



LOOM AT THE TOP

Versatility is key to Niela Kalra's alternative Shetland knitwear, which can be worn any way you choose

WORDS JANET CHRISTIE PHOTOGRAPHS ANGUS BREMNER

SITTING in Elgin Sheriff Court one day during a pause in proceedings, lawyer Niela Kalra began to canvass her colleagues' opinions about what they would do if they weren't in court. One wanted to design golf courses, another to become a cook, a third to fish. Kalra said she wanted to go to art college.

"It was mostly creative things that we all came up with. We had a desire to make something, which is what I do now every day. My first waking thought is 'What shall I make?' and that's what I think about until last thing at night. 'How lucky am I to be able to make, every day?'"

After 25 years in court Kalra gave it up and headed to Shetland to study knitwear. Six years on, her business, Nielanell, near Sandwick on Shetland, is expanding online and her striking, inventive knitwear designs sell to locals and international tourists whose cruise ships stop at the islands. In wool, silks,

merino, man-made fibres and cashmere combinations her wraps, shawls, cardigans and jumpers are distinctive in texture and cleverly cut to be worn however you want, whatever your shape.

Kalra describes them as "the alternative Shetland knitwear" in that they embody the spirit of the place and its people, their integrity, character, adaptability and exploration. "It's about Shetland, the people, the landscape, the weather, the sense of freedom, innovation and endurance. The light is different too. It's a different place," she says. "I work with colour and texture."

"I was a defence lawyer and did it for 25 years, then got to that age where I decided I wanted to go to art school, so I came to Shetland College to study knitting in Lerwick. I always meant to go back to the mainland and resume my life as a lawyer, but I'm still here. There are some similarities in that you use lateral thinking in both. You're trying to look at something from so many

different angles and find a balance in it. Knitting is logical and so is law. Design is very academic. To have something that's original you need to start with a concept, such as camouflage or fairness, and make it into something visual, along the way adding wearability and commercial appeal."

At the end of her course Kalra had built up a mass of textile designs and knitting and decided to work with programmers and machine knitters to produce it, after a light-bulb moment in a railway station in India.

"After I graduated, I wanted to stop smoking and went travelling, as I often do when I'm not sure what to do. I was in Jaipur station in Rajasthan. It was

3am, there were rats all over the place and I wanted a cigarette. For the first time in my life I was scared. I was in the middle of all this abject poverty that was too big for me to do anything about, so I looked at the people sleeping there in the middle of it, looking for something positive. Each had one thing; a piece of cloth, one loom's width. The men were sleeping on it and the women under it for modesty, then when they woke they used it as a screen to go to the toilet, then put it on their heads, carried babies in it or used it as a bag when they collected garbage. It made me realise the importance of function. You can build on this, how it feels and looks, but the lowest level is about function. Lots of cultures have this one piece of cloth, a sari, a kilt, a poncho, that is the basic form of clothing."

Versatility is key to Kalra's knitwear too, and like her Indian inspiration, her wraps could carry a baby, be used as a cover, or be worn any way the wearer chose.

"I don't put in buttons or adornments. The idea is that each wears it in their own way. The styles are simple and look different on each person and the same cape can be worn by an archaeologist, a student, over a wedding dress or in the



OPEN AND SHUT CASE

Niela Kalra gave up her career as a defence lawyer to study knitting in Shetland



garden. They might be simple shapes, but it's not about a lack of shape. It's all design-led. I always go back to the Japanese for design. They have a word, *ma*, that translates as the gap, space between two parts, the space between clothing and the body.

Another inspiration is the idea of camouflage. "The idea of whether we fit in or not, are seen or unseen. It's about how we feel physically too. If we feel comfortable, say in walking boots or slippers, we feel safe, secure and that kind of comfort makes us feel good so we look good. How we look is about how we feel. To be swathed in wool, all natural, is about comfort."

As Kalra talks, her Scottish tones recede to reveal a hint of her Canadian upbringing, although she has been in Scotland for most of her adult life.

"It gets stronger when I have a gin and tonic," she says. I was brought up in Ontario, where my father was an engineering professor from India, and my mother was a nurse from Aberdeenshire. When I was young she had a wool shop and she was a weaver. We had rain and jumpers in Canada too.

"Coming to Shetland I was supposed to be coming out of the rat race, but



CLOSE KNIT Clockwise from top left: Lisklace shawl, £220, Kirsan serape, £225, Rigg dress, £145; Rigg scarf, £45, Toog jumper, £295, Rigg cape (worn as skirt), £90; Rigg scarf, £50, Rigg wrap, £95, Rigg Vaarie jacket, £175, Marlet dress, £195; Rigg jumper, £155, Rigg dress, £145; Marlet wrap, £165; Rigg cape, £90, Rigg hat, £40, Rigg gauntlets, £45; Mirrie Dancers jacket, £235

now we're hoping to expand and build up sales and stockists. The excitement of having a second life spurs me on. We all want a second life."

After the success of her Mirrie Dancers jacket worn by all 100 of the Shetland Fiddlers who appeared at the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, Kalra, hopes to repeat the commission if they appear next summer.

"That was a wonderful job to get. It's part shawl, part jacket and had to fit all shapes and sizes. It had to speak to the Shetland tradition and be contemporary too, as well as wearable outside and under big lights. It's inspired by the Northern Lights so we put a fluorescent yarn through it to make it sparkle and dance. Laurence Odie Knitwear across the road in Hoswick made them and did a brilliant job.

"Next we're going to do smookies, a traditional Shetland garment in sizes from zero to XXXL

"I couldn't have done this anywhere other than Shetland. Here, knitting is in people's blood." □

Twitter: @JanetChristie2

Nielanell, Hoswick, Sandwick, Shetland ZE2 9HL, www.nielanell.com. Shop open May to September, 01950 431413; inquiries 01950 431516

STYLE NEWS



ROCK CROC

SOMETIMES all you need to really pull an outfit together is the perfect bag, and this jade green, faux croc skin clutch bag will work with almost anything. With a heart clasp, it measures 25cm wide, so big enough to fit the necessities, but chic enough to take you anywhere. We love the glamour of this clutch with its bold pop of colour.

Laurie Jade Green Croc Print Clutch Bag, £17, Chelsea Doll (www.chelseadoll.co.uk)

WATER FEATURE

AERIN Lauder, founder and creative director at Aerin, says new fragrance Waterlily Sun was inspired by the waterlilies of the gardens of Giverny, a quiet, warm place full of sunshine and beautiful greens. This scent is delicate yet invigorating, with Sicilian bergamot, waterlily and jasmine sambac, all warmed by sweet musk. One scent that really makes you want to breathe in deeply.

Waterlily Sun, £85, John Lewis stores nationwide and www.esteelauder.co.uk/AerinBeauty



GLOW ON

GET set to shimmer this festive season with a little help from Bobbi Brown's limited edition Highlight Powder. Simply sweep the powder across the top of cheekbones and the lightweight, reflective pearls will leave skin with a soft, subtle glow. Available in



Bronze Glow and Pink Glow, it's the way to glow. Highlight Powder, £34, Bobbi Brown (www.bobbibrown.co.uk)

WINTER DEFENCE

OILS come into their own at this time of year and we are impressed by the Firm & Revitalise Dry Body Oil, part of probiotic skincare range Aurelia. With a "free-from" chemicals policy, it is enriched with macadamia and borage oils, mongongo oil with its high level of vitamin C and kukui oil to hydrate and repair skin. Apply directly to skin, or blend into a moisturiser – great defence for winter skins.

Aurelia Firm & Revitalise Dry Body Oil, £48, available at SpaceNK and www.aureliaskincare.com

