



1980s knitting doyenne Patricia Roberts' yarn shop is still going strong

The Crafter:

words from the craft world

I've worked in a few yarn shops, and spent a whole lot of time in many more. I love rearranging all the colourful yarns on the shelves – a great source of creative inspiration – but I've found it can upset people if you don't actually work there. I still have a frisson of excitement when I see a bunch of skeins and balls that need sorting. When the colours are *right* I get that familiar tingle down my spine.

The most fun was had working for **Patricia Roberts**, queen of daring colour-combos and the boldly-patterned jumper. Oddly we weren't supposed to knit in the shop so I spent most of my time rearranging the yarn and trying to explain the complicated patterns to customers. One of the patterns I attempted myself had over twelve colours and was called *Nutcase* and it certainly lived up to its name. Eventually I was dragged away by men in white coats and the burden fell to my mother. With a sterling instinct for survival she decided to only do the complex pattern on the front and cuffs leaving the rest of the jumper plain.

At **Cockpit Arts**, Holborn I met the lovely knitwear designer **Lucy Miller**. While I admired her chic Parisian style knits she modelled for me a vintage Patricia Roberts cardigan she had been *given* by one of her clients. (I can only suppose this generous lady knew that it would be given the full appreciation it deserved.)

It's over 25 years since I worked there, but the shop is still there. Years later I found out that the knitter **Freddie Robins** also worked for Patricia Roberts in the '80s. Freddie doesn't make jumpers, not ones that you can wear anyway,

but has an eye for colour and irony. I went to a recent exhibition of her work and saw her piece *Bad Mother*, a visual representation of the guilt felt by mums all over, me included. Freddie deals with difficult and painful subjects through our favourite medium: knitting.

My next tingle moment came at the **Selvedge Fair** in Chelsea Town Hall where I met **Elizabeth Beverley** who dyes her own cashmere and merino with natural things like dog's mercury and rhubarb (who knew?). How do you choose from all those colours? Matching colours is not as easy as picking your favourites; they have to work together harmoniously and that means letting them talk to each other. Often it's an odd yellow or blue you didn't think would go that pops out and makes the whole thing work together. I had that same feeling seeing **Paul Klee's** paintings at Tate Modern: definitely a tingle moment. Yellows and purples and colours that are so indistinct as to be almost indescribable. Seeing this makes my fingers itch and I want to run home and start knitting.

Tingle moment number four was to be found in the South Wales market town of Abergavenny at **The Wool Croft**. You would think that being surrounded by fields of sheep would mean plentiful local wool. Owner Ginevra Croft says local yarns aren't so easy to come by. One of her top five bestsellers list is organic undyed wool from **Ystrad Farm**, just on the other side of the Brecon Beacons. I can testify that the cobweb singles work up beautifully and the natural colours are a great foil for other brights like **Rebekka Leigh's** colourful and slubby skeins



Elizabeth Beverley's beautiful naturally hand-dyed yarns



Ginevra Croft, proud owner of The Wool Croft



Designer Lucy Miller models her vintage Patricia Roberts cardigan



Bad mother by Freddie Robins



Finding inspiration from Paul Klee at Tate Modern

of handspun. These tingles of inspiration are hugely important to anyone creative, collecting these images in your mind (and on your camera phone) and filing them for future use. My fingers are already itching just thinking about it.