



All at *Sea*

Rachel Sumner's textile montages and driftwood sculptures are inspired by the North Devon coast and the discarded materials that she finds there.

Words and photographs by Caroline Rees

Rachel Sumner's garden shed in Northam, at the mouth of the Taw-Torridge estuary, is a treasure trove of 'found' materials – the result of beachcombing, rummages round the local recycling centre and clear-outs by friends. Plastic crates are stuffed with faded fishing rope, and well-worn tools spill out of gnarled wooden boxes.

This is where Rachel makes her boat sculptures, each one rich in imaginative detail, layered on to an initial base of driftwood. The bulk of the components come from picking over the tide line at nearby beaches such as Instow and Westward Ho!

"I gather the stuff in winter, when there are storms and not so many people about," Rachel says. "I try not to look for particular things, but anything that catches my eye: painted wood is treasure these days. Then I like quirky stuff: bits of children's toys that have been washed out to sea and come back battered."

The boats are just one prong of Rachel's artistic endeavours. The other one is embroidery, creating montages evoked by local or nautical scenes with vintage pieces of fabric and intricate stitching. For this work, she has a 'proper' studio, an airy whitewashed space added on to the back of the terraced cottage she shares with her husband, Jacques.

Rachel, 50, is a self-confessed "late developer". She grew up in rural Northamptonshire and did a Fine Art painting degree that, she says, ill-prepared her for starting a creative business. So she ended up in various non-artistic jobs and was living in France when she finally decided to put her talents to use in the mid-1990s.

"I started experimenting with silk painting, which was really popular in France. With that, you have to draw without lifting your nib off the silk, so it was a good discipline to get practising again. That then edged me into textiles." The collage idea that has become her

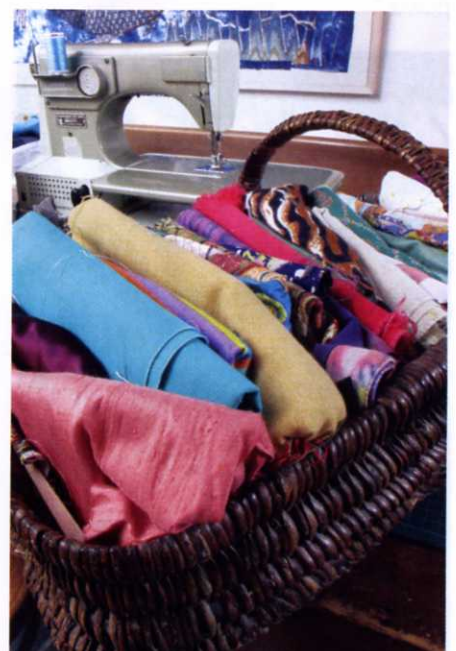
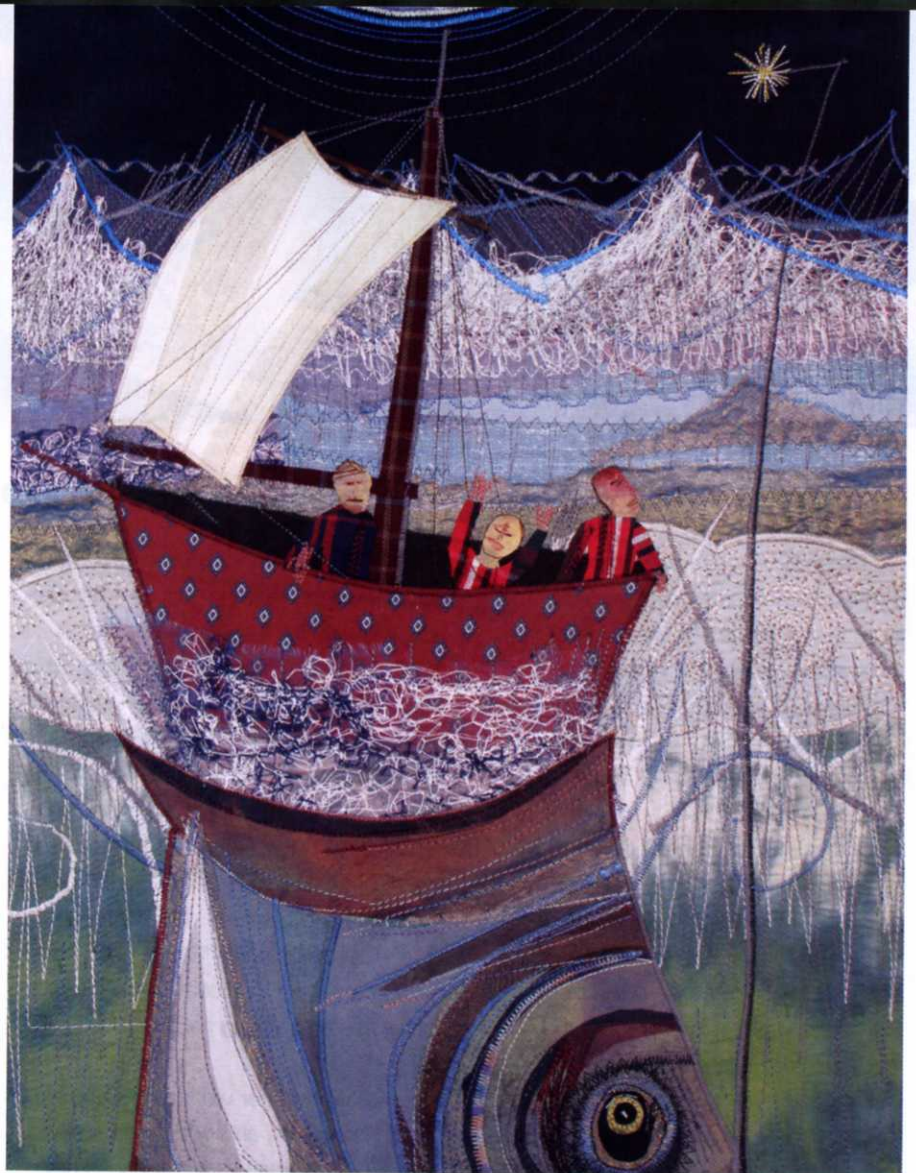
trademark was developed once Rachel moved back to England ten years ago.

