

About Projekt:

Although I began this skills training project with my childhood friend, well-known knitwear designer, Hillary Rohde, (who had developed a remarkable business, based in Scotland, producing hand-made cashmere knitwear) in 2002, it was only in 2006 that I began working alone, in control of the project. Hillary has remained a constant advisor, mentor and friend.

The idea was that both of us had worked for a discriminating customer base – I had lived in London from 1978 until 1995 – and seeing the huge amount of unemployed women in Imizamo Yethu, a vast informal settlement in Hout Bay – where I was living at the time – we discussed an idea for a project that would provide beautifully made and designed items to clients who appreciated exquisite handwork, and were prepared to pay for it. In this way, we felt, we could pay our crochet artisans a fair amount for the skill and labour involved, while creating desirable pieces.

It has been a long and difficult road to reach the point where 35 women artisans produce and are paid for work on a weekly basis, with a large amount of the project's income being spent on transport, training, and emergency relief efforts, like the fires which annually sweep through the settlement, driven by high winds.

My background is in Fine Art and design, and gradually, I've begun returning to those roots, using pieces of crochet for my figures, vases and botanical works made of components created by the project. I have never learned to crochet – and have no desire to do so, but have a deep love of hand made textiles and working with colour.

There are no written crochet patterns used in the project, though our stringent quality control means the greatest care is taken of the making of every piece, no matter how small. Every maker keeps her patterns in her head – an extraordinary feat, considering how many new designs we produce – and for every new piece learned, each person receives a lesson and ongoing help from their teachers, who are also in the project, and are paid for every lesson they give. The aim is that the bulk of the money should go to the women in the project – not to a factory – in the case of type of shoes and bags we'd choose to make – because that way the project members earn more, which is my aim.

In our studio in Woodstock the component pieces are hand – sewn to create the final objects: necklaces, tiny animals, scarves, cacti, and flower balls. Our clients expect beautiful and contemporary colour palettes and a keen knowledge of current design trends – though our pieces are timeless.

I hand-sew and assemble my own artworks, and these are taking up more of my time and focus, although I take great care to provide fresh designs to keep my artisans' income stream going.

I'm very proud that this women's project provides pieces to design stores all over the globe – proud of my artisans who put up with my obsessive desire for new pieces and excellent workmanship – and proud of the group as women, who have taught me so much about facing hardship and uncertainty with courage and integrity.

Peta Becker
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