



# experimental textiles

A journey through design, interpretation and inspiration

Kim Thittichai



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BATSFORD

## Dedication

This book is dedicated to Chris Field, without whose help and encouragement the course Experimental Textiles would never have run. Chris was instrumental in the training and development of hundreds of adult education tutors and helped me to write the third and fourth levels of my course. She was a very good friend and is greatly missed.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all of my students, who have been my inspiration for this book; we have all worked hard and had great fun together.

I would also like to thank all the professional tutors and artists who have allowed their work to be used in this book.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2009 by  
Batsford  
10 Southcombe Street  
London W14 0RA

An imprint of Anova Books Company Ltd

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ISBN 9781906388478

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

16 15 14 13 12 11  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Repro by Rival Colour Ltd, UK  
Printed by Craft Print International Ltd, Singapore

This book can be ordered direct from the publisher at the website:  
[www.anovabooks.com](http://www.anovabooks.com), or try your local bookshop.

Distributed in the United States and Canada by  
Sterling Publishing Co.,  
387 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016, USA

Opposite: 'Gormanghast' casket by Carol Coleman, made from impressed softsculpt, thermoplastic foam and decorated with fabrics, beads and embroidery. To see the inside of the casket, turn to page 83.

Page 2: Detail of 'Marisha's Forest' by Nikki Paramenter.

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# Introduction

*'Experience is what you get when you don't get what you want.'*

Dan Stanford

Like many people my age I have had several career changes in my life but what, I hope, is my final one has given me the most satisfaction. I have been teaching in adult education since 1996, not as long as many tutors perhaps, but I have learned a lot along the way. The most important thing I have learned is that anyone can be taught or teach themselves techniques; it is what you do with them that makes your work different.

Having spent a lot of time teaching and lecturing to various groups, one of the things that stands out for me, particularly over the past two years, is that a lot of us are being seduced by the latest technique, tools or equipment and forgetting the basics of design, colour and composition. Books of samples are all very well – but then what?

Getting back to basics once in a while is very important, to refresh old skills and remind yourself of the value of observation, applying colour and just taking time to think about what you are doing rather than rushing into the latest craze. If you work on your own it can be difficult to find the time and the inclination to generate new ideas. If you have not had the benefit of undertaking a suitable college course you may not know how to begin. Even if you have, taking time out to reinforce old learning can feel like time wasted, but this is far from the truth.

This book is named after a 30-week course I wrote and taught for seven years in the south of England. 'Experimental Textiles' was originally written as a one-year course but my students just would not leave and so eventually it developed into a four-year course being taught in two separate colleges. The course was so popular that it became necessary to run several first and second years to cope with the demand. The idea was to teach all the basic skills required to develop and encourage the students to work independently as textile artists.

Right: Heavily beaded and machine-stitched 'Sea Horse' by Nikki Parmenter.





When you write a course and it is advertized in the college prospectus, there is no guarantee that it will run. All colleges have a minimum number of students that must be enrolled before the course can run and the magic number at our college was 12. The first year only one student enrolled; the second year eight enrolled. By this time I doubted that the course would ever run and that something I believed in so strongly was not necessarily what others needed. Chris Field, Curriculum Leader at the Connaught Centre (an adult education centre in Hove, Sussex), who later helped me write the higher levels of the course, encouraged me to advertize my course for the third time. The course enrolled enough students and it ran. It just goes to show that if you believe enough in what you are doing and hang on in there, there is a chance your wishes will come true.

The course was broken into three ten-week terms: the first two terms covered design, colour and textile techniques; the last term was set aside for the students to design, create and finish a piece of work to be hung at the end-of-year show.

The first year covered basic design and colour theory, along with all the basic textile techniques from rag rugging and felt-making to working with metal. The second year developed the skills learned in the first year. In the third and fourth years students began to consider their professional development with personal projects becoming more important. As with all good things, the course had to come to an end, as it was not possible to keep up with the number of students who wanted to attend. Before I started winding down Experimental Textiles I was teaching ten groups across four levels. I had taken on too much. It was a classic case of 'be careful what you wish for'.

