



EMELIA SIMCOX



Emelia Simcox comes from a long line of jobbing artists—talented people who have worked in the field they love, not only as teachers but as designers and makers in the theatre and with costume and, now, for Emelia, as the creator of high end wallpapers and fabrics. This is how it has all come about...

Early influences

I was lucky enough to grow up in the beauty of the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, attending Korowal, an independent school in the bush, that nurtured my creative interests. My parents, both scene painters/designers had moved there from the city seeking a cleaner environment for their children. We would often travel back to Sydney for work, camping in a flat above a paintfloor. Long hours spent playing amongst the paint buckets of scenery workshops, dressing up in ball gowns back stage... and somehow getting covered in dust and glitter—there was always a lot of glitter around in those days.

Six months into a degree in Theatre Design at NIDA, I deferred to follow my passion to work as a scenic artist at Opera Australia and at the famous Drury Lane paint frames in London. Theatrical scenic painters have for centuries been the masters of spacial illusion. I was fascinated with techniques that can create subtle effects of changing light, or a sense of space and distance with the skilful use of layered colours and textures.

The experience of years spent absorbed in this fading discipline combined with a graphic design degree from COFA eventually lead to designs for wallpaper and textiles.

On the way to London my sister and I stopped off in India for a whirlwind textile tour of Rajasthan. Like many tourists I was deeply inspired by the handcrafts of this part of the world. We visited printing, dyeing and weaving workshops. We travelled into the desert on camels and found tiny village communities, where the women practice Bandhani, an ancient dyeing technique still widely used today, masterfully knotting fabric with silk thread between their teeth. It was beautiful chaos that would continue to influence our work.

Whilst working in London we rented a small flat in the Caribbean part of town—Brixton. It was exotic and edgy, the streets throbbed with Reggae, Ska and Bollywood music. This was before the trendy cafes and high street chain stores. I became enthralled by the Nigerian fabric shops selling extraordinary designs printed with a wax

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resist technique featuring huge peacocks, chicken wire, cigarettes, house keys, brightly coloured exotic flowers and loud patterns. A long way from the Liberty print and delicate florals of the Springwood fabric shop back home. In Brixton I gave birth to my beautiful daughter Eva, and sewed her dresses from these striking prints. I studied etching just off Fleet Street, and discovered the etchings that Australian artist Fred Williams made whilst living in London as a young man. I admire his landscapes, his boundary-pushing techniques and love of experimentation. I also had access to some of the greatest art galleries and museums in the world. I remember in particular seeing Anish Kapoor's enigmatic Marsyas in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern, listening to the wind softly moan through this surreal PVC alien structure, with a sound that reminded me of Tibetan long horn. This heralded a new chapter—pursuing a creative world beyond the proscenium arch of the theatre.

Beyond the proscenium

I have always kept a visual diary, just for myself, as ordinary yet as necessary to me as shopping, cooking and paying the bills. I showed my first sculptural piece in a park in London's East End with a friend in 2003. It was a large installation that we filmed and went on to be shown in Barcelona at Gallery Zero. This was exhilarating.

Travel, and experiencing other cultures and places helped to put my view of my own country in perspective. Upon returning home, I continued to practice and exhibit my



Photo Stephanie Simcox



Emelia painting on cyc (filled cloth) using a long handled plucked foam brush and dyes, 2002, Opera Australia, for the production of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, designed by Hildegard Bechtler



own artwork—primarily landscapes in mixed media on cotton paper, and etchings.

With a small family to support, necessity led me to graphic design. I supplied graphics for creative industries, assisting other artists and designers to present their work in the digital sphere. This includes websites, logo, branding, animation, illustration, rendering for costume designers, formatting large scale press files for the fashion industry and grand opera. The art of the graphic designer lies in the ability to not only communicate a message, a brand or product, but also to produce work reflecting the client. You have to be flexible and adapt to a wide range of styles, and do it quickly. It's an advantage if you're really interested in many periods, looks, conventions and fashions.

SIMCOX Wallpaper & textile design

In 2014 I founded SIMCOX Designer wallpaper and upholstery. I developed these collections using skills learnt from traditional scene painting, time-honoured techniques combined with digital technology.

Wallpaper gives you the power to radically change an interior with just the thickness of a piece of paper, much like a canvas backdrop does in theatre. The aim is to achieve a rich complexity that doesn't overly dominate a space, but sits comfortably within it, enhancing the architecture and natural light play. Maximizing a feeling of space and light are important features in Australian architecture and these ideas inform my approach—from the high ceilings of Victorian terraces to the contemporary modular structures of today. This

is what makes designing wallpaper for an Australian sensibility different from Europe, where the emphasis is on recognisable image patterning. For example, most of my designs become softer and lighter towards the top (there is no vertical repeat), creating the illusion of a higher ceiling. It is only with innovations in digital print that we can achieve such effects. Traditionally with the screen print, wood block or roller techniques the repeat is limited to the size of the apparatus, for example, the size of a screen. There is no reason for small and frequent repeats with digital print, unless it's the desired look. Technically we are really only limited by RAM (computers Random Access Memory).

These designs are built up of multiple layers of hand painted colour, texture and line work, scanned at a

very high resolution into Photoshop to create digital compositions, often encompassing a series of drops rather than a traditional tiled repeat. I work hard to maintain the integrity of the hand drawn pen and ink line or brushstroke, which is how the designs were created to begin with. It is exciting to combine these traditional, organic, (sometimes messy) techniques with the possibilities of the digital world.

