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Flair Trade

Textile designer Sonya Mackintosh is up to her neck in funky, wearable yarn art

WRITTEN BY AMANDA RAE BUSCH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON HOUSTON

IT'S A STORMY SEPTEMBER MORNING, and though one would expect to hear a symphony of *zings*, *zips*, and *clinks* in Sonya Mackintosh's studio, the cavernous space is remarkably quiet. Forty-three-year-old Mackintosh and three assistants, Donna, Diane, and Glynis, are quietly shuffling order forms and materials at their workstations. But for now, the contingent of wide, keyboard-shaped contraptions sits dormant behind them, digital monitors dark.

"Normally the machines would be running," the London-born textile designer and fiber artist says apologetically in her affable British burr, lime-green eyes scanning the room. "We can run the basic things but there are electronic elements, and we'll blow fuses so ..." Minutes later, Stevie Wonder pines for "Ma Cherie Amour" from a radio speaker overhead, as if to emphasize this fact.

It's here, in a converted three-car garage on a residential country lane just off Route 7 in Sheffield, Massachusetts, that Mackintosh has built smARTWORKS, where her scarves in funky textures, bold shapes, and vivid, custom-dyed colors are born. "My products tend to make traditional niches frustrated," the tall, chocolate-maned Mackintosh says with a sly grin, thumbing an orange origami-like creation. "They can't figure out how to do it."

And that's exactly what draws fashion-forward women—and a few men, now that she's launched a line of more subdued, masculine offerings—to her plush neckwear. Yet while Mackintosh's wool, cashmere, and cotton works decorate the décolletage in a way unseen before in the Berkshires, she admits that attempting to create one-of-a-kind works while staying financially afloat could prove soul-crushing. So instead, smARTWORKS achieves small-scale mass-production—yet still imbued with fine art charm.

Even with limited power, there's plenty to do. At one corner of the room is a kitchenette—an L-shaped counter with a sink above a mini-fridge and ... a washing machine. Well, what's left of the gray-and-white portable Whirlpool, anyway. It's the kind made for small apartments, so hoses snake up and over the counter to empty into the sink; the top-loading door has been ripped off entirely. "We've removed all the safety features," Mackintosh quips. "We've fixed it so we can adjust the agitation, just like a hand wash, not a regular cycle." After just three minutes, the cycle is manually stopped and its contents are spun, then removed and stretched out to dry. A couple of rudimentary digital timers scattered nearby help streamline the process.

Mackintosh presents a royal purple wool scarf that's already undergone the process; its style is identical to that of others in a pile awaiting treatment, but it's so much denser that you'd never recognize it as being the same. The shape is, well, *mangled*. "All I did was *full* the yarn," she says, differentiating it from traditional felting—all the rage in recent years—which compresses fibers with super-hot temperatures and much longer agitation cycles.

"You basically ruin it, like you'd ruin your clothes in the washer. I hate to use those words ... but we've devised a technique. I know for a



fact you could never hand-knit this because of what we do on the machine."

Damp pieces are set to dry on wooden racks, which are now occupied by a batch of dark olive green, flamboyantly ruffled strips—dead ringers for gigantic strips of sea kelp. These are the Sabrina, one of Mackintosh's first styles and one that's also garnered the most attention, but which she fears "might have run its course." Ironically, it's one of the designs not named after a river—a practice she inaugurated a few years into her business after selecting titles at random.

In fact, a number of her scarves appear as if plucked from the sea. Mackintosh's wild textures and shapes—the nubby Cypress and Acadia; the spiny Tierra and Westfield; the floppy Willow and Nelson—are born of her background in industrial weaving, an architecturally oriented field focused more on the skills and mechanics of using traditional looms. But during her senior year at the Rhode Island School of Design, a professor suggested she try her hand at a knitting machine to complete her final project more efficiently—even though she'd never taken a knitting class. The machines, while similar to looms, still felt foreign. "I actually felt forced [into using them]," she says with a laugh. "I was able to do this degree project, [but] I made it up as I went along."

It wasn't until 1994, after Mackintosh had moved from Manhattan to the Berkshires (to work for Mill River Textiles, which she witnessed fold), that she launched smARTWORKS ("sm" representing her name) from the basement of her then-home in Hillsdale, New York, and realized, "I didn't know some of the real basics." After moving to an artist-shared warehouse in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, and installing multiple machines, Mackintosh hired Donna, who knew there had to be a better way. "Then I sat down and read the manual," Mackintosh declares. "Four years later! In a funny way, I never would have been able to do [what I do today] without the groundwork of weaving."

Now, in the Sheffield workshop, to which she relocated in 2000, the designer leafs through a stack of graph paper, each with block designs inked by hand. "I do it the old-fashioned way and then translate it to the computer," she says, shrugging. A printer spits out antiquated cards with perforated edges, templates that will program specific processes for each style.

