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BAKER

TEXTILE ART BUSINESS INTERVIEWS

WITH CLARA NARTEY

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FABRIC DESIGN (WITHOUT ANY DRAWING SKILLS) - AN INTERVIEW WITH JENI BAKER

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Clara Nartey Interviews Jeni Baker

Jeni Baker is a fabric designer, a teacher, an author, a quilt pattern designer, a quilter and the author of a very active blog. She has a degree in Marketing and Studio Art from Baldwin-Wallace College. It's my pleasure to have Jeni on the blog today.

CN: Hi Jeni. It's nice to have you here today to talk to us about your business. Welcome to the Clara Nartey blog.

JB: Hi Clara, thanks for having me!

CN: Jeni, tell us about your story and how you got into sewing and quilting?

JB: I've been crafty since I was a kid. I received a "learn to quilt" hand sewing kit when I was eight, and I used it to make a small patchwork pillow for my dolls.

By eleven I was sewing on the machine, making tote bags and doll clothes.

When I left for college I brought along my machine and sewed in my spare time.

My junior year I moved into my first apartment and decided to make my first quilt. I haven't stopped quilting since!





Jeni Baker's Sewing Room

CN: What is it about fabrics that you love so much that you brought your sewing machine along with you to college?

JB: I'm not sure, I just love to make things.

Through middle school and high school, I was spending my allowance on clearance fabrics from big box stores. I was quickly attracted to bright, retro-style floral prints and little geometrics.

I also made and sold doll clothes in college to earn pocket money, so that certainly spurred on my decision to bring my machine along.



A Fabric Designer Who Controls Her Fabric Stash



Jeni Baker's Fabric Design Collection - Dreaming Vintage Coordinates

CN: I see that you [control your fabric stash](#) by keeping track of how much fabric you have coming in and how much goes out. I must say that I'm very impressed with your dedication. What motivated you to start doing this and what effect has it had on you?

JB: It's been a fun experiment. I was getting overwhelmed by how much fabric I had and knew I needed to change my habits.

We're moving out of state at the end of this year, so the thought of moving my fabric stash has added an extra layer of encouragement to get things under control.

It has forced me to be more thoughtful about buying things I really love. It's also a great motivator to finish up projects, make gifts instead of buying them and purge my stash on a regular basis.



Creatively, it's been great too. It often requires extra problem solving and really puts "make do and mend" to the test.

CN: Jeni, that has been my experience too. I find that [controlling my fabric stash](#) makes me more creative. So, I'm an advocate for keeping limited fabric stashes. Let's talk about fabric designing. When did you start designing fabrics and why?

JB: I started designing fabrics in 2012. I came to it in a pretty untraditional way.

I had been working with this company's fabrics and sharing my projects on social media and my blog.

They liked what I was doing, and approached me about designing fabrics for them. I honestly hadn't even considered it before then.

Designing Fabrics without Any Drawing Skills



Jeni Baker's Booth displaying her Geometric Bliss Fabric Design Collection

CN: Oh wow! So, you were asked to design fabrics as a result of creatively using one company's fabrics. Not because you had any ambition to become a fabric designer.



It's very interesting to hear the various paths we all take to arrive at our destinations.

So Jeni, how do you design your fabrics? Are you drawing on paper, or on a device? Are you looking at your quilts and picking/cropping particular patterns down into fabric designs? What exactly is involved in designing fabrics?

JB: When I first started, I tried sketching things out on paper first, but quickly found it wasn't the best method for me. Drawing is not my strong suit, and I'd quickly become frustrated working that way.

Instead, I found that working with a [Wacom tablet](#) that allowed me to draw directly into the computer made more sense for me. Most of my geometric designs were created with shapes that I manipulated directly in [Adobe Illustrator](#).

For many of my floral designs, I would visit nurseries or gardens and take photographs that I could then trace and manipulate in the computer.



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Since I'm not a fine artist, I used a variety of techniques in my design work.

All my designs were developed and finalized in [Adobe Illustrator](#). I was also responsible for making my own repeats.

CN: Jeni, can you explain? What are repeats in a fabric design?

JB: Repeats ensure that when the design is printed on fabric, there are no unsightly seams in the fabric design. I worked with Pantone Fashion + Home colors to color my designs.



CN: Just to explain, Pantone Fashion + Home colors is a universal coloring system that helps you choose specific color codes so that your fabric design company can match the printing to your chosen codes for a perfect outcome.

