

Art Pilgrim



Art school, travel, a degree in Indian art and philosophy, a spell in academia as a researcher critiquing the shit out of educational research using complexity theory... none of it answered my questions about how and why to make art.

Number 25

'FOUR GIRLS PROVE THAT BEAUTY AND BUSINESS IDEAS CAN GO TOGETHER'

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THE CURTAINS THAT CREATED MY WORLD



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SOME UNEXPECTED PAINTINGS ON MY WAY TO SOMEWHERE ELSE

I ended my post last week ('Looking for art in all the wrong places') saying that as an antidote to art gallery disappointment I was going to start looking more closely at the art that flowed through people's lives. I wanted to see furniture, articles of clothing, the colours of housepaint, handmade things. When I mentioned 'birds flying around a handmade lampshade' I realised that I was describing the work of someone I already knew; an artist called Sarah Campbell, who lives on the Scottish island of Lismore.

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Jenny wren cushion, Mogwaii Design



Seagull lampshade, Mogwaii Design



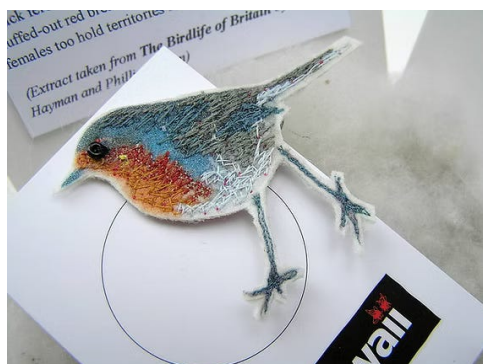
Curlew on the shore, Mogwaii Design



Hand-painting a lampshade, from Sarah's Instagram



Wren and nest brooch, Mogwaii Design



Robin brooch, Mogwaii Design

I first saw Sarah's lampshades and cushions in a shop in the Lismore Heritage Centre, many years ago. The lampshades were made of the most beautiful textured linen, with huge areas of space, like Japanese paintings.



Broody hen, Mogwaii Design



Yellow wagtail and scabious, Mogwaii Design

Her work makes me think of something Michele Pollock said last week in her Art and Nature essay: 'Long before something becomes a concept for my artwork, it is just a noticing: a moth resting on a flower, the geometry of mushroom gills, the shapes of seeds. Instead of announcing themselves as "content," these moments arrive quietly, just asking to be seen.'



Mournful thyris moth on oxeye daisy; the undersides of mock oyster mushrooms; the seeds of hemp dogbane

Art and Nature, 17.3.26

Sarah lives on a croft in the middle of the wild and gentle tufted hillocks of Lismore, an island just off the west coast of Scotland. It's an unusual and special place: a limestone outcrop which supports an abundance of plants, flowers and wildlife.



One of her current projects involves extracting dye from every plant on her croft:

'Inspired by a tribe in Burkina Faso who rank plants highest on the wisdom scale, Sarah's latest project is a deep dive into the natural world around her. Seeing plants not just as flora but as neighbours, extended family, and protectors, she aims to learn from them and understand their profound power.

To do this, Sarah is embarking on a vast project: she's extracting dye from every plant on her croft. She meticulously dyes swatches of wool, cotton, linen, and silk, then modifies half of her swatches with iron'.

From Sarah's website



Sarah also makes intaglio prints, using discarded seed milk cartons, each one of which is a reflection of her relationship to a specific place or plant, some of which have plants and twigs embossed directly onto the paper.



And then I saw that she's also now making paintings.



Ravel, Acrylic on canvas with batiq and stitch

Her paintings feel different to me from the kind of thing that I tend to see in galleries.

I was at an exhibition in the centre of Edinburgh the other day, of a well-known and very established artist who I had never heard of before. It was upstairs from something else I was

visiting; I went up to have a look with no expectations.

