

Contemporary Knitting

for textile artists



RUTH LEE

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BATSFORD



Remembering my mum Marjorie whose support and encouragement made all this possible and to my partner Mick Pearce for living through the challenge of yet another deadline: your sense of perspective is invaluable.

Thanking John Allen for his timely support and encouragement to push my own personal boundaries for which I am ever grateful. Thank you.

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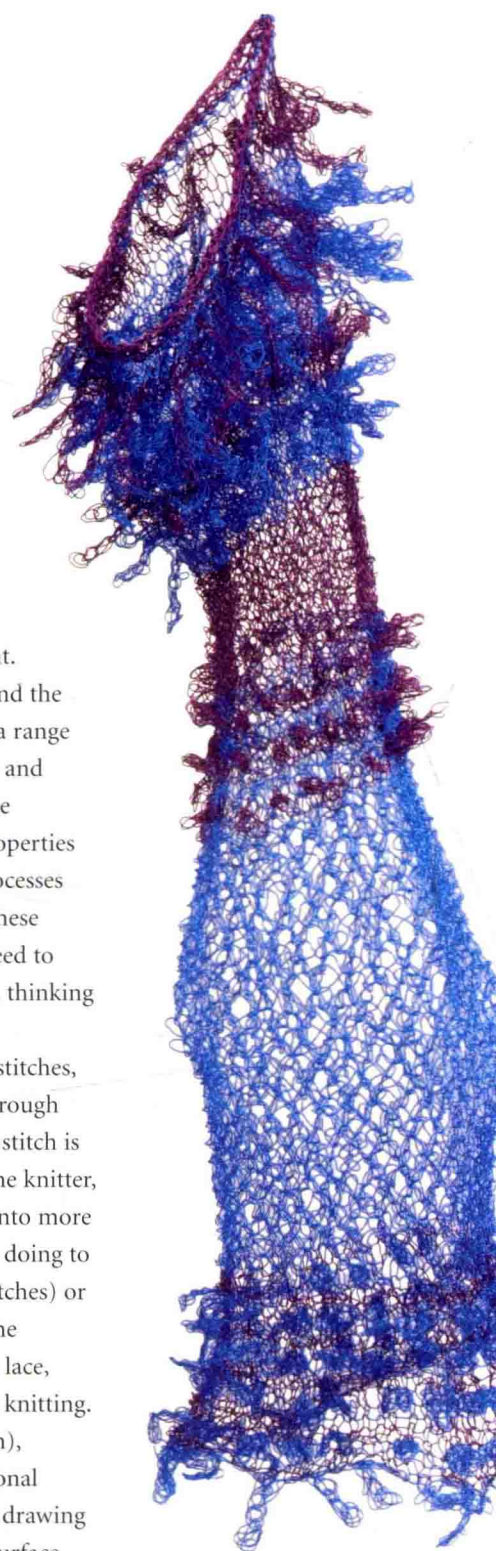
Introduction

With the current revival in hand knitting gathering momentum many people have become interested in using traditional two- and three-dimensional knitting in new and innovative ways, as a method of communicating ideas rather than simply as technique for its own sake. This book sets knitting in a modern context for the contemporary fibre artist, craft maker, textiles student and enthusiast. Use it as an inspirational resource to help you to develop your own practice further, for example by moving into outdoor installation work, gallery pieces, wearable art and body adornment.

Throughout the book I place emphasis on the relationship between actual making and the visual language of art and design. Experimental surfaces and structures are sampled in a range of naturally occurring and synthetic materials, such as wire, paper yarn, plant materials and plastics, found and recycled materials, rope and elastics. Instructions on producing these samples are accompanied by in-depth information on technique, and the individual properties of fibres and other materials, giving you a sound understanding of all aspects of the processes involved. By 'thinking with your hands' you will be exploring the connection between these different facets of knitting, and simultaneously unlocking your creativity. You do not need to have a traditional art and design background – contemporary knitting is about original thinking and a sensitive handling of technique, materials and concepts.

