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The new botanics

Characterised by motifs of nodding seed pods, grasses and reeds, the work of printmaker Angie Lewin is in demand as never before

FEATURE CAROLINE WHEATER PHOTOGRAPHS SYLVAIN POITAU

On a sunny day in a hamlet eight miles from Cromer on the north Norfolk coast, you can almost smell the sea. Beyond the roof of Angie Lewin's 17th-century brick and flint cottage an indigo sky rears up, and in the garden a brisk breeze whistles through the stylishly planted beds. 'It's lovely today, but it's been terribly wet and rainy this year,' says Angie, with her border terriers Millie and Baxter gambolling around her feet.

The seasons and the natural landscape are meat and drink to printmaker Angie, 44, whose abstract works of art depict seed heads and pods, sunshine and clouds, clifftops, bays and distant mountains. Ten years ago, living in north London and working as an illustrator, she was barely aware of the seasons, but that all changed when she and husband Simon made the decision to buy a holiday home on the coast.

Simon had family in north Norfolk, and soon they found a pretty cottage in Weybourne on the coast road. 'The idea was to split our time 50/50,

but within a year we had moved into the Weybourne house full-time. We loved the pace of life and the space. I would go dog walking along the cliffs every day and it gave me time to think.'

Making a change

In her early thirties, Angie had reached a point when she yearned for a new challenge in her professional life. She completed a course in garden design at Capel Manor, but found it took the joy out of gardening. Instead it fanned another, more artistic flame. 'I became fascinated by the structure of plants, especially those that were about to flower or that had flowered already.'

It was this inspiration that brought her full circle to the subject she'd studied in earlier life for her degree at Central St Martins and then as a postgraduate at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts: fine art printmaking. 'I'd always loved prints, and I sensed a chance to return to my roots,' she explains. An old flint garage became her

Facing page Angie in her workshop Above Lithograph 'Alliums and Fennel', in her trademark chalky hues



studio, and she took herself away on a refresher printmaking course at West Dean College in Sussex. On her return Angie took inspiration from the reeds and grasses of the Norfolk cliff tops and translated them into the flowing, whimsical shapes of her linocuts, wood engravings and lithographs.

Her style is modern, but has a retro element feeding into it. She loves the fabric designs of Lucienne Day and the delicate patterns on vintage Rye and Hornsea pottery, which she often features in her prints. She also reveres the work of the famous 20th-century printmakers Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious, who were part of the artistic community of Great Bardfield in Essex in the 1930s and 40s. 'Bawden did a lot of big, bold linocuts, while Ravilious was more delicate in style, making lithographs and wood engravings.'

After a couple of years limbering up, her work really took off in 2004 when she and Simon moved closer to the Georgian market town of Aylsham. As the cottage was gutted and renovated, she built a garden studio to pursue her printmaking. Soon several galleries including Bankside in south London and Cambridge Contemporary Art were snapping up her work. A range of cards followed and garnered new fans. Such has been her success

Clockwise from top left
The olive wood salad server Angie uses to spread ink; Angie's studio looks out onto the garden that inspires her; wood engravings and the blocks that created them



that she was elected to the Royal Society of Painter Printmakers in 2007 and the Society of Wood Engravers in 2008. 'Both real high points!'

Creative spirit

Today the L-shaped studio is packed with work in progress, books and clusters of special objects such as shells, seaweed, seedpods and the like. Large linocut prints are pegged up to dry (she has her own lino press) and a new batch of wood engravings has been printed with their first colour. 'I come in here around 8.30am to catch up with emails. Then I might do some drawing, lino cutting, wood engraving or printing. I like to have a varied day.'

Outside the garden studio, flowerbeds are packed with plants she loves to use as subject matter: fennel, teasels, astrantia, lychnis, euphorbia. On walks and on trips to places such as Speyside and the Isle of Harris in Scotland, Angie always takes a camera and a sketchbook to capture views and specimens. 'I draw the landscape view through the plants. I'm interested in how delicate and fragile they are, set against a mountain beyond, or the sky above.'

