

MIDAS

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MARINA MILL

John Gray

If you're a young artist, fledgling designer, or novice craftsman, you may not want to hear what I have to say next. Talent isn't enough. Nor luck. Nor persistence. Not even hard work is guaranteed to bring you continued success. In the end, you'll need to put yourself on the market, and that means selling yourself, or certainly finding someone who can do the selling for you.

Keith Rawkins, co-founder of Marina Mill, learnt this the hard way. "We'd always believed that we didn't need advertising, that if we were good we'd be found. It doesn't work like that. Marketing is the end of the business chain; if you don't do it, you're always one link short." Keith and Marina Mill may have taken their time to realise this, but a history rich in talent, creative innovation, craftsmanship, persistence and hard graft means that what they do market in the way of specially hand-printed and

Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, Henry Moore. "We were printing Paris couture and London couture," Keith tells me. "Ascher was very innovative and so was couture. Experimentation was going on all the time. We did any and everything." Keith's involvement in that 'any and everything' increased dramatically when Ascher's frantic and emotional studio manager smashed a screen across a table one day and walked out in the middle of the Paris collections, never to return. Keith was recalled from honeymoon at the time to sort out the mess. Did he enjoy his new responsibilities?

"I loved it. It was traumatic because it was all done under pressure. Fashion generally is very different from interior design. By definition it has to be 'now' and there's no time to get anything wrong or have a second go; and the fashion industry was even more frantic then." Ascher Ltd

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woven fabrics is certainly unique. You didn't think the moral of this story was simply going to be 'marketing', did you? No, there's something for all you romantics and innocents too.

When Keith and Stephanie Rawkins left art college in the early sixties they couldn't make a living from fine art, so they decided to try something else they'd learnt during their degree. That something else soon turned out to be textiles when Keith confidently acquired (or "blagged" as Keith says) a job at Ascher's London print works. Zika Ascher had a world wide reputation. He did something no one had ever done before when he commissioned the top artists of the day to design headscarves. We're talking names that even someone with an abbreviated knowledge of modern art will know: Matisse, Barbara

were hand printers, and it was here that Keith not only learnt his craft but decided that if he and Stephanie were ever to set up business on their own then it would be as textile designers and hand printers. Hand printing was more akin to art: the hands-on process and the quality of the final product meant they wouldn't drift too far from their fine art roots.

I know next to nothing about textiles. When Keith later shows me around Marina Mill's printworks and describes some of the processes involved in the production of their fabrics, I don't feel so bad about my ignorance. I could take all month to get up on the subject and I would still know next to nothing. Even some of the very top interior designers are unaware of the techniques and expertise involved in hand printing quality textiles. Not only does



“All the stories are true, truer than true! It was all very different then. Anything went. Whatever you did, as long as you could get it on to fabric you’d sell it. I could walk into a new boutique that wasn’t there yesterday with four little samples and come out with an order for two thousand yards just like that. We had a basement in Fulham with a three yard table where I would have to print those two thousand yards. You would never even try to do it now.”

Marina Mill produce every stage of the design process to come up with exceptional hand prints or sophisticated weaves, but all the printed fabrics are done entirely by hand in their printworks. Before me are the calico run-ways of the long print tables; round the corner are the titanic wash basins where the colours are specially mixed; whilst beside me Keith holds up a screen to explain how the designs are transferred to the polyester mesh. There’s a quiet glow of confidence about Keith throughout our meeting. It’s the sort of confidence and glow that comes from someone who has finally figured out how to make work what he loves doing most.

It was in 1967, after a four year apprenticeship at Ascher’s, that Keith went into business with his wife as Stefan Keef, providing London’s epic fashion scene with unique hand-printed fabrics. Sixties London was a place of such enormous opportunity for creative talents that young artists now will probably want to take up a foetal position in a darkened room at the thought of what they missed. “All the stories are true,” Keith says, doing nothing to break it to me gently – “truer than true! It was all very different then. Anything went. Whatever you did, as long as you could get it on to fabric you’d sell it. I could walk into a new boutique that wasn’t there yesterday with four little samples and come out with an order for two thousand yards just like that. We had a basement in Fulham with a three yard table where I would have to print those two thousand yards. You would never even try to do it now.”