Knitting is not an esoteric mystery. It is a logical process whereby knit stitches, purl stitches, or a combination of knit and purl stitches, form one unit of pattern that then builds through repetition into simple or complex structures. There is no mystery to the stitches: a purl stitch is simply a knit stitch in reverse, with the ridge or knot of the purl stitch facing towards the knitter, rather than away. Stitches can be knitted two together, increased or decreased, worked into more than once, slipped or cast on or off in any number of configurations. Whatever you are doing to the stitch, it will always be worked with the yarn at the back of the knitting (for knit stitches) or with the yarn at the front of the knitting (for purl stitches). Knit and purl stitches are the building blocks for all the different stitch patterns in knitting, from rib patterns, cables, lace, textured patterns and colourful jacquards to stocking stitch, garter stitch and free-form knitting.

Fundamentally, knitting is all about the relationship between stitches, gauge (tension), knitting medium and finished fabric. In this book, knitting surfaces and three-dimensional forms are simply seen as an extension of this relationship, which is similar to the way a drawing is constructed from a series of lines and marks in various media on a chosen drawing surface. Yarns and fibres substitute for drawing's pen, pencil or charcoal, while stitch structures compare to making a mark on a surface. Indeed, one might think of knitting sample patches as a way of making thumbnail sketches and drawings – only, in this case, with knitting needles and yarn.



above

Nymph, knitted in single-core connecting cable.

Using this Book

This book assumes a basic knowledge of knitting, with more attention given to a creative interpretation of technique rather than basic knitting know-how. However, my initial aim is to return you to these basics, so that you can build a strong foundation from which to launch your own experimental knitting. Understanding exactly what you are doing, at a fundamental level, will give you the ability to devise your own stitch patterns, unpick mistakes with confidence and, eventually, deconstruct existing stitch patterns. Seeing beyond the superficial decoration and reducing a pattern down to its underlying structure gives you a point of departure for your own patterns and designs.

The shorthand jargon of knitting patterns can be off-putting to the beginner, just as a music score is incomprehensible to someone who lacks knowledge of the rudiments of music theory. Both reading knitting patterns with confidence and constructing a piece of knitting from scratch require a basic knowledge of stitch structure, which is why pattern information is written out in longhand here. Once understood, it is easy enough to translate it into the more widely used knitting shorthand.

Ideally, learn to develop patterns from scratch, just as you learned to write letters of the alphabet, words and – finally – joined-up text, rather than following existing knitting patterns on automatic pilot. Abandoning commercially produced stitch pattern guides lets you take personal control of your knitting experiments, but can be daunting. With this in mind, I have included some confidence-building exercises that will help you to make the leap.

The sampling examples throughout the book provide a way of understanding how a particular technique works, but you should feel free to move on to your own ideas. The emphasis is on constructing the textiles rather than focusing on finished projects, so the samples throughout will suggest any number of applications, whether purely functional or as a fibre-arts statement. I encourage you to explore hands-on experimentation and to hone your craft skills through practice, so that they become second nature and you can go on to translate your own creative ideas into something tangible and original.

Starting from an overview of necessary and useful equipment (most of which is cheap, portable and quiet to operate) the book then surveys the different materials available to the adventurous knitter, and discusses their properties. Subsequent chapters cover different working methods that you can develop further as single techniques, or combine. An overview of each technique is given with one or more working methods outlined in detail with supporting samples. Space does not permit an in-depth discussion of every variation of all of the techniques sampled. Similarly, the nature of this book means that some topics had to be excluded. For example, any discussion of English, Continental, Eastern and combined working methods was omitted, as is detailed information on needle and hand positions, and the way the yarn is tensioned. There are many excellent books and web sites available, and a suppliers list for all the commercially produced yarns and fibres used in the book is also included (see page 124).

Finally, a word on hand and machine knitting. In my own practice, I regard both as simply a means to an end, with my choice determined by my chosen technique, the knitting medium and the scale of the work. A knit stitch is the same whether it is worked on a machine, on knitting needles or on a frame loom. Many of the ideas in this book can be translated to machine knitting with even an elementary knowledge of the domestic knitting machine.



