

COCKPIT ARTS 3 YEARS

Julie Kouamo

- *Textile designer*



Julie Kouamo, of Kouamo textiles, designs boldly visual fabrics from photos and sketches collected on her travels. Drawing on her French Cameroonian heritage, she creates richly detailed patterns using a mixture of traditional and contemporary print techniques. Julie launched her eponymous label in 2011, and has collaborated with Made.com on an exclusive collection, as well as selling her work through ABC Carpet & Home in the US, Swoon Editions in London and her own recently launched online shop.

Julie graduated from Central Saint Martins in 2006 and spent her early years freelancing as a textile designer for big-name brands such as Designers Guild, Robert le Heros and Atom Designs. She continued to work on her own collections from a studio in Bermondsey, launching her first collection under the name Julie Kouamo in 2011.

It was around this time that she first heard of Cockpit Arts, after attending a talk on licensing given by Cockpit maker Helen Johannessen of Yoyo Ceramics. "I'd studied textiles so I understood the creative process but I didn't have any business acumen," she says. She applied for a studio, and arrived at Cockpit's Holborn incubator in September 2012.

She spent her first year enjoying being part of the Cockpit community. "Although I hadn't felt isolated before, being part of a working environment where I was able to share information and show my work to other designers was great," she says. "There were also opportunities to sell my work at Open Studios."

In the early days, Julie admits that she "thought of [Cockpit Arts] as a studio space and a community of designers with the added bonus of business support - but actually it's been so much more than that." It wasn't until her second year that she started to focus on what she really wanted for the business - and it came as a complete revelation. Through one-to-one coaching with the Business Development Team, Julie realised she was a designer, not a craftsperson. She now outsources production of all her fabric and homewares, preferring to concentrate on designing. "I have gained a real understanding of my business," she says. "I didn't fully understand what it meant to create your own brand. It's completely different to being a freelance designer."



Julie has been quick to take up a number of opportunities open to her at Cockpit Arts. In 2015 she embarked on Cockpit's New Creative Markets programme, which offers free one-to-one coaching sessions to help creative businesses explore new routes to market. Julie cites the sales workshops with Buying Vision as particularly useful. "They made us put ourselves in the buyer's shoes," she explains, "and helped us understand how to tailor our pitch." The sessions gave her the confidence to pitch to a couple of French wallpaper boutiques she had met at trade fair Maison et Objet earlier that year. The meetings were successful and she hopes her products will be stocked in France in the near future.

Cockpit Arts also introduced Julie to business mentor and manufacturing specialist Nigel Rust, who has helped her streamline her processes and implement new systems in her studio. "I'm a hoarder!" laughs Julie. "Nigel encouraged me to let go of things. For example, although I design as a screenprinter and create samples in house, at the moment everything is digitally printed. The large screenprinting table, which was taking up a lot of space in the middle of my studio, had to go."

Julie has also benefitted from Cockpit's Creative Employment programme, which helps studio holders take on their first employees. She attended a series of workshops run by Royal Bank of Scotland, which looked at how to create and manage your dream team. "The sessions took me through the whole process of interviewing, recruiting and managing a team," she explains. "It was a really good learning curve and gave me the confidence to recruit two interns for a six month period. I learnt a lot from the experience and I know what I need next time around."



By 2015, Julie's business had undergone a complete rebrand. Her new company, Kouamo, was launched in January with a new logo and new website. The whole feel is fresher, slicker and more streamlined. As Julie puts it: "Julie Kouamo was my first business; Kouamo is my second. It feels much more grown-up - it's a premium brand."

If 2015 was all about rebranding, focussing on her business objectives and planning her strategy, 2016 is about marketing this new brand to a much wider audience. By the end of the year she aims to have her products stocked in one department store in the UK and one in France. But she remains philosophical about her business. "Whatever happens, I've really enjoyed the journey," she says. "I've learnt so much, but it's a work in progress."

www.kouamo.com

Photographs: Alun Callender