As there was no proper door to this basement workshop, Keith and Stephanie would have to overcome an obstacle course of fire escape, wobbly chair and window, before they reached the permanently damp floor on which they could stand and admire the small hand basin in which they washed their screens. None of which helps if one of your team is eight months pregnant. So no, you probably wouldn’t attempt such a thing now.

Despite this deprivation, Stefan Keef successfully supplied fabrics for such icons as Ossie Clark, Caroline Charles, Thea Porter, Mr Fish and many more. There was one particular shop in Beauchamp (pronounced Beecham) Place called Deborah & Clare which supplied shirts for what was then called the Peacock revolution. Stefan Keef did the fabrics for Deborah & Clare, and Keith just happened to be in the shop one day talking to Clare about new ideas when George Harrison’s wife, Patti, phoned to ask if they had any fabulous fabrics for their new house at Henley-on-Thames. Clare didn’t, but said she had someone there who could create them especially for her. And so began a year long project with Stefan Keef producing bespoke fabrics for most of the rooms of the ex-Beatles’ Victorian neo-Gothic mansion, Friar Park. It was all done under a veil of secrecy. Living in the gate lodge was George’s brother, a man who took pride in spearheading the huge security at the house. In the middle lodge lived Klaus Voorman (bass player with Manfred Mann and designer of the Beatles’ Revolver cover) who Keith would

occasionally see mowing the lawn as he drove up to the house on a daily basis: a far more pleasant journey than the descent into his dingy Fulham workshop. The only regret Keith now has is that they never made anything of it in business terms. “This is for me the quintessential difference between us then and us now: we made no use of it. We did the job, we got paid, and we had a fabulous time doing it, it was a fantastic experience, but we didn’t take it and make a lot else happen. These days we’d make so much of it; in the nicest possible way of course - we’d ask permission. Then though, we didn’t have a business mind.” This was the theme all the way through the seventies: Stefan Keef did a lot of amazing things for a lot of top people but never quite made it to the next level, never made any advance simply because at the time they were still purely artists.

By the twilight of the seventies things were changing rapidly, especially in the fashion world. The mass production of fabrics was swarming to the Far East and many companies were going down; even Stefan Keef was compelled to reduce their workforce to just husband and wife team again. When electricity was rationed during Britain’s infamous three day week, Keith was printing at night by lamplight.

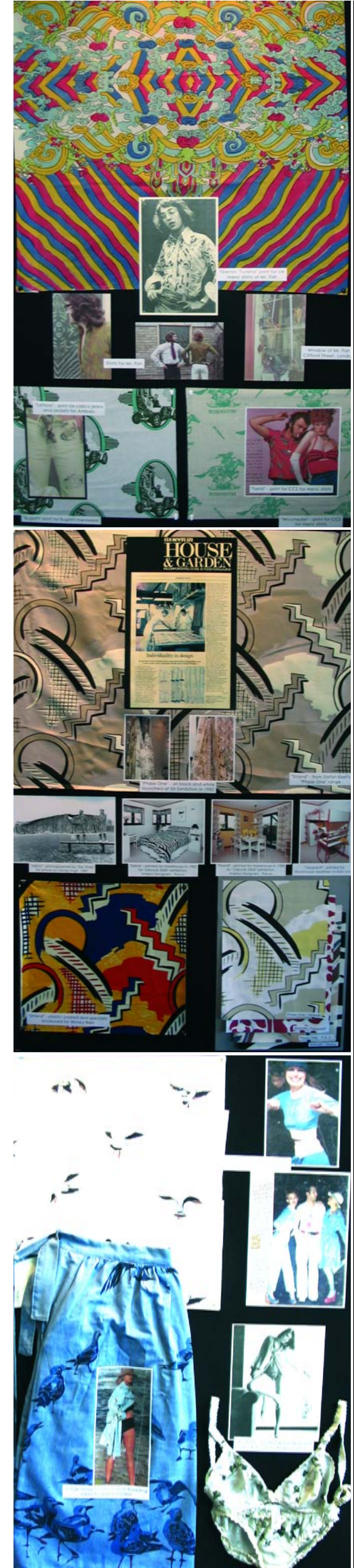
At this point, in order to survive, Stefan Keef made a clever move sideways into home furnishings. Liberty’s of London commissioned them to produce printed silk cushions and bedspreads for their windows and bed linen departments. Harvey Nichols and Harrods soon followed and their problem of self-publicity had almost solved itself.

