

BGC CRAFT, ART & DESIGN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Julie Maclean

Textile designer and founder of Goodship

Conducted by Rebecca Gross on April 9, 2013 at Julie Maclean's Goodship studio in Dumbo, Brooklyn, New York

Julie Maclean (b. 1971) is a New Zealand born, Brooklyn-based textile designer and founder of Goodship. She grew up in Golden Bay, New Zealand, an artistic and creative community on the isolated tip of New Zealand's South Island. Maclean studied fiber arts and worked in New Zealand and London in textile and fashion design. She moved to New York in 2000 and designed textile prints for well-known fashion labels at The Colorfield and Motif before establishing her own company, Goodship, in 2009. At Goodship, she designs and crafts environmentally-aware accessories and homeware that combine graphic patterns and bold colors. Her aesthetic is inspired by nature, vintage textiles, and her local surroundings. The interview was conducted at Julie Maclean's Goodship studio in the Dumbo neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. Topics addressed include her family background and education at Wellington Polytechnic as well as the arts and crafts community in Golden Bay, New Zealand. Also discussed is her career as a textile designer for other studios and independently; the interrelationship of print and fashion design in the marketplace; design process and production; fabric printing and dyeing techniques; and issues of aesthetics, function, durability, and sustainability.

This oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview. The interviewee has reviewed the transcript and made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

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Rebecca Gross (RG): This is Rebecca Gross, a Masters student in the History of Decorative Arts & Design at Parsons The New School for Design. I am interviewing textile designer Julie Maclean of Goodship for the Bard Graduate Center Oral History Project on April 9, 2013. We are in Julie's design studio in Dumbo, Brooklyn, New York.

RG: Julie, please feel free to go off on any tangents you like and at the end I will take some photographs of you and your designs.

Julie Maclean (JM): Thank you.

RG: Maybe we can start with your childhood. Where and when were you born?

JM: I was born in Golden Bay, New Zealand, in the early seventies. It was a very unique community to grow up in because it was an isolated, rural, farming community and there was a really strong arts and crafts community there as well. The mix made it a really interesting place to grow up.

RG: You mentioned there was a thriving arts and crafts community. What were your experiences there like as a child and through school?

JM: I think as a child there was always a lot of creativity going on around us at home and in the community so it was very accessible. Literally you had neighbors that were painters, writers, etc. and it was a very supportive environment if you wanted to delve into any of those kinds of things yourself.

RG: Were your family or your parents creative?

JM: Actually mum is and my dad is too, but they are both farmers, which took up a lot of their time. My mum also was a fiber artist. She had a business making free-form applique quilts. So we had a foot in each world; the farming community and the craft and design community, which was really nice. But my mum was a big influence—she has always been a very creative person.

RG: Did you go to high school in Golden Bay?

JM: I did. It was a pretty small high school. We had some really good teachers. I think again because Golden Bay was such an amazing place to live a lot of people came there for the climate and the lifestyle. We particularly had some really amazing math and science teachers. The school being so small it didn't really have a strong art program and I ended up doing art by correspondence in my seventh form year. So that was pretty challenging.

RG: What high school did you do the correspondence through or was it a national program?

JM: It was through a national program. I can't even remember the name of it. I guess that it was there to service the rural parts of New Zealand.

RG: After high school, did you go on to tertiary studies?

JM: I did. I went to Wellington and I went to the Wellington Polytechnic. The design school program.

RG: Can you tell me a little bit about the curriculum?

JM: The curriculum was very broad and we covered all sorts of different fiber arts. We did the basics—drawing, photography, design, two-dimensional design—and then we had some tutors that were practicing artists in fiber arts—tapestry, weaving. So we covered a big broad range of subjects.

RG: How did they teach design?

JM: It was very practical. I think it's changed a lot. Not long after I graduated they merged with one of the Universities—first Victoria and then Massey—then the courses became more theory based and they looked more like some of the art school programs. But when I did it was very practical. Which I think was actually very good training. At the time I think we had—there was sort of a stigma towards polytechnic courses, and there probably still is, but I think we had such a good grounding in the basics. And that's so important. Even now when I get stuck I go back to drawing.