I found it really confusing. I couldn't understand the curation, which I realised afterwards was something about not being able to find any kind of story in the paintings themselves, nothing that drew me in. Without this, I started looking for a story through time in the exhibition as a whole, wanting to understand the artist's journey, their process. But it wasn't there. Figurative work from one decade was juxtaposed with abstract work from twenty years later. I couldn't see anything happening, either in the paintings, or looking at them all together.

I hadn't realised that I was looking for stories when I looked at paintings. The sense that something is going on, beyond whatever it is that's being portrayed, literally or otherwise. Most of the time I probably can't describe or name what that something is, but nonetheless, if I'm lucky, it's there.

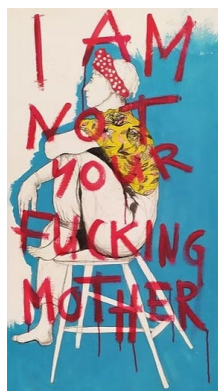
Sarah's paintings whisper stories to me. I don't know exactly what the stories are, but that doesn't matter, my mind can make them up, or feel them without knowing their precise shape.



'Conversation', Acrylic on canvas with batiq and stitch

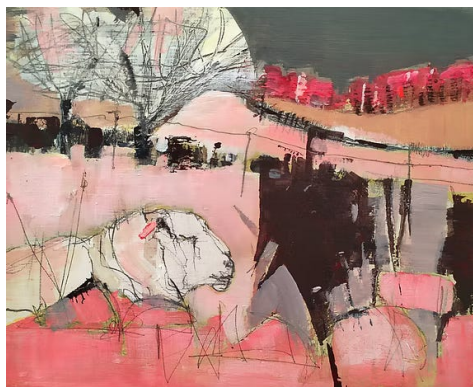


'Pomp', Acrylic on canvas with batiq and stitch



'RE Present', Acrylic on canvas, with batiq and stitch

Even her landscapes tell me something a little different.



'Sheep in pink field', Acrylic and graphite on board



'Alasrath 2', Acrylic and graphite on canvas

I went looking for half-remembered lampshades, and found some paintings that I would never have seen otherwise. You never know what you're going to find when you take off in a new direction...

Sarah runs short courses on Lismore.

This year she's offering Printing with Plants, Drawing in the Wild, and Wild Plant Dyeing.

'FOUR GIRLS PROVE THAT BEAUTY AND BUSINESS IDEAS CAN GO TOGETHER'



In the summer of 1964, a small mail-order company called Biba released a pink gingham dress. They sold 17,000 of these dresses, which allowed Biba's founder, Barbara Hulanicki, to give up her career as a fashion illustrator and devote herself full time to the creation of 'one of the most influential and democratising' fashion movements of the 60s and 70s.

Biba went from being a small boutique to a seven-storey department store with fifteen departments, each to a theme; including Victoriana, Pop Art, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco. There was a beauty parlour, a roof garden tea room, and the 500-seat Rainbow Room restaurant which hosted musicians such as the New York Dolls, the Pointer Sisters and Liberace. Eventually Biba had 'a children's floor, a floor for men, a book store, a food market, and a "home" floor which sold items such as wallpaper, paint, cutlery, soft furnishings and even statues', as well as cosmetics in every Dorothy Perkins store. It's been called 'the world's first lifestyle label'.



The pink dress, on display at the exhibition



Inside 'Big Biba', the Biba department store



Men's shoes in Big Biba



Big Biba food market



Inside a Biba Boutique in London in June 1966. Shoppers bought more a designer rather than just clothes.
Surrey Spokesman Daily Mirror/Getty Images

I lived Biba as a teenager. Deep purple lip-gloss, smudgy dark green eye shadow, long hair, and a long green dress that I made from an Indian bedspread. You don't realise that you're in something extraordinary at the time, do you? We took the swirling multi-coloured patterns in the clothing in the shops for granted; the wildly fantastic album covers, the psychedelic posters on billboards advertising music festivals that highlighted hundreds of bands that went on to become legendary. I never stopped to think about the fact that everything was exploding visually from reports of the hallucinogenic experiences that people

reported as they experimented with magic mushrooms and LSD. We scraped the insides out of banana skins, soaked morning glory seeds to get rid of their poison, tried anything that we had read might be a free way to get high.