"These are not modern machines," Mackintosh says, almost proudly, of the Swiss contraptions she's snagged off eBay and then "jerry-rigged so they don't jiggle." She points at a still-blank screen set before rows of stainless steel combs and needles. "It's a card reader—it's literally that old-fashioned. This tiny little computer manipulates the actual knitting."

But Mackintosh stresses that hers is not a *set it and forget it* sort of process. "The word 'machine' immediately makes people feel that [it's] not a craft," she laments. "But it's no different than a loom if you're a weaver. The word 'loom' suddenly makes it sound very old-fashioned. The knitting machine is much younger than the loom, which has been around for centuries, but the technique of learning to use it and manipulate it is still an art form."

Says artist Jan Gilmor, of Gilmor Glass in Millerton, New York, "If I see someone wearing one of Sonya's scarves, it's very obvious that it's her work. The fact that it's a multidimensional kind of surface—and the interplay of color—makes her work stand out." (And, *oh*, the colors: 938 in all, the majority of which are custom dyed by a guy in Maine, as spools lining shelves

spanning the width of the room attest. Of these, smARTWORKS has created more than 3,700 striking combinations.)

Mackintosh credits Gilmor with urging her to sell her work, first at the Millbrook Craft Fair, which Gilmor helped organize. "I would never have done a show—it's just not my personality," Mackintosh says. "You always think you can make it, but will someone actually part with money for it? I have to stand there and watch people open their wallet, and that's a really weird feeling."

Good thing she's sort of getting used to it; as Mackintosh constructs accessories that ultimately keep people warm, smARTWORKS is on a strict seasonal schedule. She's about to embark on the final stretch of the summer/fall craft show circuit, when retailers spanning the Northeast place orders under the shadow of the holiday rush. By now, only a handful of stops—Rochester, Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, New Jersey—remain. National boho-chic retailer Anthropologie placed a big order this year for a slew of its retail outlets, as did a number of museum shops and apparel catalogs—gravy, Mackintosh says, because it's fairly easy to crank out a couple hundred scarves in a single color. Another major coup has been placement in *Selvedge* magazine, a U.K.-based, bimonthly trade publication for interior, textile, and fashion designers.

In October, Mackintosh hit the preeminent Paradise City Arts Festival in Northampton, Massachusetts (a sister event at the other end of the state, in Marlborough, takes place November 21 to 23). "I've managed to get into some of the top craft shows in the country," says Mackintosh emphatically. "To go to the Philadelphia Museum show—it's a very humbling experience because there are some truly talented artists out there."

Cue Mackintosh's unlikely mentor: Great Barrington-based actress and knitwear designer Karen Allen, whose thriving business, Karen Allen Fiber Arts, might be perceived as direct competition for smARTWORKS. After all, the two are exactly 8.4 miles apart.

"My work and her work complement each other," Mackintosh explains. "She saw that. Yes, it's knitting, but it does not compete. Our work is quite different. She wanted to carry it—that is an honor." Besides, Mackintosh adds, "I don't want to be a store. My mother ran a bookstore [in England] for twenty-five years and I used to spend lots of time working in the store ..."

Regional shops like Allen's have been instrumental in smARTWORKS' success, largely because, as Gilmor believes, Mackintosh's work is truly original. "She explores lots of textile techniques and tries to use them in a variety of ways that make a garment have a statement rather than just be a flat piece of yardage."

In front of another massive shelving unit stuffed with finished





pieces, Mackintosh scoops up a lonely box from the floor. Inside are past "flubs," which she often revisits when conjuring up new designs. March is spent in an exotic locale like Bali or Puerto Rico, on "inspirational trips" with her partner, Steven Seward; April through June, on experimentation. This year, smARTWORKS is launching five new styles, two of which were reformulated from the scrap heap. She's unveiling a selection of ribbon-laced fingerless gloves and a line made with organic cotton, keeping it "simple," she says, because "you have to remember there are people out there who find the bumps scary."

She wraps the wildly popular Mackenzie around her neck and tucks it into itself via a hidden slit. "This is fun for me to figure out," she says. "My younger sister loves wearing my scarves in London; she'd just had children and she was leaning over a lot—pushing trams and getting in and out of cars—she needed a scarf that stays in place."

Quite clearly, while panache dwells here, practicality is queen. And just as Mackintosh likes to rejigger her machines, she's conscious of making the entire process personal, from dreaming up ideas on a grid to adding signature finishing touches with a dull-green circa-1930 Mellow crochet machine. Her methods are a byproduct of what she describes as a crucial experience: living in Turkey to learn ancient dye techniques. There she became inspired by the village cottage industries and goods trickling through every step of the production process while remaining local. She likes to understand how things work.

"Truth be told," Mackintosh admits, "I've never had much interest in fashion, but I have had a real interest in fabric. I've had to develop some fashion skills to make unusual shapes, but I studied architecture; I didn't study fashion. And I was never a very confident dresser. I'm a textile designer trained in textiles. I'm interested in the technique." ■

Berkshire Living associate editor
Amanda Rae Busch is not a knitter. But she is nitpicky—a job requirement, luckily.

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