles with colour, texture & imagery'**.



The work of an Activist!

Left: Christine & Mary exploring 'Breakdown Printing'



Silk Habotai, breakdown printed, then
discharged printed using a thermofax screen

