

Cloth encounters

Melbourne textile studio, Spacecraft, is making a big buzz in international fashion with their imaginative designs.

By Ella Mudie

Stewart Russell is looking for a quiet spot to take my phone call. This is no easy task in a studio abuzz with the noise of light industry at work on a host of design and art projects, but Russell wouldn't have it any other way. "When I came to Australia I wanted to get my hands dirty a little bit more with design, rather than just talking about it," he says of Spacecraft's impetus. "And I wanted to set up a studio that would be commercially viable."

It's been close to eight years since the Scottish-born Russell first arrived in Australia with a germ of an idea that has since evolved into a textile studio encompassing

contemporary fashion, interiors and homewares, not to mention visual art projects and exhibitions. Russell set up and runs the Melbourne-based Spacecraft with his partner and business manager Donna O'Brien, while New Zealand textile designer and printer Bonnie Ashley, who has previously worked for print-based fashion labels like Eley Kishimoto and Jessica Ogden, is the third permanent fixture. The ranks are then swelled with specialists and technicians depending on the projects at hand.

While Russell says he prefers to keep design and art projects separate because "it's easier to keep my head straight if I am

focused on what I am making" there is one Spacecraft project where the two quite literally bleed together - the backing cloth of the print table. The studio has one table dedicated solely to experimentation and print development and when its backing cloth becomes saturated every couple of months it has to be replaced. Russell often finds chance compositions on the cloth and will cut it up to make paintings. "Perhaps more than any single piece of artwork we produce, these backing cloth paintings manage to capture the energy of the studio in full flight," he says.





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It was at a recent exhibition of these backing cloths in Tokyo that Russell was approached by one of Japan’s most exciting young designers, Dress Camp’s Toshikazu Iwaya, with a request to make a painting for him. Iwaya is among a new breed of young Japanese designers embracing bold prints, saturated colour and high-fashion tailoring in a departure from the anti-fashion of Japan’s old guard. Russell’s painting immediately resonated and Iwaya asked if he could turn it into yardage to create a dress from it. The painting metamorphosed into a multi-layered gown fit for the like of Marie Antoinette and was the last dress to come down the catwalk at the Dress Camp show at Tokyo Fashion Week.

As the director of the famous London Printworks for six years before moving to Australia, collaborating with other designers and artists is nothing new for Russell.

He continues to organise exhibitions that challenge artists and the public alike to rethink design. At Craft Victoria in 2007 he collected ideas then gave them away for free as part of the Something for Nothing project. The Spacecraft studio has also become something of a go-to place for visual artists looking to realise textile-based artworks.

“I like to work with other artists because they come with no preconceived ideas of what is possible. When you work in print a lot you begin to unconsciously think that things can only be a certain way because that’s how the other people you work with make them. But when artists come in they ask for things out of the ordinary.”

www.spacecraftaustralia.com