Essential Tools, Equipment and Know-How

Choosing the Right Tools

Needles

Needles are an essential piece of equipment for your knitting, be they single-pointed, double-pointed or circular. They come in a wide range of materials: for example, steel, nickel plated, aluminium, metal alloys, various woods, plastics, resin and bamboo. Each type of needle has its own particular merits and will handle differently, so experiment with various types and sizes of needle in relation to the materials you are knitting.

Needles sizes range from 0.5mm (US size 8-0) fine-steel needles, intended for lace knitting and working in miniature, to wooden broomhandle-size needles. Single-pointed needles, which are straight with a stop at the end, are manufactured in pairs. Double-pointed needles, traditionally used for working in the round, are sold in sets of four or five, while twin pins (circular knitting needles) have points at both ends, and can be used to make straight or tubular knitted fabrics.

When it comes to material, needles manufactured in reinforced plastic or resin are a relatively inexpensive option, allowing the novice knitter to build up a good collection of needles in various sizes and lengths. Lightweight and durable, they are useful for knitting many of the textured modern yarns and also many of the more unusual materials suggested in this book (with the exception of some plastic materials). A good selection of these needles is available from Pony in a wide range of sizes up to 25mm (US size 50). Their slightly blunt points, compared with steel needles, are especially useful for knitting loosely spun yarns and handmade 'yarns' – made from knitted tubes, crochet chains, paper yarns and rough-cut fabrics, for example.

Lightweight bamboo and birch wood needles are warm to the touch, and less tiring on the hands than metal or plastic. Both types of wood have an inherent strength and do not warp easily. Ideally, look for needles made from wood sourced from regulated forests, such as those made by Brittany Birch Knitting Needles. Double-pointed needles, as well as straight and circular twin pins, are available in various types of wood.

Wooden needles have the advantage that stitches are less likely to slip off, particularly when working with slippery hair fibres such as mohair and alpaca, or Rowan Big Wool and Colinette Tao 100 per cent silk. The same applies to smooth tape yarns, such as paper yarns, soft cottons and eco yarns such as bamboo and corn fibre yarn. Light plastic materials, such as bubble wrap and cling film (Saran wrap), for example, are also easier to knit on big wooden, rather than plastic, needles. Of particular interest are the square-section needles marketed by Kollage,

opposite

Straight needles in
aluminum, palm wood
(square cut) and birch.

handmade in Vietnam from Forest palm. These are claimed to be easier on the hands than traditional round needles, and to produce more uniform stitches. They are surprisingly comfortable and lightweight to work with, while the square profile does indeed seem to help to maintain an even tension with smooth flat tape yarns, such as Cornucopia and Amaizing 100 per cent Corn Fibre (hence the name), both available from South West Trading Company (SWTC).

Multi-purpose double-pointed metal needles, 20cm (8in) long, are supplied in sets of four in the Pony brand. Addi manufacture the same length, in plastic, in sets of five, including needle size 20mm (US size 35). The latter are useful for knitting strips of fabric and wide ribbons, as well as doubling up as extra-large cable needles.

Traditional steel needles are strong, with sharp tips, and are useful for the complex increases and decreases found in openwork stitch patterns: for instance, those manufactured by Inox in sets of five, 20cm (8in) in length. Plated steel needles in really small sizes are tempered so that they will not break, while exhibiting a degree of flexibility. Steel and aluminium needles are best for knitting enamelled copper wire, though single-core electrical cabling (for example) works well when knitted on large plastic needles. There is a tendency for wire stitches to slip off metal needles, but they usually keep their shape and are easily picked up. Use a stopper on the end of the needles when not in use.

