



BREATH OF FRESH AIR

An artist from Abbots Ann is gaining commissions from interior designers all over the UK for her African-inspired designs. Words: Miranda Robertson

Patricia Mitchell, 47, left a lucrative corporate career aged 34 to hone her artistic side. She left school and started her career aged 18, designing and managing business centres in Mayfair. “I don’t know how I managed it,” she says. “I didn’t go to university as my O-level results weren’t great – I used to drift off and stare out of the window in lessons – but I ended up with this big corporate career.”

During her career she found time to drive 1,600 miles across Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia with her cousin, in a 1.1-litre Ford Escort – which eventually caught fire in the middle of a desert. It was a trip that would provide the inspiration for lots of her hugely popular paper cutting artworks, now installed at some of the finest homes across the UK.

Despite her success in a fast moving corporate world, especially during the .com era, she felt

burned out after 16 years – “I just couldn’t do it any more, I ran out of energy” – and when a big client asked her to work on a new business centre she turned him down and instead, signed up to study Figurative Sculpture at the Heatherley School of Fine Art in London in 2004.

“I had to find a part time job to pay the bills and just went for it.”

As well as working for a Member of the House of Lords a couple of days a week, she also started to take photographs of her friends’ children which really helped financially. Suddenly, her photographic career blossomed – “It just grew and grew and grew” – taking her away from sculpture as her commissioned work increased. She was a runner-up for Geographical Photographer of the Year, and her work was published in newspapers, magazines and journals.

One of her commissions was to work with the British Army, photographing a Commando regiment on exercise on the North Coast of Scotland. Eventually her military work was recognised by The Royal Hospital Chelsea and she was awarded a two-year photographic residency, documenting the everyday lives and ceremonies of the Chelsea In-Pensioners. She was the first female photographer to be allowed to do this.

During the residency she met and married her husband James, a senior business development manager in defence and aerospace, and later welcomed their daughter, Sophie, now six.

Patricia’s words, interviews and photographs were picked up by Merrell Publishers who published a beautiful coffee table book, *A Year in Pictures: The Royal Hospital Chelsea*.

However, the excitement of publishing her first



book was marred as she was suddenly diagnosed with severe pre-eclampsia. Her daughter, Sophie was born 10 weeks prematurely, weighing 1lb 9oz.

“We spent nearly two months in hospital,” says Patricia, known as Pish to her friends. “But the outcome was brilliant – she only needed fattening up and came home weighing 5lbs 8oz. However, we were in and out of hospital with her for the following three years.

“This traumatic experience put an end to my photographic career, I was finding it too stressful to juggle everything, so I haven’t touched my camera since. I felt I had achieved something special with my book, so I couldn’t really top that. It was my last hurrah really.”

The family moved to Hampshire from London three years ago: “I love it,” says Patricia. “I lived in London for 27 years and now I’ve become fearful of traffic congestion, parking meters, crowded pavements not to mention how unfriendly shop assistants are! We only go up for parties and meetings.

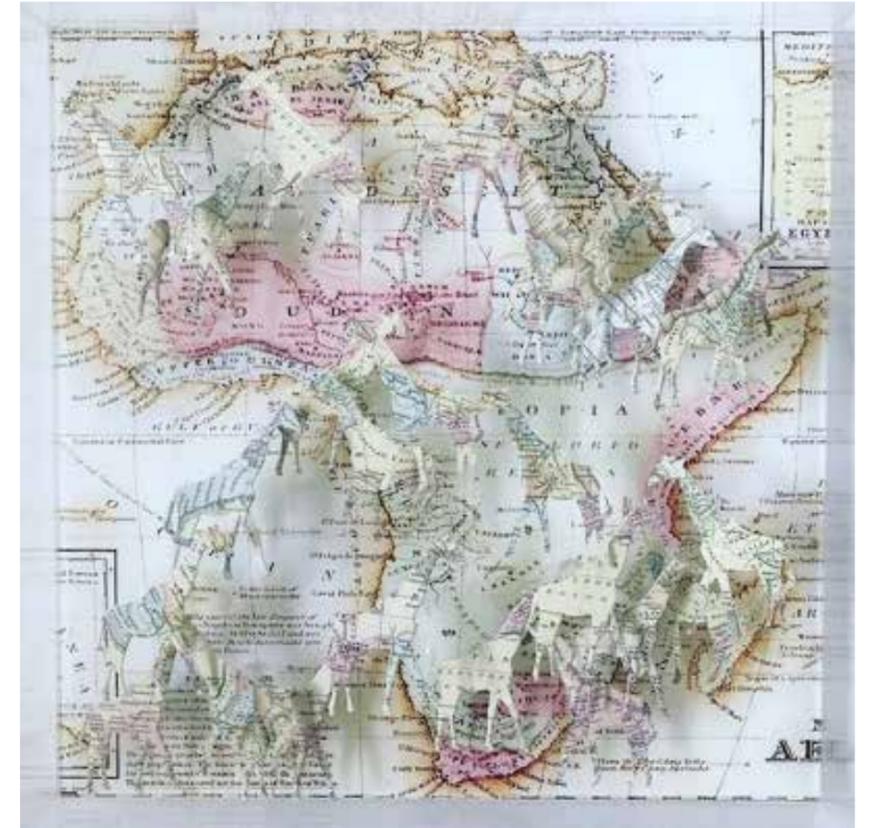
“There’s something about living in the countryside that feels like a holiday every day, come rain or shine. Everyone you meet seems to smile.”

After the move, Patricia started using origami (Japanese paper folding) to create paper sculptures and quickly moved into paper cutting, where she can achieve more intricacy and depth bringing the paper to life with layers, light and shadows.

She started uploading her work to the net and it took off – she’s had commissions from many highly respected interior designers, and sets about creating artwork based on their designs, incorporating the animals and flora and fauna she adores.

“I just completed a large commission for a lady who keeps a herd of buffalo in South Africa and wanted them incorporated in the design. The Africa installations are my favourite subjects to work on. All my work encapsulates nature, botany, flora and plants. From bees to dragonflies to Japanese blossom, I love pushing my creative boundaries.”

She’s busy – too busy to simply produce artworks off the cuff – and is enjoying the fact she gets all her



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work from Instagram: “It’s a one-stop marketing shop for me,” she says.

Patricia works from her garden studio which also has a small desk for Sophie to work at where she fashions artwork using copious amounts of glue, glitter and sequins. “I hope Sophie’s enthusiasm for art continues, although perhaps conquering her spelling and times tables are a little more important!”

Patricia’s work is displayed in clear Perspex boxes which can either be hung or used as a decorative table piece.

Her unique installations have been described as a “breath of fresh air” to the art market.

She is now creating bespoke pieces for interior designers, including collaborations with Libby Blakey Designs, Hungerford and Lucy Marsh

Designs, Whitchurch. “I adore working with creative people,” she says.

She also works with architects as well as selling her work through galleries and notable private clients, and from time to time she works with the occupational therapy staff at Help for Heroes, teaching origami as a form of cognitive therapy to former military personal with mental health issues.

Her dream, for now, is to design and build an enormous installation for a modern corporate environment, “metres wide and metres tall!” she says, grinning hopefully.

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