The largest prints are lithographs, printed on

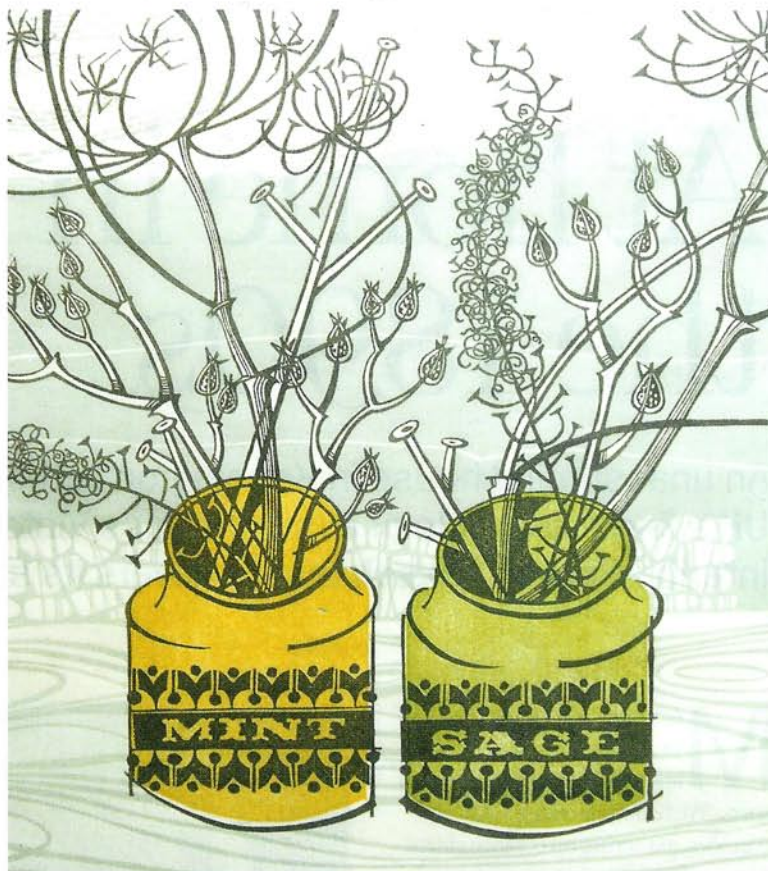


heavy paper. She draws and paints these onto transparent plastic sheets, then takes them to the renowned Curwen Studio press in Linton near Cambridge where Bawden made his prints, working with the technicians there to create limited edition print runs of 75 or so.

Her wood engravings, limited editions of 40 to 50 prints at a time, are much smaller, delicate wisps cut into blocks of lemon, pear, holly or box wood, printed onto fine Japanese paper and the ink 'burnished' (consolidated and spread equally onto the paper) with an olive wood salad server. 'I bought it from David Mellor, and when I saw it I thought "that's the spoon!"'

Across the board the colour palette is 'washed out and chalky, but with the odd tangerine or red thrown in to cause a stir'. It's a palette that lends itself brilliantly to fabric, which Angie has developed since 2005, selling to Liberty and in her own art and crafts gallery, St Jude's in Aylsham, which she and Simon opened in 2006. 'Ravilious also designed ceramics, Bawden wallpapers and murals – they liked to rise to a challenge and that's what continues to inspire me,' she says.

H&A



*** AN ORIGINAL ANGIE LEWIN PRINT**
We have one print of 'Winter Spey', a wood engraving worth £115, to give away. For your chance to win, send a postcard marked 'Angie Lewin' to the address on page 173.

Clockwise from top left Angie is always on the lookout for effective tools; Linocut 'Two Green Jars'; Angie likes to vary her day, and will work on several different projects as the mood takes her

Collecting Angie Lewin

The Cambridge Contemporary Art gallery, established in 1990, represents over 150 artists, and Angie Lewin is their top-selling printmaker. Owner Nathalie Staples comments: 'I've only been selling Angie's work for two years, but the response has been amazing. I've never known such wide appeal to customers of all ages and from different walks of life.' In June 08 the gallery put on a solo show for Angie and before the private view people were queuing outside. 'We were mobbed, it's the most successful show we've had. We sold 70 pieces, but could have sold a lot more,' says Nathalie. But can she sum up her appeal? 'It has a retro, nostalgic feel and is very detailed and beautifully made.'

*Cambridge Contemporary Art, 6 Trinity Street, 01223 324222, cambridgegallery.co.uk

*** Contact Angie at St Jude's Modern British Gallery, 35 Red Lion Street, Aylsham, Norfolk (01263 735777; stjudesgallery.co.uk), which is open Thurs to Sat, 10am to 5pm. A showcase of her limited edition prints will be at Castor & Pollux, 164-166 King's Road Arches, Brighton (castorandpollux.co.uk) 24th Oct-17th Nov.**