RG: You mentioned that your mum was a fiber artist. When did your interest in textile design begin?

JM: Well, I would say as young as I can remember really. As I said she and a friend had a business making applique quilts, so they used to collect bags and bags of fabrics. And that was a time when you could just go to a second hand store or an op shop and find amazing vintage garments and so they had literally cupboards full of bags of fabrics. I remember sitting next to her while she was sewing, putting colors together and playing around. And then when I was a little bit older I started making my own or doing my own dyed scarves and bags and selling them at the local craft shop.

RG: What is it about textiles that interest you?

JM: A lot of textile designers get drawn into it because of the tactile aspect, the love of color. I do enjoy the practical part of it. I don't screen print and do those things as much as I used to but I do enjoy that part; lots of ideas come from the hands-on stage—it's all part of the creative process I think. Also, I feel like it was just in my blood a little bit.

RG: Were you also interested in other areas of craft or design?

JM: You know, I've always enjoyed drawing and I did get into doing some papermaking and printmaking when I was at design school. But I haven't really continued that through. My main interest was really just in textile related things.

RG: What did you do once you finished your studies in Wellington?

JM: Well, once I graduated, then it was interesting because we realized that there weren't many jobs for textile designers in New Zealand—we were trained for a very broad range of creative skills but it was hard to find a job with those at the end of it. I did some waitressing and then with a friend of mine we found a small studio space and we started doing our own things. We did some printed t-shirts and I got some freelance jobs. I did some t-shirts for the Forest and Bird Society, so that was one my first jobs. So we just kind of—we looked around and found whatever work we could find, trying to build up our portfolios. And waitressed and bartended

RG: Then you moved to London?

JM: Yes. That was two years after I graduated I moved to London. And I was there for two years. I really had a goal to try and get into doing textile design while I was there. Towards the end of my study I started specializing in print design. I wanted to try and investigate working in this field in London while I was there. Once I'd started showing my portfolio around some studios I really quickly realized that I was going to have re-do my portfolio and make it more fashion based. You know, we didn't really have any print studios that I knew of in New Zealand at the time that I studied. So I didn't really know what was required of a textile designer working as an apparel print designer. I had to re-educate.

RG: Was it a difficult process?

JM: It was. A lot of the studios didn't pay salaries they only paid commission. So again there was waitressing at nighttime and then you'd get a placement in the studio. A lot of the other designers I worked with gave guidance to the young designers coming in because a lot of people were in the same boat. When you just start it's a whole different ball game to suddenly have to produce a lot of work and it has to be very on-trend to sell and if you don't sell then you don't get any money. The mentorship of some more experienced designers is what got me through.

RG: Did you manage to work more in textile design in London?

JM: I did. I sort of made that transition over the time period that I was there. I started off working in a bar and by the end I was able to be just working in a studio. It was definitely difficult and I think of those two years as still being part of my education.

RG: I know living in London gives New Zealanders a great opportunity to feed their travel bug. Did you get the chance to travel?

JM: I did some traveling around. I didn't go quite as far a field as what I would have liked to have gone. There are still many places I want to get to. But I travelled around France, and Spain, and Italy, Greece, Turkey; sometimes on my own, which I think was a really good experience. I think now I'd find it much harder to do that but at the time you just jump into it. You don't think about it.

RG: Where did you go after London?

JM: Then I moved back to New Zealand and I went back to Wellington again. After just finding my footing in London with finding work in print design studios—then coming back to New Zealand and realizing that if I wanted to stay I was going to have to create my own work opportunity. There was a little bit of freelance work there through bigger companies but there was very little—very few jobs—for textile designers. So, I teamed up with a friend and we started a clothing line, which just sort of happened organically. We did a collection and then we ended up with some shops picking it up so we did another. We just kind of started rolling with it.

RG: What was your role in the fashion label?

JM: I teamed up with a friend who was a fashion designer. She was in charge of the garments, the cuts, and I was the print designer. But then in reality that was probably only about five or ten per cent of our time and the rest of our time was managing the production, selling it, and everything in between. It was very much all hands on deck at all times. We did everything.

