

COCKPIT ARTS 3 YEARS

Catarina Riccabona

- *Weaver*



Catarina Riccabona designs and makes hand woven textiles that are produced from start to finish in her studio at Cockpit Arts Deptford. Using a traditional, computerised loom and eco-friendly yarns like hemp, linen, undyed wool and alpaca, Catarina has become part of the new wave of crafts people redefining luxury. She sells her work direct from her studio, as well as through outlets like The New Craftsmen.

Catarina graduated from a BA in Textile Design at Central Saint Martins in 2007. Soon after she went to live in Luxembourg, but she continued to weave in her spare time on a little hand loom that she had bought as a student. Catarina knew of Cockpit Arts from her time at Central Saint Martins: one of her tutors, Eleanor Pritchard, had a studio in Deptford at the time, and Catarina had visited Open Studios. She'd signed up to Cockpit's newsletter and continued to stay in touch with life on the London craft scene. "When I read that Cockpit had introduced an award specifically for weavers I knew that was my chance," she recalls. "I prepared very hard for the application. I wanted to have a really strong portfolio. If I was ever going to take that step [to start a textile business] it was always clear to me that I would come to Cockpit."

Catarina's application was accepted and she moved to Deptford in 2012 as part of the first cohort of weavers to benefit from the Cockpit Arts/Clothworkers' Foundation award. The six awardees shared a large subsidised studio space fully equipped with looms. "I think I was the first person in the studio," she recalls. "The looms hadn't even arrived, but it was just so exciting to get this space. I was jumping around like a little kid, thinking 'oh my god, I've got a studio!'"

In the early days, Catarina says she went 'religiously' to all the workshops on offer. "I needed to absorb all the information going," she laughs. "It was like being back at college." She had one-to-one coaching from various members of the Business Development Team and says she valued the variety of input and having someone there as a sounding board. She was walked through the basics of setting up a business, including advice on tax, how to price her product and setting up her administrative processes. "I'm not from the UK, so all the basic information around how to start a business in this country was vital," she explains. "Psychologically knowing that if I had a question, there were people I could turn to very easily for free - that was amazing."

One of the first things the weavers had to get to grips with was pricing their work for the upcoming Summer Open Studios event. Having arrived in May, they had just one month to get ready. "This was my first great selling opportunity," Catarina says. "Luckily I had made some products for a show in Vienna as part of the process of applying for Cockpit, so I already had some cushions to sell. I remember I was nervous about talking about my work, but in fact it is such a nice audience that comes to Open Studios, it was a really good experience. I got my first commission from that event!"

Catarina says that Open Studios have been a particularly useful route to market for her work. Over the years she has met many new clients this way and won some big commissions. "There is a core crowd who come back year after year," she says. "My work is a considered purchase, and I've realised now that people need to get to know me and my work before they buy."



With the arrival of the looms in Deptford, Catarina could get on with testing and developing her product. Up until then, she had been weaving on a relatively small scale and turning her fabrics into cushions and scarves. Suddenly, with access to much wider looms, Catarina could start thinking about weaving other products, like throws and blankets. "I would not have dared to buy such a big machine from the beginning," she explains, "but with access to these looms I could try out all these new possibilities. I wanted to be about the fabric, the weaving itself, without adding in the extra process of making cushions," she explains. "That left me with blankets that come straight off the loom almost as finished products, so to speak. As I was weaving everything by hand I needed to use heavier and thicker yarn, which is faster to weave with. Blankets were the answer, and they have become my staple product."

With this development in her making processes came a new challenge: how to make money from a highly labour-intensive product. "I knew that the most important thing was to work out how to make money from hand weaving," she says. "I was open to seeing what kind of feedback came from colleagues, the business support team and from Open Studio events. I was really sure that by being at Cockpit Arts I would slowly get all the necessary information in place."

A breakthrough came in 2013 when The New Craftsmen approached her following a recommendation from Eleanor Pritchard. "One of the founders [of The New Craftsmen] came to my studio and we had a long chat. They were still a pop-up shop at the time. They took some of my work on a sale or return basis, but they wanted to introduce a commissioning service." This initial introduction proved invaluable to Catarina. The New Craftsmen now has its premises in Mayfair and offers a bespoke commissioning service to interior designers and architects. "Some of the most interesting work I now get is via this route," says Catarina. "The New Craftsmen have given me really constructive feedback about my work and made me grow as a designer. It's made me much more confident about my work and my creativity."

"I always thought I had to go down the mill producing route," she continues. "I'm very surprised there is a market for hand woven. It's a real relief that it's possible. I'd always hoped hand making was a form of luxury; that the skill, care and attention to detail that go into my products is valued. I really appreciate the amount of creative control that I have over my pieces because I weave them by hand."



Originally the Clothworkers' award had been for one year. When this transitioned into two years, Catarina says this was a huge relief. "Without this support, I might have quit. For me it was very clear I wanted to stay with Cockpit Arts." In her first year at Cockpit, Catarina had wanted to concentrate fully on the weaving, but by the second year she realised she needed to have a more regular stream of income to enable her to develop the business. She now works two days a week for Eleanor Pritchard. "Things worked out really well. With my textiles selling I could now afford a bigger studio."

In January 2014, with the Clothworkers' award nearing its end, Catarina approached Cockpit Arts about moving into a sole-occupancy studio. She was offered a space on the top floor of the Deptford incubator, a beautiful light and airy room with large windows where she now works on two different sized looms. "It was my dream to get this studio, but it's more than double the price of my previous space. The transition from the pretty sheltered atmosphere during my award years into the real world was quite tough."

Luckily, 2015 proved to be a phenomenally successful year for Catarina, with commissions coming in from The New Craftsmen and Cockpit's Open Studios. "For three years it was a very focussed way of living. With that one successful year, for the first time I can now relax. There's no longer that fear. That crucial phase of the new business, wondering whether it's really working, has passed. The award has come to an end, and it's great to know it's worked and I can afford to carry on going."

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