

Art Yarns are Fun to Spin!

Helen Melvin, Abergele and Online Guilds

I find spinning art yarns liberating, fun and exciting. Spinning these yarns allows me to find an outlet for my love of colour and texture and spinning.

I am a free and playful spinner and I love experimenting. In my mind's eye I have an idea of the end result. I want my yarns to be usable and to feel good. I have a fond memory of a very over-the-top knop yarn I made being worn as a necklace by a visitor to my open studio.

Techniques

I first came across art yarns in 2009 when a friend introduced me to Lexi Boeger's book *Intertwined*. Here I came across crazy carding, thick and thin yarns, paper yarns, beehives and plenty more. The essence for me in Lexi's book was freedom and experimentation.

Materials

Handspinners are tactile creatures. Watch any spinners going around a textile exhibition and you can see their fingers twitching to touch. As I spin, I enjoy the feel of the fibre as it slips past my fingers. I use the best fibre I can afford. I dye with natural dyes too, some of which I have grown in my working dye garden. Looking at my basket of yarns I can see I have used Saxon Blue from indigo sulphonate for a turquoise blue, indigo, cochineal, logwood, Coreopsis with ammonia (orange), Persian berries with iron (that's the soft olive green), and madder. I always want my yarns to be dyed with lightfast dyes. For the yarns made for this article I have used ramie, Tussah silk, kid mohair, and an alpaca/Merino/silk mix, Bluefaced Leicester, fine and ultrafine Merino (18.5 and 15 micron respectively), and Romney fleece. I sometimes use a spindle to see if the yarn and colours work together.

Inspiration and Mind Maps

I am occasionally inspired by the colours I have in my stash, but most often there is quite a lot of thought and design behind each yarn.

I am privileged to live in North Wales, and much of my inspiration comes from the colour and textures I see around me.



Fibres from the basket wild carding and singles yarn

My starting point for this article was the idea of using climbing plants as my design source. In my garden I have clematis and honeysuckles twining up through trees and shrubs, and surprising me with a sudden burst of colour. My first step was a mind map of this idea. Mind maps really do mirror my thought processes and enable me to get ideas down before I lose one idea while the next is surfacing. I use an A3 book of cartridge paper in which I can both sketch and write my ideas.

I start off with a central idea. Drawing a wiggly arrow I write down some ideas this gives me. Under 'Art Yarns' I had written 'colour exploding out', 'burst of colour', 'unexpected', 'vibrant and contrast'. Then I start considering techniques. Bobbles in white, spun into a singles yarn was one idea, coil yarns another. I considered a singles with bright spots that would be coiled around the yarn it was plied with. I then noted that I thought my first attempt was dull and I didn't like the bobble yarn either. It's necessary to experiment and to fail to get to something that works. Failure and a feeling that time has been wasted can, with perseverance, result in a piece which can then turn out very well, and often a better piece than the one which at first seemed easy.

Preparation

I have my ideas, but how to prepare my fibres? I have spun a lot of yarns from mixes made on my drum carder. A friend told me of blending boards and that these

gave a painterly look to yarns, so I bought an Ashford blending board and was able to produce rolags and yarns I liked. The colours I chose were not those of my climbing plants. Favouring the fashion colours in season for spring 2015, I started an internet search and came across a vivid dark pink dress with an emerald green coat. In my stash I found some fabulous green dyed ramie singles – I had added a tiny bit of fustic extract to the Saxon blue to produce the green. I plied this with a singles made from blending board rolags. The rolags were turquoise Merino, with cochineal and Coreopsis (dark pinks and oranges) dyed Tussah silk in the middle. This resulted in the yarn shown below, which was the first yarn I felt happy about. I loved the colours, and it was starting to give me the effect I wanted. I also loved the crisp handle from the ramie fibre.

I had spun about 100g of the pink and turquoise mix, but only had 50g ramie. This left me with enough singles to ply with some fabulous alpaca/Merino/silk mix. I spun this as a thick and thin yarn, allowing a slub to go through at intervals.

Detail of yarn on niddy-noddy. Pink, orange and turquoise singles plied with a green dyed ramie





Blending board rolags in basket



Detail of yarn using wrapping ply techniques



Singles yarns

For my final yarn in this series, I made rolags on the blending board from the same Merino/silk mix and dark pink Tussah silk, and plied it with the alpaca/silk/Merino mix.

Below: The resulting yarn from blending board rolags

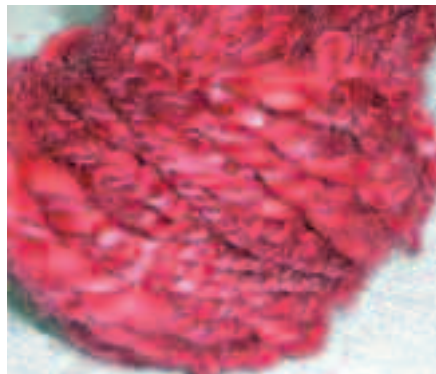


I felt I had exhausted my idea for a yarn based on climbing plants. I liked the idea of roots criss-crossing over each other. I tried knop yarns, made by holding one of the plying singles at right angles to the other and allowing it to wrap over in one spot before plying conventionally for a length, and then repeating the knop.

I also tried a coil yarn plied with itself (where the yarn is pushed up a smooth core to make a beehive like clump). Though I liked the resulting effect, I thought it would take up a very great deal of very beautiful fibres, so I only spun a sample. It was a useful process as the softness of the fibres had been lost.

The colours of my yarns lined up in my basket inspired me through the absence of one colour. It needed a dark pink or red. Onto the drum carder went some mohair, silk and Merino dyed in cochineal. This yarn stayed a singles. I also dyed some kid mohair in cochineal for a dark pink, carded it with dark pink dyed Merino, and plied with pink Tussah silk.