RG: Can you talk about your design philosophy and aesthetics for the fashion line?

JM: When we started, I think we were trying to do something that we felt was different to what we were seeing in the stores at that time in New Zealand. We really always tried to have an element of contrast. We looked, for the print design we were looking for natural elements so we would take really simple kind of patterns we would find in a leaf or a texture you'd find in nature, then I'd blow it up and change it and abstract it. And then put it on a very clean, minimal garment. So we were always looking for contrasts.

RG: What was the name of your fashion label?

JM: Rubicon.

RG: How does it feel to see your own designs and craftsmanship come to life under your own brand?

JM: Definitely very satisfying and I think it's nice to have that validation when people enjoy what you do. You put it out there in the world, which is obviously very nerve-racking; and then there are a lot of ups and downs to that. There's times when you have something that you really like and it won't get the response that you anticipate and that can be very deflating. And then at other times you have the opposite. People love it. It's kind of a roller coaster in a way.

RG: Yes, when you've invested yourself into it.

JM: Yes.

RG: Let's move on to our current setting New York. What prompted your move to New York City?

JM: About the time when I was in New Zealand I met my future husband and we both wanted to travel some more and we'd both been to New York for vacations and we had an interest in coming to live here. Neither of us are really long-term planning people so we just thought we'd try it out. So he came over first and then I followed nearly a year later. I was in New Zealand longer helping my business partner set up to run it on her own, so we had to wait until it was at a certain stage so we could do that. And then I moved.

RG: What was your first job in New York?

JM: My first job was in a textile studio. When I moved here I needed to pretty quickly find a job that would sponsor me. That added an extra layer of difficulty to looking for a job. There was one print studio that pretty quickly offered to sponsor me and I accepted the job offer. When I came back with my visa in hand I realized it was not the right fit for me. It was a studio where there wasn't a big emphasis on creativity at all. And there wasn't really even a big emphasis on being at the front of fashion trends. It was just like, what's selling—do it. What's selling? Do it. Has someone else done it already? That doesn't matter. Just copy it. That was from the employers but I made some really good friends amongst the other employees.

RG: And where did you move on to after that?

JM: Then I moved on to The Colorfield where I stayed for quite a few years. That, I feel like I found my creative niche there.

RG: You designed prints for some major fashion brands. Can you tell me about that?

JM: Sure. That was working through the textile studios The Colorfield and Motif where I worked afterwards as a freelancer. The process was very similar from one design to another no matter who the client was because the buyers would choose from designs in the collection rather than collaborate. This meant that forecasting trends had to be an important part of our jobs. We spent our time painting and designing prints in the studio and trying to anticipate what buyers would be wanting. Once a design was purchased it was then in the clients hands to see it through to the production stage. Whether or not your design was bought by a mass market company or a high end designer it didn't change the process but I think it's definitely a nice validation if a high-end designer picks it up to know that you're on the leading edge of the trends that you're working on.

RG: What brands and what sort of companies were picking up your designs?

JM: Well, it was really very varied. I think that's the key to being able to be a successful print designer; to cover a whole lot of bases. The kinds of companies that would buy from us were predominantly a lot of the high street stores like The Gap and J. Crew. The Colorfield would also participate in some of the big textile shows here and in Paris and that's often when you could sell to some of the other higher end designers.

RG: Would you design a print with a buyer in mind or you, as an individual or a company, created prints that were your own aesthetic and they would get bought or picked up?

JM: Definitely a combination of both. And I think finding your feet as a designer was finding how your aesthetic fitted in with the market that you were reaching out to. And within each group or story that you were working on you would try to do some that would be a little more out there; there might be an eye catching piece that would only be for certain companies who could put that into production. And then you would do some other pieces that suit each part of the market. So you try to cover off a variety of customers. If you were doing a story on color block geometrics then you would try to do a whole variety of different layouts, scales, and color-ways.

RG: Did you have any mentors or people you found to be influential in your career along the way?