When I stepped into the Biba exhibition, all of this started to move out from the shadows of long-forgotten parts of my mind.





Barbara Hulanicki took ideas from Art Nouveau, Victoriana, ‘silent movie dark smudged eyes’, and Art Deco. The Victoriana is interesting, at a time when, in architecture, Victorian buildings were being torn down and replaced with plain Modernist blocks and cubes. I never thought before about the idea that the crowded posters, swirling album covers and fabrics of the 60s/70s might have been an conscious or unconscious rejection of that fashion for unadorned white space, the preference for hard edges and straight lines.

Hulanicki’s drawings from her previous career as a fashion illustrator in the 1950s show a neat, restrained aesthetic, with plenty of sharp lines.



Within a few years though, she’d invented the Biba girl.





An exhibition text describes the Biba Look:

'For Hulanicki the epitome of the look was the Biba house model (1969- 73) Ingrid Boulting. 'Ingrid was the perfect shape. The idea was that one was trying to get that shape onto people who weren't that shape'. Biba clothes reflected the Biba girl, from the early mini- dresses of the skinny Biba 'Dolly Bird' to the sexually alluring clothes of the Biba woman from 1970 onwards. Although the Biba silhouette changed, reflecting the evolution of fashion, the Biba look remained constant'.



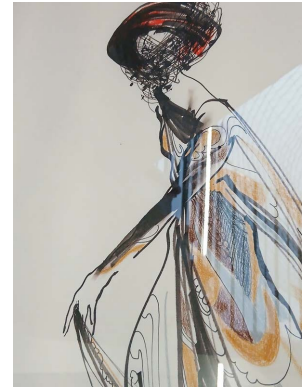
Biba was an enormous success and a huge cultural influence, but, despite a million visitors a week visiting Big Biba near the end, it suddenly collapsed due to the economic downturn of 1975: 'Just as it seemed that nothing could affect this charmed existence, disaster struck and a bad mail order season turned a booming business into a financial disaster almost overnight. ...After disagreements with the British Land Board about creative control, Barbara Hulanicki left the company she had founded in 1975. Biba was closed soon afterwards by the British Land Company after it was decided that the Derry and Toms building was worth more than the ailing business itself'.

The rise and fall of Biba

Dovecot studios are also showing a small number of fashion illustrations from the same period, unconnected to the Biba story.



Antonio Lopez, YSL Furs, 1965, ink and collage on paper



Kenneth Paul Block, Pucci, 1973, ink and pastel on paper



Robert Melendez, Irish Linen, 1969, charcoal and wash on paper



Steven Stipelman, *Winter Furs*, 1972, charcoal and gouache on tonal paper



Ruth Freeman, *Yellow Suit*, 1960s, ink and wash on paper



Tod Draz, *Balenciaga*, 1962, ink on paper

I adore these drawings, such gorgeous free lines...

The Biba exhibition runs at Dovecot Studios until the 27th June, 2026

Dovecot studios is a tapestry studio which was originally a Victorian public baths and swimming pool. I used to swim there as a kid. It still feels slightly weird to look down from what used to be the viewing platform and remember its blue water...



THE CURTAINS THAT CREATED MY WORLD



I think these curtains are probably responsible for everything. My longing for travel to warm and distant places. My excitement about the world. My instinct for a strong black line, and my desire to make that line just a little wonky, slightly abstracted.

The curtains were bought by my parents some time in the late 1950s. I have a handmade book somewhere which was made by a Danish 'au pair' girl who came to look after me and my brother and sister. The first page of the book shows my parents in their sitting room in their little bungalow on an estate on the outskirts of Edinburgh; Ercol chairs and matching coffee table, gorgeous pottery lamps, my mother with her knitting machine, my father looking serious.