This book will take you from design, through interpretation and inspiration to encourage you to stop thinking about it and get on with it.

While reading the following pages you will find many references to working in groups, particularly for the exercises. This is an excellent way to broaden the range of your experience and ideas but in no way negates the value of working on your own. If you are experimenting with textiles on your own but would like input or to share your ideas with others, take a look on the internet. There are many blogs put up by like-minded souls who are creating marvellous work.

Inspiration is a very personal issue. It is not possible to have one rule or formula for everyone. I hope that the projects and information in this book may give you some new ideas and help inspire you.

The artists that I have chosen to include have all inspired me in one way or another. I have been a student of some, and a teacher or a colleague of others and I have admired them all. I hope they all give you something to think about. Contact details for the artists are at the back of the book.

Right: Felted bag by Mary Dean. Made with hand-rolled felt incorporating vintage fabrics and threads and finished with hand-rolled pom poms. The bag is 61x 38cm (24 x 15in).



Please bear in mind that this book is just my interpretation of what I have learned on my relatively short journey as a tutor. It is intended as a starting point for you to begin your research into what interests you most. There are many excellent tutors who have longer experience; seek them out and work with them and above all listen to them! Don't just stick to textiles; you can be taught to draw and paint, it's just a matter of confidence.









# Part One

# Where Do Ideas Come From?

## Recording ideas

We are always being told to keep a sketchbook. If you are attending a course at college you will be encouraged to use sketchbooks, folders and portfolios to store your work. However, what is right for one person isn't necessarily right for the next. If you are experimenting with three-dimensional samples, for example, several shoeboxes or cardboard boxes might be more useful than a sketchbook that bulges and then falls apart. The main thing is that you keep a record of your work and have some means of storing it safely.

There are many different types of books that are useful for storing information; softback, hardback, spiral-bound, white pages, black pages, fat and thin. What is important is that you choose what is right for you, not something that everyone else is using or that you think looks good. Stop and think for a moment. What are you using a sketchbook for? Would you rather use a scrapbook? A sketchbook always sounds so important, so if you are at all worried about committing ideas to paper perhaps you might prefer to get a basic scrapbook and fill it with ideas. These are widely available and are usually softback with cheap coloured sugar-paper pages. They are excellent for sticking in photos and images cut from magazines, scribbled notes and sketches, old handouts, interesting (dried) plant life you have picked up on a walk – anything that sparks an idea. A scrapbook is often seen as less threatening than a sketchbook.



Left: Hardback sketchbook painted with Procion dye powder and water. If you thought the plain white sketchbook was daunting, this may inspire you.



There are many forms of commercial sketchbooks. They come in many shapes, sizes and layouts, often with a choice of paper, but as a rule the pages are white.

There are few things as daunting as blank sheet of white paper, particularly when it is contained in a sketchbook. What are you supposed to put in a sketchbook? Does it have to be a beautifully finished work of art or can it just be a useful record of ideas, lists and scratchy drawings? How you use a sketchbook is totally up to you. Don't be intimidated by others who create a masterpiece of exquisite pages that are highly embellished and decorated. A sketchbook should not be an end in itself but more a doorway or first step towards an idea or range of work.

One of the most popular ways of changing the pages I have found is to paint an entire sketchbook in one go with a dilute solution of Procion dye powder and water. Procion dyes are used to dye natural fabrics and although when dyeing fabrics, in order to make the dye fast and washable, you add a fix, this is not necessary with paper as you are not going to wash it. Just mix a little dye powder with water and paint onto the pages (when mixing dye powders you should wear a particle mask). Use lots of different colours and a wide paintbrush and see how they bleed together. Paint a page at a time until the whole book is done, and then close the book. You will have a lovely wet mess that will take ages to dry but it will be worth it. Once the book is dry or just damp, carefully separate the pages. You will find that they do not stick together. This would not be the case if you were to use ink or paint to colour the pages.

Now you have a wonderful array of coloured pages on which to write notes, stick photos, draw onto and generally let rip.

Below: A concertina sketchbook before it was painted and after.