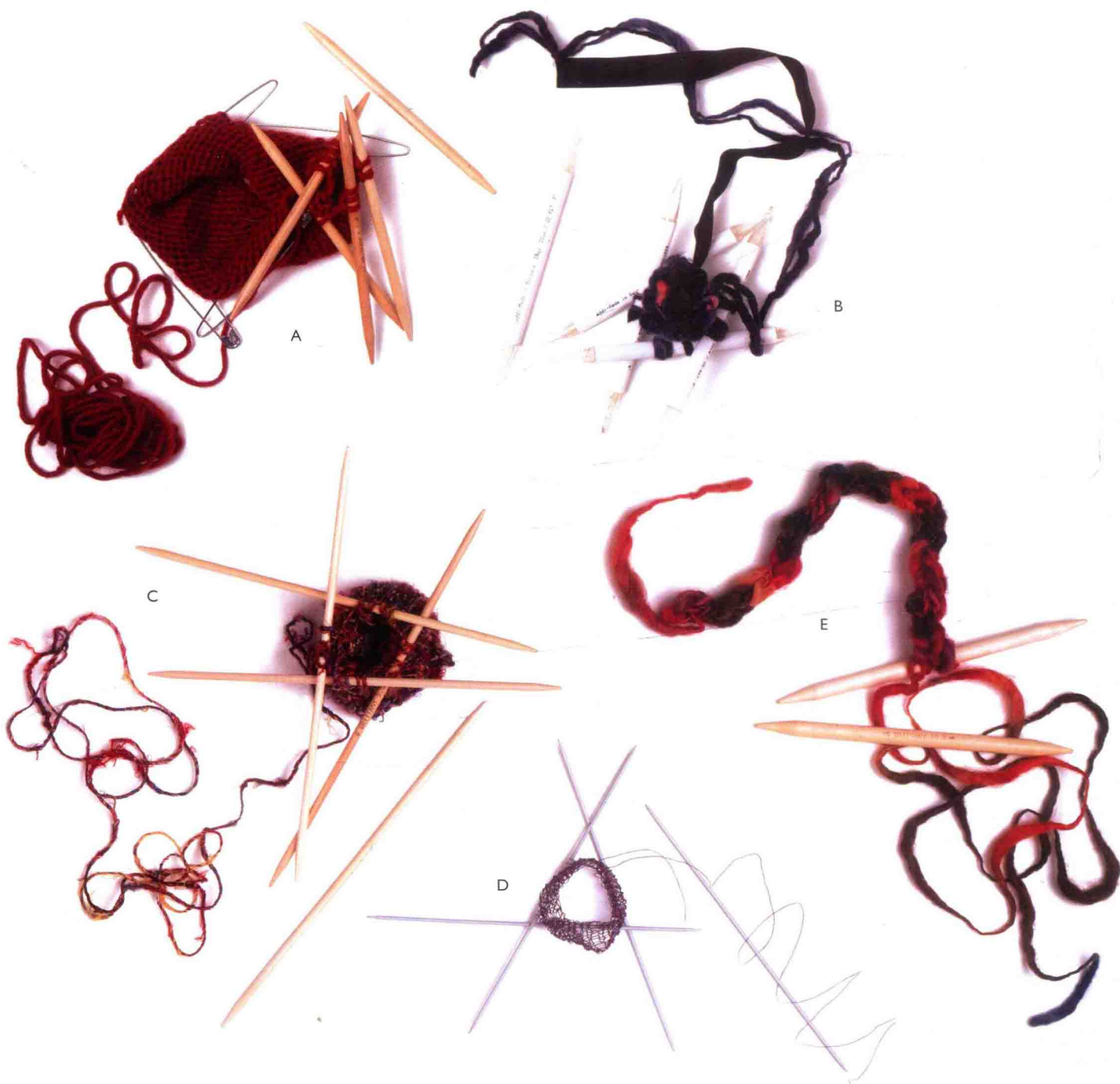
Sizes differ between Europe and the United States, and older knitting needles are often sized in old English sizes and imperial for example, rather than metric units. For example, 0.5mm is UK size 22 and USA size 00000000 (8-0). Use a needle gauge (available from Addi) or refer to websites that show comparative needle sizes.