JM: I think the people that were influential are definitely the people that are close to me: my mum and my husband. My husband comes from an arts background. That opened my eyes to other

things because I think I've always come at my work from a very 'learn as I go' practical way, not having the formal arts training. That was interesting to be exposed to more art and design. My mum is influential because of her gutsy approach to life.

RG: While you were at The Colorfield or Motif did you have the opportunity to continue to design for yourself during this time?

JM: Not really. I always collected ideas and kept scrapbooks. I would spend a lot of time just kind of gathering ideas at flea markets or wherever I happened to be out and about. But I didn't do anything else outside of using it to feed into my work.

RG: In 2009 you started your own company, Goodship. What was the impetus for you to start your own brand and company?

JM: I think there was a number of things. At the time our oldest son was a toddler and I was finding the time I was being away from him, doing a full time day job with the commute to be too long. I always like to keep on adding skills and learning new things and I was also feeling like I was at the point where I'd learnt everything I was going to learn there. And at the same time I wanted to work on something that I felt really good about in terms of the environment.

RG: How did you begin Goodship?

JM: I started making bags out of vintage fabrics. Again I'd been collecting fabrics and I wanted to do something with them so I started making patterns and making up bags and that was really fun but it was kind of like what do you do with that? It was very hard to find a practical way to make it into a business.

RG: Can you talk about your design philosophy for the products you make?

JM: What I'm trying to do with the design philosophy for Goodship is let it evolve so I'm not bouncing from one hot trend to another. I'm working on developing a style and evolving it from one season to another.

RG: You mentioned you make bags. What else do you make in your product range?

JM: I've started making some other accessories. Last fall I brought out a little silk bow, basically for fun. I was playing around with a scarf tied into a bow one day and thought that would be a

really fun thing to wear. And it turned into a product. We are also doing some kidswear; bags, pencil cases, t-shirts. Over the next six months we are looking at doing home wares as well.

RG: Where and how are Goodship's products made and sold?

JM: At the moment all our production is local. I've actually teamed up with my old business partner from Rubicon who is now living in Australia. She is setting up a Goodship based in Melbourne, Australia. We are looking at doing local production there as well. So we will have two hubs where we produce and distribute from those two places: one here in New York and one in Melbourne. But the process of making the bags, at the moment I use local sewers and screen printers around the city. I run around picking things up from one and dropping them to the other.

RG: You also mentioned about the environment, that you wanted to create a company that is environmentally friendly or aware. How is this part of Goodship?

JM: One of the first bags that I made when I moved away from doing the vintage fabrics and doing my own prints was a reusable shopping tote. I wanted to make one that was canvas because I felt it was a different product to the nylon ones; it was kind of a little sturdier and you could use it for other things like a regular tote bag. It's also cutting down on the plastic. Every time I read about the Pacific garbage patch floating out there it horrifies me. I start making lists to stop using as much plastic. So personally I'm trying to do that: not using any disposable bags. Now I'm working on disposable coffee cups. And I know it's really hard to incorporate that into our lives. With Goodship I'm trying to provide another way that people can incorporate that into their lives and make it easy and fashionable.

RG: How do you describe your aesthetic?

JM: I'd have to say I'm drawn to very bright colors and graphic patterns. I'm very influenced by a lot of the Scandinavian fifties and sixties designs. I think when I get stuck I always start with something natural. I'll start with a drawing and push it to make it very graphic. A lot of that has come from the last few years where I've been drawing using a scalpel. That was one of the processes we would use in the textile studio. You would lay down a big colored sheet of paper on a backing card and you would literally draw with a scalpel so that you get the kind of silhouette graphic. So that process definitely influenced the aesthetic.

RG: I was going to ask how your aesthetic developed, so I guess that is part of it. Do you feel there are other ways it developed?

JM: It's hard to really put your finger on it. I think it's really been a process. A lot of it has come out of my commercial textile design work and that developed as a response to what people bought. My specialties were doing graphics, geometrics, silhouettes, and sometimes small scale patterns with plays on texture and color. And then the more you do that the more you sort of follow those veins of exploring those kinds of ideas.

RG: Where do you draw inspiration from for your products and patterns?