Everything in that room is a vintage rarity now. I find it hard to believe that they just lived in it all then, buying the latest modern fabrics and Bernard Leach-style lamps.

I don't know if the curtains hung in that room, or in a bedroom. I think probably in a bedroom, and, looking at them day after day, I absorbed them into my bloodstream.

They were made by Sanderson, who still make fabrics today. In the 1950s Sanderson were proud of the up-to-date, modern processes they were using for producing block and screen-printed fabrics and matching wallpaper.

The basic unit of the curtain design is one simple idea, repeated a number of times. Somehow, though, you don't understand this when you look at the curtains themselves. I, at least, just see a magical, hot place, unfurling endlessly towards an imagined horizon.

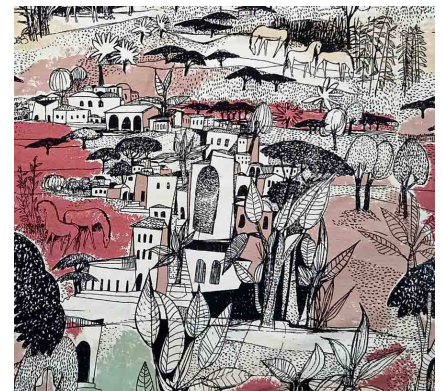
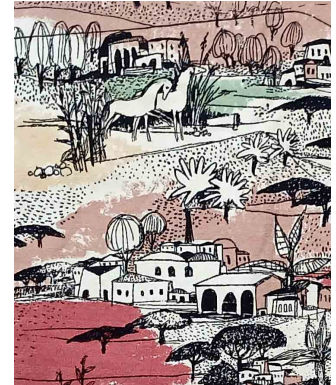


This is the basic unit:



I don't really understand how they did it. You can see a line in the top section (of the whole curtain) which seems to me to be an edge, but then underneath that there are trees which would overlap that line if you continued it downwards, and all the rest of the piece doesn't seem to have any edges or overlaps of any kind.

I must have pored over these images endlessly, and they still fascinate me.



The design is called 'Viterbo', created for Sanderson fabrics by a German artist called Walter Matysiak (1915-1985).

Actual Viterbo, Italy:

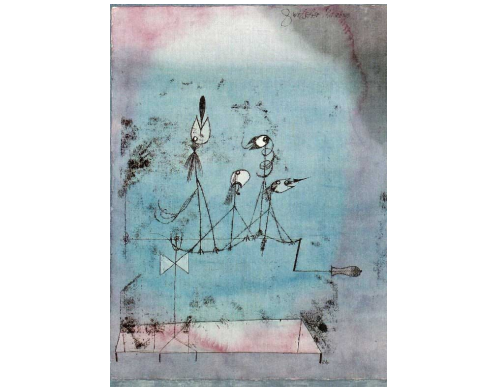


Palazzo dei Papi, Viterbo

I can't find any record of the curtains online with the right colours, but the V&A have this version:



Walter Matysiak's father ran a decorating business, and apparently his mother 'would like to have become a needlework teacher'. At the age of 14 he began an apprenticeship with his father, and a year later had lessons from a painter in Breslau. Apparently during this time he saw an exhibition by Paul Klee, where he saw 'The Twittering Machine', which he later described as one of his favourite paintings.



The Twittering Machine, Paul Klee, 1922

Matysiak studied at the Academy of Fine Arts and the State School of Applied Arts in Munich. From 1946 he became a freelance painter and graphic designer, working for a number of textile firms as a pattern-designer, and was also an illustrator, caricaturist, and cartoonist. He later taught drawing and painting at the Lake Constance Art School in Switzerland, and exhibited in France, Germany and Switzerland.

