

Mali Morris RA

On collaborating with the designers Eleanor Pritchard and Marlene McKibbin.

A few years ago, on my walk to the studio, I saw a woven woolen blanket for sale in a Greenwich shop. It was beautiful. I could not resist it. Later on I looked up the designer, imagining her to be based in the mountains or by the sea, because the label said *Eleanor Pritchard. Made in Wales*. It turns out that her work place is a block away from mine, in London - both of us overlooking Deptford Creek. We eventually met, and I now own two more of her blankets. When invited by the Royal Academy to collaborate with some contemporary designers, I immediately thought of Eleanor. It has been fascinating to hear about her design philosophy and her process, and extraordinary to witness an idea being transformed into a weaving on her shuttle loom. We have discussed the relationship of design to painting - their differences, and their possible connections. It was a conversational way of collaborating - we visited each other at work, colour choices and yarns were carefully considered, and many samples produced. We eventually arrived at a new version of one of her designs, which we have called *Creekside*, now exclusive to the Royal Academy.

I first met Marlene McKibbin when she was still at school in Ireland, in the 1970s. She used to visit her brother in London, a neighbor of mine. A few years later I remember her graduating from the Royal College of Art, by then an accomplished jeweller with a clear and fresh approach to design, known for her groundbreaking use of acrylic. Marlene once worked on a collection with the late Terry Frost RA, who many years ago had been my tutor, so I hoped she would be interested in this collaboration, making links across time. Our work together was instinctive, unfolding during meetings in my studio and her workshop. She showed me her recent designs and in response I sent her some quick studies, variations in paint and collage. Later on, back at her work bench, we moved around the acrylic shapes she had machined and dyed, trying different permutations of scale and colour, figuring out why some had the dynamic we wanted. The result has become a new collection, *Two by Two*, available only at the Royal Academy.

My discussions with both designers centered on process, material and relationships of form and colour - my own work was not seen as a design proposal, as it operates in a space unique to painting, and Eleanor and Marlene each have their own very different practice. Working with them on these parallel projects was a new experience - I learned a lot, not only about the way designers create and make, but also about how collaboration and exchange can open up new possibilities for us all.

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