JM: I'm definitely a magpie with collecting bits and pieces and vintage textiles and snippets of photographs; just little color ideas. That all gets piled into scrapbooks and processed. Normally I have a lot of visuals on the wall.

RG: Do you feel your designs are influenced by your local environment?

JM: I think so. I definitely think so. I think this is the interesting part of working too in the fashion world is that you have to soak up what you're seeing around you. So every time you walk down the street you see someone wearing an interesting color combination that's all filtering in. And I don't think you really switch it off. And then again if I'm in New Zealand and I'm spending more time in nature then I think I'm getting influenced more by things like a pattern in the sand or things that I'm seeing there as well.

RG: What makes a great design for you?

JM: I think what makes a great design for me is when I come back to it in a year or two years and I still really like it. So I don't know necessarily at the time. Sometimes I do things and put them aside and think it's not right. And then you come back to it. You know, you see a little corner of it and you work with that a bit more. Or you come back to it and you see the whole thing and you're like actually I can use that. I think still liking something after you've been living with it for a certain time period. And not just with my own designs but with design in general.

RG: Can you tell me about your design process for Goodship?

JM: Again, I think I evolve the designs from one season to another. The design part of the process would get squished up to short intense design periods because of the all the time involved in production. And that's when I pull out a lot of the ideas that I've been working on in the past. And then I'll add in the new things that I've been thinking about. But I usually have a specific idea in mind when I sit down to design something. Either it's a completely new design or reworking an old one, I've usually got an idea of how I'm going to execute it.

RG: Does designing for your own customers entail a different design process than designing for other fashion brands?

JM: Yes. I think. Although it's hard to separate them sometimes, but I think it does. And the fun part of designing for myself is that I really get to—some things that are whims that I might not be able to produce when I'm doing work for other people I can play around with on my own. I think one thing that I have learned in the last few years of setting up my own business is that in the end you're reaching to the customers. You're still trying to find something that's accessible to them. So if it's too out there it may be a fun thing to have in your collection, but you still want people to be able to buy them and wear them. Wearability is a big part of what I am trying to do, as I think making practical products that people want to use is a big part of sustainability.

RG: What do you enjoy about the design process?

JM: You know, I think it's definitely something that I feel if I don't do it then I get there's a backlog of ideas building up. So I think it's it's the way that I express myself. It can be frustrating at times. It's not always fun; but I think it's sort of a necessity for me.

RG: How do you see Goodship as a company or brand developing over the years to come?

JM: I would like to focus on bringing in a lot more prints as a small business I don't want to spread myself too thin with doing lots of different kinds of items. So we are looking to simplify the range but keep it very print based. And I'm really excited about doing homeware. I think that allows you to keep it print based because you can have simple shapes like cushions and tea towels. You're not reinventing the wheel each season like with different cuts and shapes that you do with fashion. You've got the canvas and it's about the print. That's where I really want to focus.

RG: Where and how are you selling your products in New York?

JM: I sort of patch together selling through my website and I do some holiday fairs and craft fairs throughout the year. And I have a word of mouth following. It's definitely a patched together kind of thing at the moment.

RG: How do you feel being from New Zealand influences your design?

JM: I think being from New Zealand does help in that very practical, hands-on kind of way. I do enjoy that. Getting my hands dirty, printing, dying, that part of it, which is sort of part of the production process, but it's also part of the creative process. I think being from New Zealand

does—there's a New Zealand way of just jumping in, trying something, working out different ways if you come across a problem, finding all sorts of creative ways to problem solve it.

RG: Is there anything we have not covered or anything else you would like to talk about?

JM: No, I think we've covered lots.

RG: Thank you Julie. How about if we look at some of your products and prints around the studio and I will also take some photos. It may give us an opportunity to chat some more.

[Walking around the studio]

RG: We have some of your bags and kids t-shirts here.

JM: Yes. Making everything really super practical and durable is all part of making it an eco-conscious line. It's not meant to be disposable fashion at all. And that includes the kidswear. First we wanted things that kids would wear, then we wanted things you can throw in the washing machine and it won't get dirty really easily. And that goes across the women's wear as well. We made the bags and really worked on the pattern to make it really durable so it won't fall apart. You can literally just keep on using it season after season.