The needles shown on the previous page are an assortment of straight knitting needles in aluminium and wood. The top sample, knitted on aluminium Pony needles, is worked in string and the sample below it uses a selection of tape yarns. The brown wooden needles in the centre are made from palm wood and have a square profile with a sample knitted in Cornucopia, a yarn made from maize fibre. The 4mm (US size 6) needles at the bottom, made from birch, show samples in Colinette Tao silk yarn with glass beads.

below

Double-pointed needles. Here you can see some of the ways in which these versatile needles can be used.



Double-pointed needles are versatile, and can be used in various ways, as shown opposite. Birch needles (A) in a mid size are comfortable to hold. When working a small section, such as the finger of a glove, put the stitches not in use on stitch holders. Plastic needles, like these from Addi (B), are fun to use, here shown working with ribbon and Colinette Point 5. Often you will want to work in the round with four needles holding the stitches plus a fifth, working needle, as in the set with the recycled sari silk yarn (C), but if the piece is very small or you don't have many stitches, you can use three needles plus the working needle as on the sample worked in wire (D), or you might work with just two needles in the traditional way or when making i-cord (E).

The third basic type of needle is the circular needle, like the ones shown below, which are all made by Addi. The sample, bottom right, is worked in South West Trading Company (SWTC) bamboo yarn and Colinette Tao. As the sample expands it can be transferred to a longer needle.

below

A selection of circular needles.



Knitting Frames

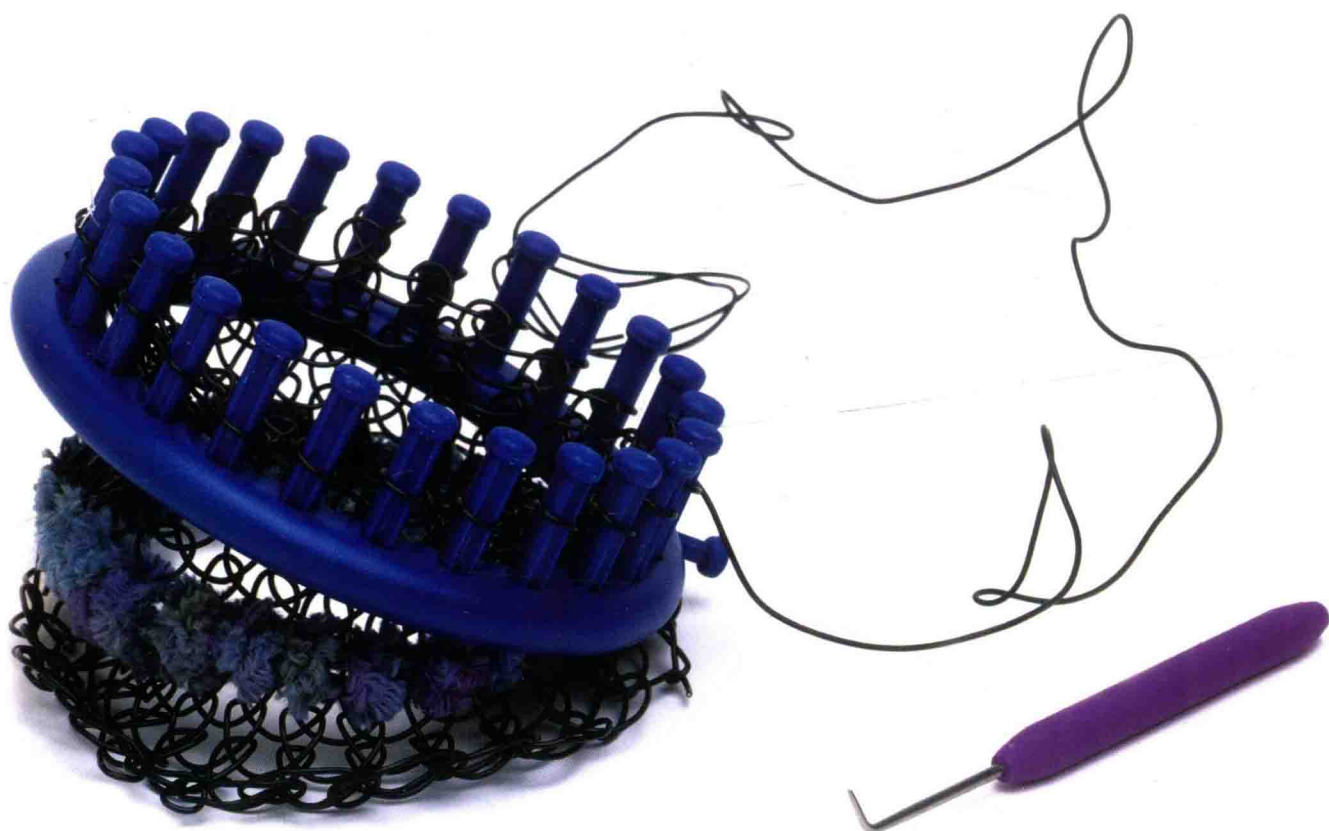
The frame below is a round, plastic knitting frame – these are sometimes referred to as knitting looms, knitting boards, spool frames or scarf boards. These are sold in varying dimensions and gauges. The Nifty Knitter is of plastic construction with grooves in the pegs to assist the knitting process. Many frames are adjustable to accommodate different widths of knitting.