“We had our fabrics in the front windows all along Regent Street.” With the business taking off in this new direction, Keith was struggling to keep up. “I was printing it myself, printing the line drawing of whatever designs we had done, and Steph and I were painting it by hand, and of course there’s only so much you can produce before you’re boss-eyed. So Liberty’s said if you can convert these designs into multi-coloured prints rather than having to paint them, we’ll buy them. So that’s when our ranges were born. And we then started looking again for ways of printing and therefore employing.”

At the beginning of the eighties they moved the business to a run-down Victorian coach house in Bexley, which Keith remembered as being empty from his days as a paperboy. Having renovated it, they set up their table and started printing again. With the soft furnishings success came their first exhibition at the Olympia IDI (Interior Design International) show.

Stefan Keef produced a radically different stand. Keith acquired several sewer pipes, painted them black, interlocked them into a tower-like structure and had purely black and white fabrics flowing out of them as though they were water. The response was overwhelming, with orders to buy, business offers, and a feature by House & Garden magazine. While this took them on to many interesting projects throughout the eighties, they still weren’t making the most of the publicity, they still hadn’t sorted out what many would think of as a mundane business matter: how to sell quality goods to the right clientele.

That minor wrinkle had been ironed out by the early nineties though. If there’s one thing I pick up from talking to Keith about Marina Mill’s story, then it’s that there doesn’t appear to be any shortage of people who believed in them. And so it was with the help and backing of a couple of friends that Keith and Stephanie put together their first business model. Marketing, weekly meetings, a focus on the right sort of client, a new name - oh, and a computer. From yet another old Victorian Mill, this time on



the banks of the Medway River, they set about transforming boat interiors. It was their agent, Michael Abbott, who suggested they ought to focus on the marine industry. At first Keith was puzzled: he thought of the interior of a boat as functional, cramped, not the sort of place for their high-class textiles, and at that time he had a point: regular boat interiors were largely presented in bad plastic with awful colours and schemes, more like a fifties caravan or a burger bar than a floating palace of opulence. One thing you don't write into your business plan is the willingness to give anything a go, and it's probably fair to say that the sixties mindset of 'anything goes' is what took Marina Mill along to Fairline Boats. They were soon given carte blanche to design and produce fabrics for Fairline's leading production boat. Marina Mill's stunning work was then taken up by Princess Yachts, who Keith says were a 'dream' to work for. It still is, as Marina Mill produces exclusive fabrics for Princess to this day.

It wasn't just a case of Marina Mill bringing something new to the world of marine interiors; the marine industry also inspired something new from the Mill. They felt that as luxury boat design improved, they would have to take their fabrics seriously upmarket. "And in order to do that we had to make them more sumptuous and felt that some needed to be woven." Keith explains. "So we started designing for weave." These woven designs took them into the exclusive range of super yachts and cruise liners. It was this work with super yachts, and in particular their vast outdoor areas, that led Marina Mill to consider creat-



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ing a specially made outdoor fabric. Historically there had only been one really well-known exterior fabric, generically known as Sunbrella. This mass-produced fabric was high-grade in terms of wear, but it was not a luxury fabric. Marina Mill felt they could make an exterior fabric which was both durable and luxurious, a material that was light fast, washable, saline resistant, chlorine resistant, water repellent, porous, stain resistant, but also soft, welcoming, and a pleasure to sit on. Over the next two years they developed just such a material. The weaver they were working with brought them a hospital grade fabric: the only thing it had going for it was that it was urine resistant, high-performance and soft. So the Mill got the weaver to take the yarns and reconstruct it into something that would cover their shopping list of versatility and subtlety. They used simple designs – a plaid (Sunart), a stripe (Lyon), a check (Rannoch), and a plain (Mull) – and now have a range of thirty four colours. The final result is a woven chenille jacquard called EXTEX. They'd created great works before but the difference now was they knew just how to push it. They advertised with a vigour that made things happen for them. EXTEX is such a success that it even won a BCFA Product Approval Award.

