



# Stitching stories

**Deirdre McSharry** award-winning magazine editor, formerly of *Cosmopolitan* and *Country Living*, has known model turned fabric artist Mick Lindberg for many years and celebrates for *The Bath Magazine* the opening of an exhibition of her fabulously colourful fabric paintings in Bath this summer

**P**ainting with fabric is what Mick Lindberg does. Where and how she finds the meaning of life, the common thread is revealed in her pictures – images of women expressed in everyday fabrics, cut and so finely stitched, it gives the impression of brush strokes. Former model, award-winning photographer, designer and creator of an evocative home and garden, Mick says of her fabric art: “Stitching is slow happiness. I never throw out fabrics, I love recycling, I like the story.” The alchemy of her work is her own.

“I feel I was born with a needle and thread in my hand,” says Mick, “as long as I can remember I have been stitching. It is what your hands know

and feel that comes together in what you create.” Wearing one of her own designs, she travels light with a shoulder bag, adorned with the silver Hands of Fatima, the bag inevitably contains a piece of work in progress.

Mick grew up in Sweden in the 1950s and recalls her childhood memories: “I sat under the table at my mother’s sewing circle, absorbing the advice, exchange of patterns and motifs. The art of textile was passed on from my mother and grandmother.

For Mick stitching is as natural as breathing, pruning the roses or taking her granddaughters on a picnic.

“I don’t separate my creativity from my life . . . the way you dress,



Opposite, CULTURAL THREADS: *Tea for Two* is a collision between European and African textile traditions

EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY: main picture, *The Fortune Teller's Daughter* contains fabric pieces found at Buff Baer's rag market in Bradford-on-Avon

Right, *La Petit Fleur*

dream, decorate your home, the cake you bake, it is all part of the artist's life. I don't separate art from life."

As Mick travels the world she collects stories from different cultures and pieces of fabric, all adding to the eclectic mix and helping to share the stories. In *The Fortune Teller's Daughter*, which is on view in Rose and Tony Hepworth's lightfilled gallery in Margaret's Buildings, Bath, can be found fabric from Buff Baer's rag market in Bradford-on-Avon. This is Mick's first one woman show of textile art, (she has had many shows of her haunting black and white photographs) opening mid August and is an important step in revealing stitched fabric as a serious art form.

Mick is protective about her fabric pictures. "They are not craft, they are art," she says. "Like a painter I have the canvas, I apply the fabric as if it is paint. The stitches have to be perfect, something uneven is upsetting. There is no stress, when I stitch stress disappears. I love when I cut out the fabric and set up the piece. I talk to the work . . . It's what your hands know and feel that comes together in what you do."

Her Swedish inheritance informs her feeling for handwoven fabrics, colour, humour, and her evocation of women, mysterious and often sensuous, as the viewer will see in this compelling show of fabric pictures, some hanging, some framed. There is something of an icon about these images. Here is a young woman, watchful, playful, holding the baby, a tea cup, maybe a cat, another with a pheasant perched on her head. They look out of the canvas at us, the watchers, still, with an



icon's steady gaze.

Sometimes there is something for the lightness of the Swedish movie *Smiles of a Summer Night* in Mick's work. She wants to convey and to celebrate her cultural identity.

"The Swedish heritage runs deep but I am equally interested in the fusion of cultures, the re-cycling, re-shaping of ideas and materials from one medium to another." She feels that whether she is working on a photographic collage, a pattern of a dress, or layering of fabric shapes to create an image, "it is what lies in between that interests me."

“I don't separate my creativity from my life . . . **the way you dress, dream, decorate your home, the cake you bake, it is all part of the artist's life**”

Inspiration for her work often occurs on her travels, "the journeys I take in real time, but also those nocturnal ones where dreams are made." It was a collision with the vibrant tribal Kinte cloths in Gibbs Farm, an art centre in East Africa – where she had been invited to work – that she found herself cutting up and sewing the cloth to make pictures, portraits

# ARTISTprofile

really, of the local women.

