

COLOUR AND COMMUNITY: DESIGN TO LIFT YOUR SPIRITS

SOPHIE ELKAN

Emma Hardie has not only worked with icons (she started her design career with interiors legend, Jocasta Innes) but in certain circles, she has earned the status for herself, following the development in the mid-2000s of her ground-breaking skincare line; Emma Hardie Amazing Face. The Moringa Cleansing Balm is the stuff of legend (I have bought jars for more friends and family members than I can remember). After stepping back from the day-to-day running of Amazing Face, following a severe injury to her head, Emma has continued to flex her considerable creative talents and is now to be found in a small studio, just up from Summertown's leafy main shopping area.

Stepping into the gravelled courtyard is akin to entering another world, where colour and creativity beckon from every surface. I have gone to interview Emma but am distracted by the sheer volume and breadth of her creations. Fighting the urge to fangirl is hard and our time together was, for me, a masterclass in focus. Where to start? The fact her interiors career saw her working with clients including David Bowie and Elton John? The extraordinary efficacy of her global skincare range? Her celebrated facials? She's been up close and personal with Naomie Harris, Sophie Dahl and Melanie C, to name but a few of her dedicated A-Lister clients. Or the panoply of joyous, flamboyant designs which fill her



studio, spilling out onto the veranda of her garden room and lining the hedged perimeter of the space? All I can really focus on is Emma herself, her penetrating blue eyes immediately suggesting that despite these manifold achievements, the most interesting thing about Emma must be Emma herself.

She also has the knack of immediacy in conversation, eager to share her experience: "After my head injury, I was told the left-hand side of my brain had taken more of the shock, so to help mend the brain, particularly the left-hand side, I was told to do art which used the right-hand side of the brain. I taught myself embroidery which is very focused and detailed, and it opened up the wonderful world of colour. I found that the embroidery helped to control my pain, it took me away from my fear of my accident and it has given me a new lease of life. Working with colour has also had a healing effect. Embroidery allows you to be 'in the zone'. I began to work with different mediums such as sterling silver and gemstones, which brought me a feeling of calm. In fact, any kind of art and design is so fulfilling. My work is diverse, and I use my designs to print onto fabric which I have made into clothing."

It's a grey day, threatening drizzle, although certainly warm enough to be outside and Emma is telling me how ▶

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she plans to create more all-weather storage as clearly, she can't curtail the urge to create. "And I'm going to be installing another outside room in this space. It will be wonderful, I want people to come and hang out, to stitch together and knit – have you ever done loom-knitting, Sophie? You must come, I'll teach you how to use the loom, it's so simple. It doesn't matter if you can't knit – you'll love it!" She then points out a chunky, gorgeously textural poncho. "That's loom-knitting". She continues, "I love the community feel here and want my Stitch and Knit sessions to be where people will bring their own projects to my safe space where we can knit stitch and natter in a safe friendly environment. Mental health is so important to me, so I'd like to offer a place where people can come and be social and do what they love."

And that's now here in Oxford? "My head injury stopped me in my tracks, so I came home to Oxford to recover. Oxford is now my world, there is so much colour, texture, and history here to feed my artistic brain, so I never run out of ideas."

Already I'm sensing the potential for this to go in a million and one directions, and I want a closer look at Emma's designs. I go inside her studio and am taken aback by the abundance of fabulous creations on display. Where does the

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inspiration come from? "Colour, texture, shape and strong images inspire me. I love bringing the natural world into my work. Nature is so inspiring, the colours can be so vivid and diverse I love studying the different textures in nature and really zooming into the diversity, then the challenge is to replicate them."

Although I could listen to Emma describe her process for hours, I'm still slightly stuck on the fact that her Amazing Face range was so incredibly successful and wonder if that was hard to walk away from. "Yes, I do miss the beauty industry. But, the intensity of having such a big well-known brand became quite stressful. I do miss the craft of doing my facials, so to help in my recovery, as I now have a neurological condition called FND I am offering a half-hour facial, which I find very grounding to do." Back to Emma's work and I find my gaze flitting like one of her beautifully wrought butterflies, from the gloriously padded framed pieces and King Charles Spaniel cushions to the embroidered, embellished jewellery. I spy a series of dog portraits and my mind wanders to our office greyhound Lionel,

who I think would look utterly majestic seen through the lens of Emma's vision. I quickly establish that she does, indeed, undertake commissions and is happy to make bespoke pieces on request.

My eye is caught by the vibrant parrot necklace and before I can counter the impulse, I've picked it up and Emma immediately offers to place it around my neck. It is fabulous and I'm sorely tempted to buy – would that be horribly unprofessional? Perhaps, but this whole experience has an element of entering Wonderland. I play around with it, encouraged by Emma. It also works as a brooch and a hairpiece... to paraphrase Lorelei Lee's "I just love finding new ways to wear diamonds", I am loving finding all the ways to wear this design.

However, I've also been eyeing a lobster neckpiece and when I try that, all hesitation leaves and a purchase is made. It's bright, it's festooned in twinkly Swarovski crystal, and it is a one-of-a-kind piece, made with care and clearly with a great deal of love. It's also (*whisper it*) fantastically priced. As my work-head reasserts itself, I take in the numbers on the price tags accompanying each piece. Emma notices and tells me she's deliberately curated a range which encompasses a range of prices; from pocket money to investment with the upcoming ArtWeeks in mind.

As I leave, I already know I'll be coming back. If not for the loom-knitting, then with my daughter for ArtWeeks and certainly for one of her legendary facials.

Emma Hardie will be opening her studio (venue 487) at 304 Banbury Road, entrance in Lonsdale Road), Oxford OX2 7ED emmahardiedesigns.co.uk and on Instagram [@emmahardie.designs](https://www.instagram.com/emmahardie.designs)