The marine industry is not the only one that benefits from this new focus; Marina Mill nowadays provides customised or exclusive textiles to the foremost interior designers for

private residences, villas and hotels around the world. Then there is the work they do for English Heritage where they hand print meticulous replications of historical fabrics for royal castles and households. This is more or less the only instance where they will actually copy anything. Because Marina Mill manufactures its own products people misunderstand the nature of its business. Keith explains: "Sometimes people will shamelessly bring us a fabric and ask us to copy it for cheaper than the original, but we won't. Besides which we're designers, and we always think we can do it better anyway. So why not have something original, why copy it. That's not to say we won't work in a period. If someone brings us a Regency fabric that is in an archive of theirs and asks us to reproduce it then we'll do that, but if anyone has that same fabric in a current range we won't copy it." It's extraordinary that even in the world of high-end design there's always someone looking to do things cheaper. "I don't think many people realise how tight a control there is on something that seems to be the lap of luxury. It's still budget controlled all the way through. Even a boat that is going to cost a 100 million dollars is on a budget."

This business realism is reflected in the way Marina Mill works with its clients. "We have one meeting free at which all kinds of things are put in front of them," Keith says, "all kinds of things are said and done, but after that we charge for

everything we do. Everything we do is completely unique and done for them and them alone and they can really have whatever they want: they can have floral design, Egyptian design, it can be regency, it can be silk, they can have gold in the fabrics, pearls, whatever. They pay for samples all the way through but what they get in the end is a boat full of things they'll never see anywhere else, which is what most of them want. And it's such a simple principle. We never hoodwink anyone, they know what it costs before we do it, and, extraordinarily, they really appreciate all the more what we're doing. What's important is that everyone knows where they are, you actually work to order and it all runs smoothly. It's why we're still here."

"A boat full of things you'll never see anywhere else." Let's just expand on that for a moment. For example, Marina Mill will create exclusive fabrics for the top two tiers of a super yacht, both the owner's residence and the VIP area. And in order to make the design as special as possible there is a signature to all the fabrics produced. This signature motif can be something picked up from the name of the boat, the style of the boat, or the style in which the super yacht designer wants to work. Maybe there's a little diamond motif woven into the fabric which then has the principal design printed or woven over it, so there's always a second take to the design, and on closer inspection you'll realise it's all been





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specially done. These subtle signatures of Marina Mill's finally tuned textiles often inspire other craftsmen with their own designs, so that the motif is then picked up in the design of the china or the glass or the marquetry, and the whole interior begins to hum with a bespoke beauty.

The knowledge, skill and experience involved in Marina Mill's business means it isn't the sort of venture you can start overnight. With some four decades of designing bespoke textiles under their belt, the Mill has now accumulated a large archive of around 2000 designs for print and nearly 500 for weave. Style-wise, of course, anything goes, but this vast body of work has been distilled into a set of stunning fabric collections, ranging from the modern geometry of Modus to the historical elegance of Carrington-Cox. This last range is named after Keith's grandmother. It's something I haven't had chance to mention yet, but I feel is of no minor importance. Marina Mill is still very much a family business. Not only have they a highly skilled team of experts working for them, but Keith and Stephanie (who still creates wonderful designs herself) have been joined in the business by their son Guy and their daughter Tandine, who now is Operations Director and Design Director respectively. While it's a tighter and more focused operation now, Marina Mill has still managed to retain the original ethos of doing everything by hand, producing superlative fabrics of style and refinement. I asked Keith if he had thought of retiring. "I'm sixty five in February so I'm thinking of pulling away over a period of time. But it's such good fun; it's far too interesting. For the first time we're really enjoying the fruits of our labour in terms of the work we do. This exterior fabric is so successful for us, and we have a follow-up to it that no one knows about yet, which we're hoping to launch at the Dubai boat show. We were going to call it Sextex - possibly because of its feel - but as Tan rightly points out, half the world's computers have a filter on them to prevent THAT word coming up, so it wouldn't be good for publicity." You'll have to wait to find out what the eventual name is, but one thing's for sure, they'll definitely let you know about it.