'Walter Matysiak was a poet with brush and paint and a highly productive artist who mastered the technique of the Old Masters with virtuosity. His works captivate "with his boundless imagination, his bubbling ideas, his almost high-spirited delight in fables, in inventing the strangest apparitions and stories." He dealt intensively with artists he admired, such as Paul Klee, Lyonel Feininger and Joan Miro. Urs von Schroeder divides his work into "imaginary" and "funny" images. Many of Matysiak's paintings and graphics captivate with their humor, but often there is a serious level behind them. He also did not shy away from incorporating taboo topics such as sexuality, corruption or war into his work. The techniques he used were oil

painting, watercolour, tempera, ink pen and brush, coloured pencil, pencil, drypoint etching, woodcut and linocut and mixed forms.

His multifaceted oeuvre combines contradictions and contrasts, is both figurative and abstract. His work is difficult to classify stylistically: he took up elements of illusionism, cubism and surrealism and irritated (translation?) the viewer by combining stylistic elements in an often grotesque way. It is therefore not possible to speak of an actual development, but rather Matysiak varied styles and motifs as uninhibitedly as he did skilfully'.

From Wikipedia (in German)

Don't you just love that idea of 'irritating the viewer', and it being difficult 'to speak of an actual development'? I'm sure Paul Klee would have approved.

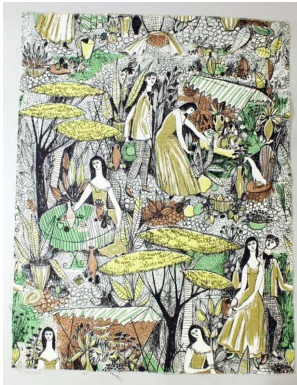
There's not much of his work to see online. There are a few textiles in the V&A:



Anmut, V&A



Patizier, V&A



Peinture, Detail, V&A



Peinture, V&A

‘Peinture’ (‘Painting’), above, is quite amazing for a curtain design.



Pelanze, Detail, V&A



Pelanze, V&A

I found even fewer of his drawings and paintings.



Reading about Matysiak’s influences and range of work brings home to me what an incredible time artists were living in then.

I wish there was more of his work to see.



Articles included in your edition of the Substack Print:

<https://tamsinhaggis.substack.com/p/some-unexpected-paintings-on-my-way?r=1b6gdj>

<https://tamsinhaggis.substack.com/p/for-girls-prove-that-beauty-and?r=1b6gdj>

<https://tamsinhaggis.substack.com/p/the-curtains-that-created-my-world?r=1b6gdj>

Apologies for the odd bit of wonkiness in this print version. The programme that pulls the articles off Substack sometimes can't cope and I have to adjust manually - hence the little extra paragraphs or images that may appear at the top or bottom of a column, or sometimes handwritten punctuation.

About Art Pilgrim

Follow the adventures of Art Pilgrim as she leaves art school perplexed, becomes a teacher, and journeys onwards to Italy, North India, and the distant mountains of a Tokyo skyline, before studying Indian art, philosophy, and Sanskrit. Dive with her into complexity theory as an approach to unpicking models of adult learning, then follow her out of academia and back into the world of colour and paint. Watch her struggle to reconnect to her art as she draws on biology, fractals, and the sculptures of ancient India as sources for her painting. Finally, arrive with her back into the Edinburgh present and see what happens next.



This is a Substack Newsletter published every week by Tamsin Haggis at tamsinhaggis.substack.com. Most recent newsletters have an audio version.

There are currently more than ninety essays on Substack. The personal story (which, though personal, takes in Indian and Chinese art, complexity theory and teaching) runs from October, 2024 to June, 2025. After that, they cover a range of topics which are stimulated by visiting Edinburgh galleries and reflecting on what I find there. There's a seven-part series, for example, on Context and Time, which arose after my first visit to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. Check me out!

The order of articles in this print version is different from online, in order to create some variety. The online articles often appear in a series, which might not make for interesting reading as a one-off newsletter!