I use Photoshop and Illustrator as tools as I would a pencil or a brush. These programs have incredible capabilities built in to develop your own effects, textures, masks etc. It surprises me how under-utilised they often are in the art and design world. I think people are still a bit in awe of this technology and afraid to push the boundaries and really experiment as an artist might with their palette

knife and oil paints for example. Inspiration comes from the fine art world, often landscapes, and the challenge to capture and interpret light. When designing the Abstraction Collection I was really interested in Paul Klee's gentle geometry and his language of colour and tone. This also works in beautifully with the current trend for mid-century interior design. The Scribe Collection is very painterly, impressionistic in its broken surface, but contained in an overall structured repeat, which from a distance reflects the elegance of the Nouveau period. Close up, however, they are a series of multi-layered paint markings, spatters and textures, a very modern aesthetic. Australian artists... I am drawn to Lawrence Dawes, his powerful, dreamlike landscapes which actually feature the Glasshouse Mountains in Southern Queensland, his scratchy technique, luminous oranges and misty grey/mauves—the way he captures light falling across vast plains, and his use of symbols. And Euan McCloud's facility with a palette knife and oils—I am interested in the way he interprets Australia, his

exploration into the interior, often void of people, but with signs of existence, dark scenes, but with a feeling of a continuum...
I am currently finalising my very first upholstery collection. My talented designer sister Chloe, who has also worked in the theatres of England and Ireland, will be contributing to the upholstery collection in the near future.

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Wallpapers featured are from the Scribe and Abstraction Collections, photography Milton+King

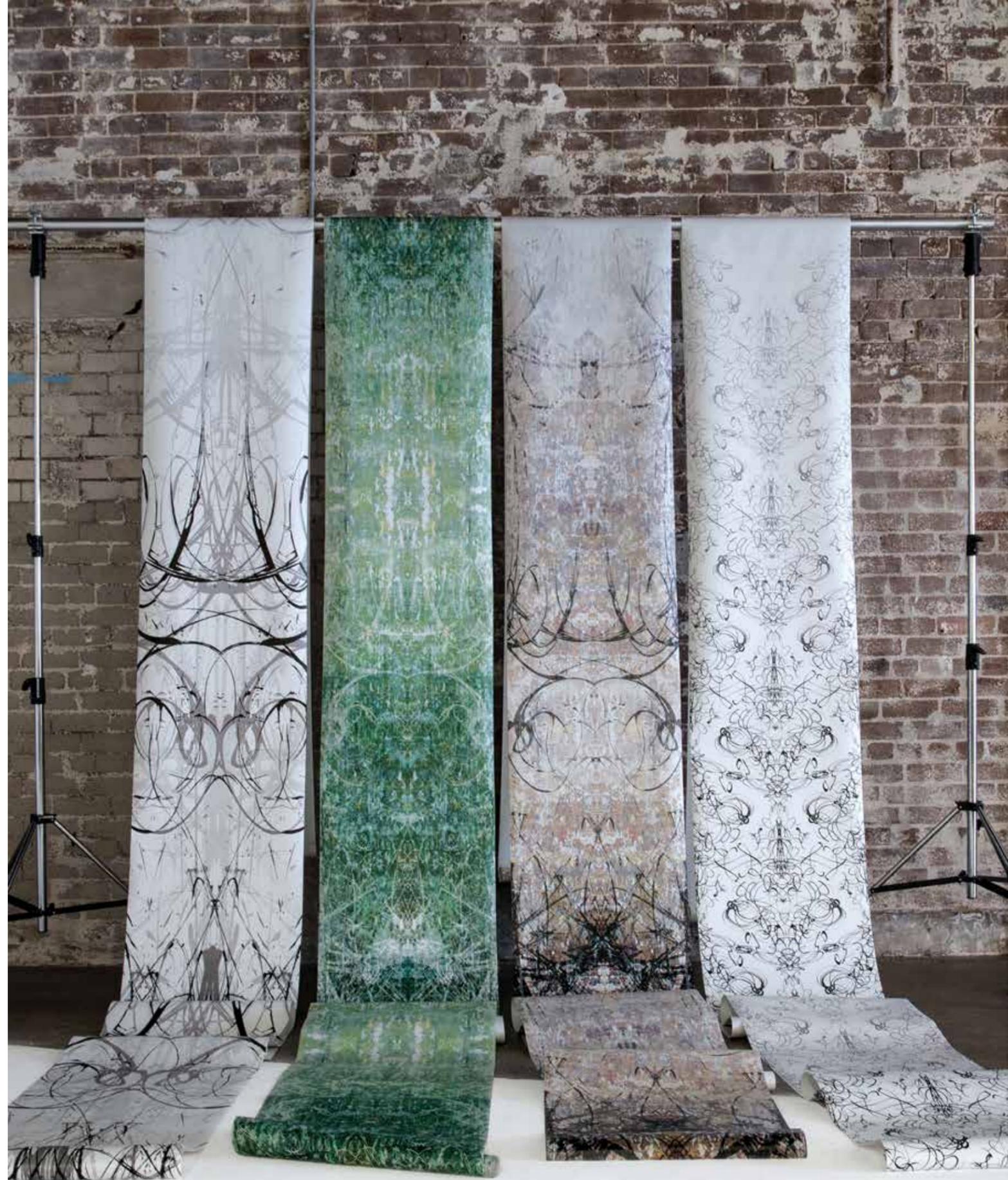


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