

The twists and turns of textiles: Ruby Richardson



Textile artist Ruby Richardson at home in her Warrnambool studio which is a calm place full of fabric and creativity.

[dropcap style="color: #8f9f59;"] T [/dropcap>extile artist Ruby Richardson has had a life full of twists and turns, but joining a circus was perhaps the least expected.

It was while Ruby, from Warrnambool, was studying costume design at Swinburne University in the late 1990s that she secured a work placement with [The Women's Circus](#), based in Footscray, and not only created some of their wonderful outfits, but ended up being part of the show.

"I learnt to do static trapeze, which is where you do various swings around the trapeze but don't leap from it, and acrobalance," she explains.

"I was so strong back then!"



Members of the Women's Circus demonstrate the art of acrobalance as part of their show, *Out of the Box*, using a combination of strength, poise and balance.
Image: [Women's Circus](#).

[dropcap style="color: #8f9f59;"] A[/dropcap] circus was the perfect – if unpaid – world for Ruby, who was entranced by “the sheer visual spectacle” of costume design and human movement that allowed for so much more experimentation than mainstream fashion.

“One of my lecturers at the time used to ban the ‘f’ word and say, ‘we make outfits for characters – not for the masses!’”, Ruby recalls with a laugh.

During her course, Ruby learnt the tricks of the costume trade – from millinery to creating “fat suits” – and also tried her hand at screen-printing for the first time.

Despite her love for the field, however, the opportunities for paid work were (and remain) limited, so Ruby also became a

personal care worker for the City of Yarra, before deciding to return to south-west Victoria in 2002.

It was here that all the threads of her past and present life began to combine.



Screenprinting is one of many of Ruby's skills and she now teaches others at TAFE and occasionally at The Artery, Warrnambool.

[dropcap style="color: #8f9f59;"] A [/dropcap] child growing up in Woolsthorpe, Ruby had always been a "good drawer" at school but hated sewing classes, until she decided to try her hand at sewing her own clothes at home.

Her father, a shearer, had a sewing machine in the house to make the calico bags he used to store fresh meat: it was not unusual for old-time farmers to know how to use a needle and thread.

"I bumped him off the machine and yeah, there was a fair bit of swearing about that," Ruby laughs.

Ruby began to make and wear her own clothes; shirts without

collars, skirts without hems, a kind of rustic chic .

“It was very rough, but also quite fashionable at the time, so I could get away with it,” she says.

Ruby went on to study art and design at TAFE, before completing a Bachelor of Fine Art at Deakin University, during which refined her drawing and design skills and began to explore printmaking.

After returning from Melbourne, Ruby re-enrolled at TAFE to study screenprinting under the guidance of **Donna Dixon** and, a year later, began her own label, Pattern & Print, that combined her printing and sewing skills.

“I decided to start making things from what I was printing, little bags, cushion covers, that sort of thing,” she explains.



The raw and the complete: some of Ruby's collection of fabrics, including many sourced in Japan, a printmaking cut-out and a completed, hand-stitched

felt bag.

[dropcap style="color: #8f9f59;"] A [/dropcap] decade on and Pattern & Print is well known for its bold, geometric designs and colours that are inspired by Ruby's deep love of the natural world.

"I can spend hours just looking at a plant, examining it and looking at its structures and colours," she says.

"If you look closely, you can see how all the tiny pieces of a plant form into one piece and this is repeated over and over: I love that."

Retro images from the 1950s are another common theme and, again, Ruby uses bold, monochromatic colours and repetition to create her own unique "look".

These days Ruby has also moved from being the pupil to the teacher, and, three years ago, replaced Donna Dixon as the screenprinting lecturer at TAFE. She also continues to work in personal care, at Lyndoch, where she is known by her first name of Alison (Ruby is one of two middle names).

Like any artist, her work continues to evolve and Ruby is currently working on her first ever collaboration, with ceramacist [Clare \(Claybody\) Fennessy](#), that will lead to an exhibition of "Prints and Clay" at TAFE on October 20.

"I am loving the process of working with Clare, who's work I have always admired, and experimenting with different techniques to see what works and what doesn't," she says.

Ruby is also keen to produce larger wall hangings of her work, where the print is viewed as a work of art in itself, rather than as part of a functional object such as a cushion or bag.

"I see it as part of a natural evolution, working through processes, trying different things and not really knowing how

it may end up: that is the exciting and enjoyable part."



The eye-catching simplicity of Ruby's designs are captured in this backdrop that reflects patterns and images that were popular in the 1950s.

[box] Ruby's work is available at the Warrnambool Art Gallery gift shop, The Artery gift shop, the Little Yellow Owl hair salon, W'bool, and at her home by appointment. Commissions upon request. e: ruby.rich@yahoo.com.au [/box]

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Behold this bluestone beauty



A labour of love: Ben and Helen Fennessy spent a year measuring up what lay ahead before deciding to take on the restoration of a rundown Rosebrook property that is now their home.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"]T[/dropcap]aking on the restoration of a bluestone cottage in a rugged coastal landscape may sound romantic, but it is not a task to be taken lightly.