Detail of resulting yarn: kid mohair, Merino, Tussah silk



Reviewing Lexi Boeger's book reminded me of the technique of spinning silk carrier rod waste, and of my love of bark and its texture. This was enough for me, and a carrier rod yarn was on its way – but only a short one. Spinning carrier rod is a trial of patience. I soaked the carrier rods, carefully split them, and inserted them in wool tops while spinning.

Eyeing up my growing basket of yarns I decided I wanted some singles yarns. Sometimes plying destroys the look of the yarn. In an exuberant moment, I carded together a range of colours I liked from tops, fleece, silks and textured silk, and spun.

One skein of the three singles I produced was inspired by a photo of a yarn I spun years ago, showing that inspiration can come from almost any source.

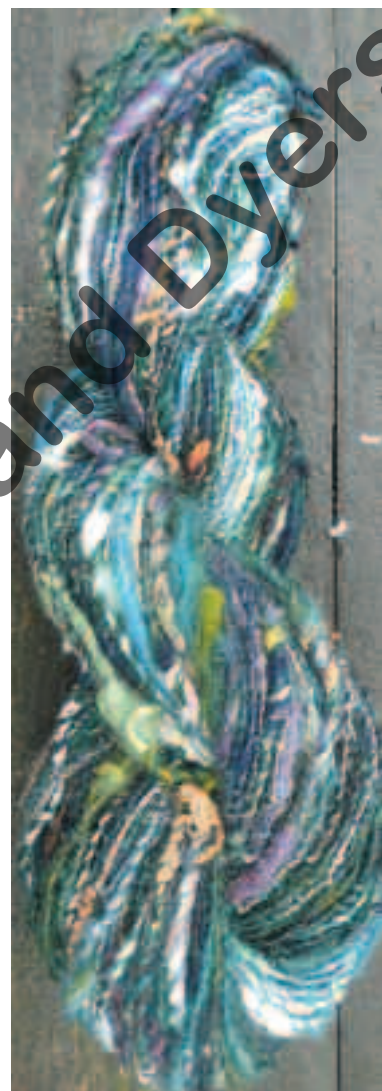
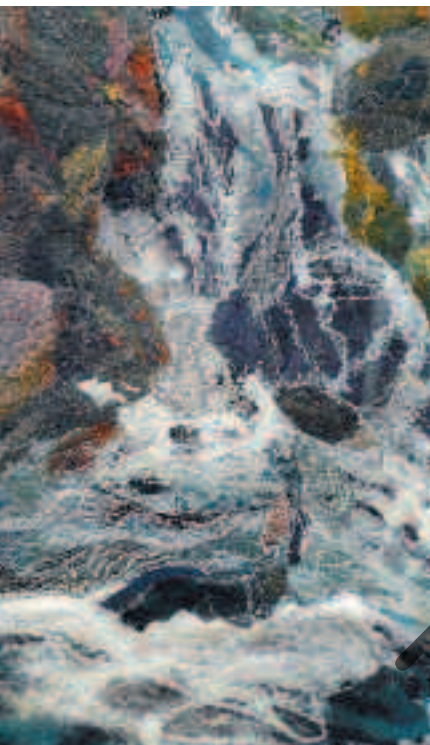
Detail of singles yarn



Below: Waterfall felted landscape inspiration for yarn

Right: Basket of carded fibres

Far right: Finished Waterfall yarn



My next yarn was inspired by one of my felted landscapes of a waterfall.

As the spring trees blossomed around me, almost without thinking I found myself mixing together a pale pink Bluefaced Leicester top, a touch of darker pink Merino, and white Tussah silk on the blending board. I plied this with a mixture of white Tussah silk and pink Merino, putting in a light knot to create texture. Currently I am spinning some blending board rolags in soft pinks and greens. A piece of silk is in my cochineal bath, so I can spin in some fabric for some petal-like texture.

When first spinning art yarns I was most interested in the different techniques and the textures from spinning fabric strips, adding insertions, and from coil yarns and beehives. This time I was more interested in the colours and the way I can mix them to get the effect I like.

Below: Close up of Blossom yarn





Basket of Yarns
Photos: Helen Melvin

Finishing

Finishing the yarns is a hugely important part of the process. Some yarns can come off the wheel in a very energised state. I leave all my yarns on the bobbin overnight to allow the twist to go dormant, before winding off onto a niddy-noddy. All my yarns are washed vigorously in very hot water, with a dash of organic lavender shampoo. Following Abby Franquemont's example,¹ I then submerge my yarn immediately in cold water, before swinging the yarns around my head to get rid of surplus water, and hanging the skeins to dry. This seems to sort out even the most highly twisted singles, and results in a less energised yarn, as this technique felts the fibres together.

When I first started spinning I had no idea that other people would like the yarns I was producing; I was spinning for fun and for relaxation. Somewhat to my surprise people wanted to buy them. I never spin more than 100g of an art yarn, but then no-one would knit a whole sweater from an often very textured yarn. As a highlight, accent or centre of a project it is a different matter. Some people buy the yarn to inspire themselves, and I heard recently that one is still sitting intact in a basket, giving pleasure to its owner three years down the line.

¹ Abby Franquemont can be seen demonstrating washing yarns on YouTube <http://bit.ly/1FGosNE>

Bibliography

Boeger, Lexi (2008) *Intertwined: The Art of Handspun Yarn, Modern Patterns, and Creative Spinning*. Beverly, MA: Quarry Books.

About the author

Helen Melvin has for the last 15 years explored ways of painting with naturally dyed fibres and fabric, making her own colours using plants grown in her dye garden. She spins for relaxation and pleasure, exploring colours and textures and creating fine felt with complex colours and textured surfaces.

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