To kickstart a new embroidery, Rachel surrounds herself with materials from her large collection and builds up the layers as an image forms in her mind. "I've got a broad idea in my head and I'll select fabrics in the right colours, but it's when I start playing with them that a story evolves."

Her style has evolved informally. "Even with the embroideries, I don't draw the ideas. You hear writers saying they don't know what their characters are going to do, and it's a bit like that. It all happens on the actual piece with me, which means that one or two are awful, but that's part of life, isn't it?"

The Burton Art Gallery in Bideford was one of the first places to show her work, which was a factor in drawing her to North Devon. She also had family in Devon, as her sister, Mary, a painter with whom Rachel often collaborates, lives in Tiverton.

For the boat sculptures, she has raided skips at the tip for old tools and tins of nails. From the shoreline, she has retrieved used lifeboat flares and lettered chunks of plastic fishing boxes – and she once turned the end of a washed-up hockey stick into a ship's funnel. "I take it all home, then, if nothing else, I'm doing a bit of beach clearing!"





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Recently, she has been commissioned to make a memorial boat using bits and bobs that belonged to the customer's mother. And a music-themed exhibition has allowed her to bring into service some sections of smashed-up piano she has been hoarding. "You need a spark like that sometimes."

The sea is the subject of her latest exhibition. "I use the sea in terms of a narrative going on, perhaps with a big fish in the sky or sea creatures. I've always been interested in medieval bestiaries and the details you see in churches. It fascinates me that craftsmen would hear a story, and even though they hadn't seen the animals or witnessed the event, would do an interpretation that still has a lot of power."

Rachel snaps, sketches or jots down ideas while out walking, just as reminders. Her favourite local subjects include Bideford's old bridge, the Tarka Trail, which she regularly cycles along, and especially boats. "In Bideford you see all sorts – from skeletons to working trawlers. Something about the shape of the hulls inspires me. Boats are vessels for carrying things, and I use them to carry ideas."

Switching between different media keeps her stimulated. "Sewing can be very intense, so it's nice to get a hammer out and start bashing nails into pieces of wood."

Rachel sells her work at six galleries in the Westcountry, and gets commissions through her website. Her creations have ended up as far afield as South Korea, the

United States and Australia. "It's such a compliment when you see that people have fallen in love with a piece. My work can be a bit quirky and you're not sure if anybody else will be on the same wavelength."

Her work would undoubtedly be different if she lived elsewhere, she says. "It's really important how you relate to your local landscape. It filters into your work. The materials I find are 'of' the area as well – it's what gets washed up in North Devon." □

Rachel Sumner's exhibition, All At Sea, runs from 16 October – 7 November at the Appledore Crafts Company, Bude Street, Appledore, 01237 423547. See also www.rachelsumner.org