What do you think, Jeni? Is there such a thing as a good design and a bad design? In other words, are there designs which will not work well as fabric designs? How do you tell the difference?

Things Which Make a Good Fabric Design



Jeni Baker's Fabric Design - Color Me Retro

JB: It depends a lot on the intended use of the fabric. I designed fabric intended primarily for home sewing consumers, which includes quilting, small home décor, and accessories. Some of my designs were also used on apparel fabrics.

There are things you need to consider depending on how the fabric is going to be used.



In my opinion, the biggest factors are scale, directionality, and color. In general, large-scale prints work better for apparel than for quilting.

For color, it can be difficult to place complementary colors directly next to one another without a neutral in between because the colors can bleed into each other.

Some colors are also more popular than others. Being thoughtful about directionality is important as well.

Does a print have a distinct top and bottom (one directional), or can it be turned any which way (multi-directional)?

That's a few of the factors to consider when designing.

So, to answer your initial question, I think that there are appropriate applications for almost any print, it's a matter of having a good mix and considering how the end consumer will use it.

How to Pitch Your Fabric Design to Companies

CN: So, generally, after someone comes up with a design then what? Do they create a portfolio of designs and look for a company to license their designs to? How do you go about marketing your designs?

JB: I got lucky and sort of fell into a design job. I hadn't even thought about designing fabrics let alone actually designed anything.

However, most of the time, prospective designers build up a portfolio of potential designs and then approach fabric companies.

A lot of times this can be done digitally, by sending your designs directly to the company through their website or via email.



There is also a trade show, [Quilt Market](#), that's held twice a year (in May and October), where you can meet in person with fabric companies to pitch your designs.

How Licensing Works in the Fabric Design Industry



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CN: Generally, how does licensing work in the fabric design industry? Do you get into licensing agreements with multiple companies simultaneously or are you required to have exclusive agreements with one company at a time?

JB: I can only speak to my personal experience, which was an exclusive agreement with one company.

With licensing, you retain copyright of your designs, and you are simply giving the fabric company permission to print your designs on fabric. In my case, I make a royalty on my fabrics that are sold.

Time Between Signing a Design Contract and When Fabrics are Printed

CN: How long does it take between signing a licensing agreement to seeing your designs in print?

JB: This varies a lot by the company, depending on how far in advance they require final designs. I signed a license agreement in August of 2012, and my first fabric collection shipped in February 2013.

CN: Umm!! That's over a year. That's a long time to wait for the fruits of your work to manifest.



How to Make Time for Juggling Different Creative Projects & Business



Jeni Baker's Booth displaying her Curiosities Fabric Design Collection



CN: Jeni, I'm curious. You design fabrics, you publish patterns, you sew, quilt and blog. What is your secret? How do you make time for it all?

JB: My secret is constant evaluation of what I'm working on.

I designed fabrics for three years and then decided to end that part of my business. For a while, I was designing fabrics, publishing patterns, blogging, and teaching locally.

I wanted to write a book, so I took a break from designing fabric to do that. When I finished the book, I realized that I needed to cut a few things from my to-do list to stay sane.

I am always reevaluating the things I do, and trying to focus on the things that I really love and that I feel are most important to my business.

CN: Sewing, quilting, and designing fabrics are all fun things to do. What was the mindset that helped you craft a career out of doing these things that most people only do for fun and as their hobbies?

The Inspiration for An Entrepreneurial Mindset

JB: My Dad is an entrepreneur and that inspired me at a very young age.

As a kid, I would sit at the end of the driveway and sell painted rocks, friendship bracelets, and lemonade.

In high school, I started an [Etsy](#) shop selling doll clothes, handmade jewelry, and scrapbooking supplies.

In college, I ran an online shop selling vintage bedsheet fabric.

I have always had that drive to do my own thing and run a business.



I fell in love with sewing and it was a natural progression for me to turn my hobby into a business.

I also happen to love math and problem solving, so designing and writing patterns is a good fit for my skills.

CN: I think that is important- to have the drive to do your own thing. Jeni, there are two segments I include in every interview because readers really enjoy these segments. They are your five favorite tools and 6 business tips.