Artist **Ben Fennessy** and his wife **Helen**, who writes, spent a year deciding whether or not to buy a ramshackle, rundown dump on five acres that overlooked the Belfast Lough at Rosebrook, near Port Fairy, and turning it into a home.

The historic bluestone cottage and assorted add ons and out-buildings had been on the market for five years – five years! – when the Fennessy's happened upon it during one of their visits to Port Fairy from their former home in the Otways.



The house sat unloved for years before the Fennessy's took over.



The original kitchen ...



The same space as it looks today.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] I
[/dropcap]t took a special vision to see the beauty beneath the ugliness of the place, which had suffered from a combination of poor building extensions, a lack of maintenance and a series of tenants that showed little respect for the property, if not outright neglect.

(The state of the house was summed up when the Fennessy's later removed boards covering the fireplaces and found piles of dirty nappies).

"It was very, very rundown and fairly hideous when we first saw it six years ago," Ben said.

"We walked away for a year, but we kept coming back to it in our minds, thinking that it had really great potential, but that it would take a lot of work."

The extent of the task ahead was laid bare in an Archicentre report that, Helen said, "ran to several pages".

"The roof was being held up by tomato stakes," she said, laughing at the memory.



Out with the Besser block extension: Helen Fennessy hard at work during the renovations...



And in with a light-filled, bluestone extension designed by Tim McLeod and that overlooks the Belfast Lough.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] U
[/dropcap]nderneath all of the half-baked renovations,

however, sat a sweet, four-room bluestone cottage that, despite all of its terrible makeovers, was as solid as the day it was built some time in 1856 as the engineer's house for the local mill at Rosebrook.

"The original bluestone was actually in good nick, so we brought it back to that original footprint," Ben said.

Over a two-year period, the Fennessy's tore down a parasitic, 1970s extension at the rear of the cottage, restored the original cottage and added a magnificent big-windowed, light-filled space – designed by Warrnambool architect **Tim McLeod** – that overlooks the lough.

The result is a character-filled blend of the very old and the ultra modern – but the story doesn't end there.



Clare meet Rosie, Rosie meet Clare: an old railway building and carriage have been converted into a self-contained living space.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] B
[/dropcap]en's eye for the quirky has seen two more fascinating additions that, together, form a separate, self-

contained living space for their daughter and ceramic artist, [Clare Fennessy](#).

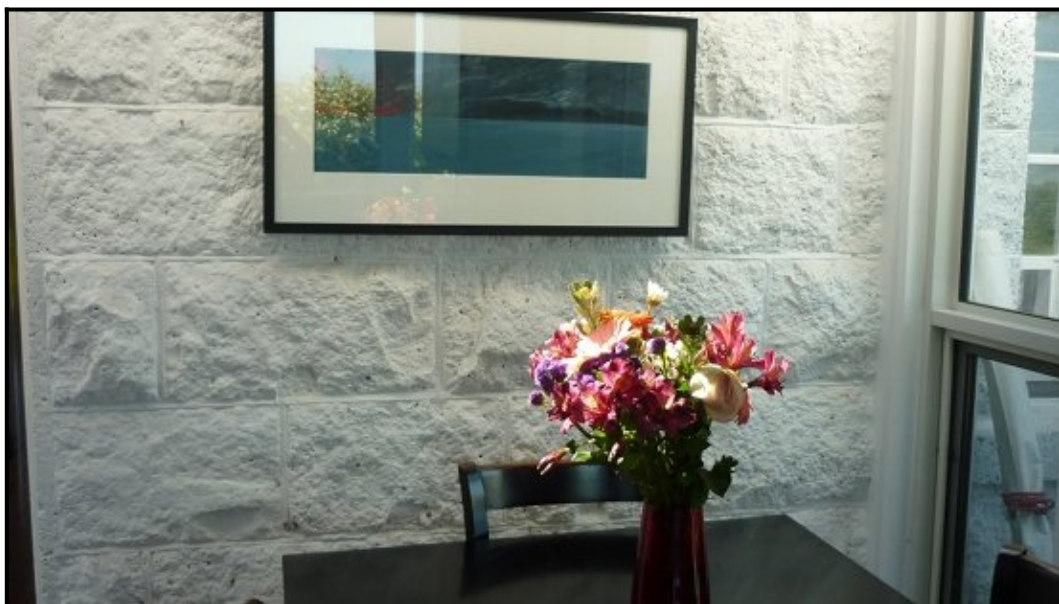
Clare's lounge room, small kitchen and bathroom is housed in a pre-fab railway building originally from the Warrnambool Railway Station that, when Ben found it, was being used as a hayshed out in a paddock.

"Rosie", as the railway shed is now known, snuggles neatly against an antique railway carriage that dates back to 1911 and was once used to transport refrigerated goods. It is now Clare's bedroom, complete with a roof insulated by horse hair.

"I'd seen it sitting in a paddock at Illowa and so I approached the owners and asked if they wanted to sell it," Ben explained.

"It was being used as a fertiliser shed at the time."

With the property finished, and two alpacas installed in the surrounding paddocks to keep the grass down, the Fennessys need only enjoy the inspiring space: perfect for such creative souls.



After many years of hard work, the renovation and restoration is complete.



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