RG: The geometric pattern is quite timeless so it also is durable.

JM: Yes, this geometric [pink] is a new print and I think it's got a little bit of fifties geometric and there's some Pacific in there as well. It will hopefully keep going that one. That was one that I worked on a few years ago and then I put away and I kept pulling it out and working on it some more.

RG: With the bags in front of you now how do you think you describe your process for some of them or the aesthetic?

JM: With the designs and where I'm trying to head with Goodship is to do prints that are fun but wearable. So they'll be eye-catching and they would be kind of graphic but also you could wear it with a number of things; you know it's not like it's only to going with this one thing, one outfit. I do have a strong functional aspect coming through when I'm designing and I think that goes back to years of doing print designs for fashion companies. Because that really is the bottom line for when someone is buying your design. They want to know that their customer is going to wear it and if they don't then it's of no use to them. So that's a really strong little voice that's coming

through when I'm designing and I almost need to throw that off sometimes because you don't want to get too stuck in just thinking about practical elements. That's probably my challenge at the moment is to really try to myself out of that a little more.

RG: I can see with their size, their color, style, you can use them for so many different things as well—beach, picnic, with work, shopping, out at night, casual—it's a really versatile style.

JM: I hope. That was the goal. It's hard to sometimes put your aesthetic into words I think when it's evolving.

[Tie-dyed bags] I also have this—I've gone back to my fiber arts roots and have been doing some exploring with tie dying lately which is a very fun and satisfying process.

RG: You've done these recently?

JM: Yes. I started this project last fall and these ones are in the shop at the moment. It's really fun because it's the sort of thing that you don't really know what you're going to end up with. You can have a certain amount of control in that you know you're mixing our dye batch the same strength each time and you're using the same folding processes and the same timing. But it's always going to come out different. The spontaneousness and unexpected results are refreshing.

RG: When there's this element of risk as to how it's going to turn out, is that something you can give to local makers to do as well or is it something you like to have more control over?

JM: Well, when it comes to the dying I think I have to do that part of it myself. These ones I literally did in our bathtub and you can sort of set up a little production line where you've got some big sheets of fabric. This is a folding process. So you're not putting it in a big vat, you're basically folding up the fabric and letting it sit in a bucket or a bath for a while. You can do quite a lot of fabric in a small space. Ideally one day it would be good to get someone else to do it but I think at the moment it's an enjoyable part of the process and it's still something I haven't quite worked out how to pass one to someone else to get the same results.

RG: Do you have quite an interest in the texture and feel of the fabric?

JM: Yes definitely. And that's one thing with these dyed ones they do come out beautifully soft. They still have all that durability of the canvas but they are really soft and they feel like they have been worn in.

[Bows] I actually have two versions of it. One [Flirty Tie] is like a little bow tie on a snap so you wear it with a little collared shirt, and it would look like sort of a drapey bow tie. And this one you would wear. [Demonstrates worn around collar of shirt]. So I collaborated with a jewelry designer to do this one [Bow-Tie Necklace], also Brooklyn based. And this one you can wear the same way so it's got this little adjustable clasp so you can also wear it longer like a regular necklace. [Demonstrates worn as a necklace]. It's kind of funky because it's taking something you wear around your neck and putting it onto something else you wear around your neck. Interesting little about what I enjoy about designing I think sometimes it's just that satisfaction of having that idea pop into your head and the motivation is just that I would like to have that object to wear. And then you go with it and see where it takes you. And at the end you come up with something. These ones I'm really happy with how they turned out and I do wear them.

[Pencil Cases] This project although I didn't do the initial design there was a lot of production decision-making and aesthetic decision-making in terms of the t-shirts. I did all the color stories and the scale and the artwork for the screen printer. And same for the little ones, we did some colored pencil cases and we've got bags as well. So I feel like there was a whole different set of challenges when you're taking someone else's artwork. You don't want to mess with the feel of it or essence of it. You're just trying to bring it into what I was doing. It was really interesting.

RG: I'll take some photos.

[End of the interview]

goodshipstore.com