At a textile fair, of tribal work, suddenly in her mind she saw a black woman dressed in brilliant fabric. "I had this vision," – and that was the birth of her fabric images.

"The characters I create on canvas often have a life of their own. When you spend time touching, stitching, it becomes part of a meditation, you weave a story, and that energy remains inside the picture."

Tapestry, weaving, quilting, sackcloth, metallics, canvas, even bed sheets, from Picasso to Louise Bourgeois, from Grayson Perry to Tracey Emin and here in Bath, textile artist Carole Waller, painter of fabrics and dreamer of gorgeous clothes – artists are

currently making hay with fabric. And audiences are ready to embrace the movement too, demonstrated by the queues of fans thronging the Royal Academy to see Grayson Perry's tapestries *The Vanity of Small Differences*.

This is an art form which has distanced itself, with its range of references and its messages, from the homespun craft movement. The Financial Times reported: 'Fabric based art has broken free.'

Anthony Hepworth, of the eponymous Bath gallery, is responding to this mood with this fresh exhibition of Mick's work. He says: "In the wonderful atmosphere Mick evokes in her pictures, in their seeming simplicity – they are in fact very sophisticated – her 'paintings' remind me of early English portraiture . . . those girls with almond eyes presented by the itinerant limners of the early 19th century, what we now call the British Folk Art tradition."

Inevitably Mick's passion for fabric informed the years she worked as a fashion model in Paris, for Kenzo and with photographer Sarah Moon. She says: "It was a window into something I could not have imagined. I loved the clothes, the crazier the better. That thread was always there, like a ball of cotton, unravelling itself."

Mick says that Kenzo's memorable collections, evoking Kabuki theatre, Turkish peasants or Berber nomads, were a joy to wear and absorb. "It's the fusion of culture, the overlap of folk design, the juxtaposition of people or place or parable. The stitching of one's story, that's the fascination."

Unsurprisingly the Japanese, in search of meaning to their clothes, have beaten a path to her door. Mick's dresses are crafted in folds of heavy linens in painterly colours. Or simple shifts in moth-like shades. The moth is Mick's motif, her signature, a hand printed moth label is sewn into each of her creations and each dress arrives in a moth printed bag.

The fabric pictures are similarly signed.

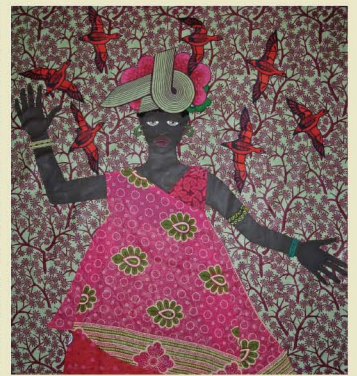
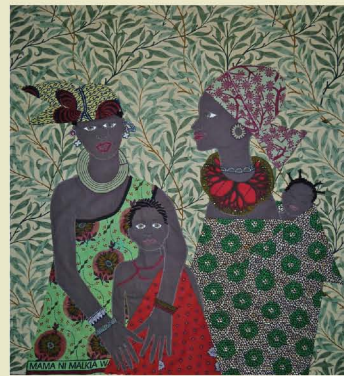
"It's a sort of moth-amorphosis, a transformation from old into new, and new into old," she laughs. Her life is her art.

Mick Lindberg is that rare creature, a unique talent, whose work will transcend many, many summers. But don't just take my word for it, go and see for yourself. ■

*Mick Lindberg's exhibition Fabric Paintings is at the Anthony Hepworth fine art gallery, Margarets Buildings, Bath, from Saturday 17 August until 3 September, 11am to 5pm Tues – Sat.*



THE ARTIST: Swedish born Mick Lindberg



ICONIC WOMEN: top, *Bird Song* – Mick Lindberg's collection inspired by her work in East Africa. Below, details from *Tanzania Talking* and *Seven Birds and a Red Dress*. Bottom of page, *A Child is Born*, using the colours of Mick Lindberg's native Scandinavia