Jeni Baker's Five Faves



1. [Adobe Creative Suite](#) – I could not run my business without it. From fabric design to pattern design and blogging, I use these programs every day. [Photoshop](#) and [Lightroom](#) for photo editing, [Illustrator](#) for fabric design, pattern diagrams and any other graphic design I may need, [Indesign](#) for laying out print materials including my patterns, business cards, and postcards.
2. A good quality iron - I've gone through a ton of irons over the years and I finally found one I love, the [Reliable Velocity 200IR](#). It's held up well to my daily use and has amazing steam.



3. Camera – I am constantly going on “inspiration trips” around town to look for interesting designs and color combinations. With the advent of smartphones, it’s so easy to always have a camera with you. Be open to finding inspiration anywhere, you’d be amazed by how the most mundane things can spark an idea for a fabric design.
4. [Maintenance chart](#) – This is more of a tip than a tool, but it’s really been useful for me. I keep a chart in my sewing room where I can mark down the dates that I change my machine needle, my rotary cutter blade, and my machine cleanings. This makes it easy to determine at a glance if it’s time to refresh anything.
5. [Bone folder](#) – I use this tool so much. It’s great for creasing paper and fabric (when you can’t use an iron). Plus, I use it to open and close my pattern bags when I’m assembling printed patterns. I love tools like this that are not only inexpensive but can be used for many different things.

Jeni’s Tips on How to Start Designing Your Own Fabrics



1. Just start. When I was designing collections, I would design nearly four times as many prints as I needed. Then I would weed through the fabric design and figure out which ones needed more work and which ones just weren't right for that collection. This took some of the pressure off for all my prints to be perfect.



2. Save unused or incomplete designs. Sometimes I'd design something that wouldn't work with a theme or prompt, but had potential. I keep those designs in a specific folder that I can come back to later. Sometimes a design just needs a fresh set of eyes to figure out how to make it work or improve upon it.
3. Be thoughtful with your portfolio. Before pitching your fabric design to a company, organize your portfolio into mini collections. This way the person you're pitching to doesn't have to imagine how your designs would work in a collection. If you're able, design some digital mock-ups to show how your designs would look on pillows, quilts, bags, etc.

3 More Tips on Fabric Design

4. Get involved in the industry. Start a blog or a social media account and interact with consumers and brands. This is how I got started! If you're targeting a specific company, sew with their fabrics, and engage with them on social media. I think one of the things that helped me, was that I had an audience before I started in fabric design. This meant that there was a group of people who already liked my work and my projects, and would probably like and/or buy my fabrics.



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The graphic features a pink background. On the left, there is a stack of papers representing the ebook, with a yellow arrow pointing from the text to the papers. The text is in various colors: blue, black, and yellow.

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5. Be aware of trends. For me, this was more about looking at what I thought made successful collections successful. That collection that everyone has to have, what about it do people like? This involved a lot of inward reflection too. Look through your fabrics, think about why you bought a print or collection. What colors or designs are you drawn to? This is a great way to figure out your personal style.
6. Take matters into your own hands. Not ready to license your designs to a big



fabric company? Try Spoonflower! Spoonflower allows you to digitally print your fabric design on demand, and you can even offer your designs for sale through their site. It's a relatively inexpensive way to test designs out, and you could even make up some samples using your designs if you decide to pitch to a fabric company.

CN: Thanks so much for appearing on the blog, Jeni. I was itching to ask you questions about creating and publishing patterns too. But I wanted to keep it on one topic -fabric design. I'll love to invite you back to talk about patterns.

JB: Thank you for having me!

To learn more about Jeni, visit her at incolororder.com

Interview Highlights & Quotes

- △ Creatively, [controlling my fabric stash](#) has been great too. It often requires extra problem solving and really puts "make do and mend" to the test.
- △ Be thoughtful with your portfolio. Before pitching your designs to a fabric company, organize your portfolio into mini collections.
- △ Take matters into your own hands. Try [Spoonflower](#)! Spoonflower allows you to digitally print your fabric design on demand, and you can even offer your designs for sale through their site.
- △ To become a fabric designer, be open to finding inspiration anywhere, you'd be amazed by how the most mundane things can spark an idea for a fabric design.

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Clara Nartey is an artist and a writer. She finds and interviews thriving entrepreneurs from all over the world about their mindsets and the systems they use to grow their businesses, in order to help artists learn how to start or grow their own creative businesses. To get more of her writings and access to her free resources for textile & quilt artists, makers, and creators, [sign up here](#).



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