When using knitting wire or plastics, spool frames are kinder on the hands than conventional knitting needles. By winding the wire around the pegs, then lifting one stitch over the other with a pick or crochet hook to make the stitches, you can avoid the need to tension the wire around your fingers, which can cause blisters and surface cuts if you are knitting a great deal (see chapter 6 for more on spool and frame techniques).

Frames are easy to make yourself. The simplest way is to make a temporary spool by taping lolly (popsicle) sticks around the edge of a sturdy plastic drinks cup that has the bottom cut off (a roll of cardboard or cardboard tube could serve the same purpose).

below

Circular knitting frame.



Small Tools and Other Equipment

These include therapeutic craft gloves (see below for more on health and safety issues), sewing needles, scissors, wire cutters, tweezers and shallow containers for picking up and storing beads. You will also need small steel crochet hooks, latch tools and rug hooks with latches. Useful equipment includes ball or cone winders, sturdy wooden hank winders for specialist yarns, such as those from Colinette, and a dedicated cord maker.

In addition to a range of art materials and sketchbooks for experimental surface manipulation, consider buying a hot-air blowing tool and soldering iron. Optional larger equipment includes a basic, no-frills knitting machine, a computer (with printer, digital camera and scanner) for visual- and text-based work, a sewing machine and a needle punch/embellishing machine (see the section on needle felting in chapter 9, page 113, for more information).

Health and Safety Issues

It is essential to be aware of health and safety issues, and to use all potentially hazardous materials and equipment responsibly. For example, when burning any type of materials you should take all necessary precautions and be aware of any possibility of poisonous fumes. When using any type of chemical – solvents, glues, varnishes, bleach and dye powders – read and act on the relevant health and safety guidelines for each product.

RSI (repetitive strain injury) is thought to be caused by repetitive movements over a long period of time, and can be a hazard to textile makers. If you think that you may have problems relating to RSI then seek professional advice. Possible avenues to explore included learning to knit by holding the needles and yarns with both left-handed and right-handed tensioning methods, so as to vary your movements. Investigate knitting with circular needles rather than straight pins, and experiment with a range of needle types and weights to determine those that suit you best. Consider wearing therapeutic craft gloves if they will assist you.

Good posture, seating height and lighting are of paramount importance when knitting. If you knit for long hours you should take regular breaks, and exercise your back, neck and hand muscles in particular. If all else fails, set a timer to remind you to stop for breaks every 20 minutes or so.

On a practical level, heavy, large-scale work can also present physical difficulties for the knitter, some of which can be solved by knitting individual sections and only linking them together at the making-up stage (for example, see the bias knitted rug sample on page 33). Alternatively, you can make use of a support, such as a table, to take the weight of the knitting as it progresses. *Spirit Dresses* 3 and 4 (see chapter 10) were made in this way – standing up to knit. When working with very large broomhandle-size needles try knitting with the needles balanced on the floor, and knit back and forth without turning the work.