

How a Citroën 2CV became my muse

MA students at Chelsea, Camberwell and Wimbledon are preparing for their degree shows. Liz Nehdi explains why her textiles project involves refitting a quirky French car...



Orangina: Liz Nehdi's design is printed on vinyl wrap and stretched around the bodywork.

Photograph: Liz Nehdi

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Nehdi's beloved 2CV before its transformation. Photograph: Liz Nehdi

It all started when I moved to France and found love at first sight. The object of my affections? A second-hand car, Orangina as my husband and I affectionately call her, given to us by an uncle.

Orangina is a 1974 Citroën 2CV (in French, Deux Chevaux) with a two-cylinder engine with 28 horsepower - basically an enormous lawnmower. Her vinyl roof rolls back like a sardine can, letting the French air blow through our hair, and her flap-up windows give just enough space to stick out our arms to high-five the locals as we drive through town.

All of the older French say the same thing: "Succès garanti!" ("guaranteed success!").

Indeed, when driving this car we just know we can make friends and influence people. And carry large loads of baguettes of course.

Orangina is far from perfect. Her fuel gauge is broken, and when we are on the highway cars and trucks shake her from side to side as they zoom past. But this quirky little car has become more than just a way to get from A to B. Orangina has become my art and design muse. This odd little car has become central to my MA Textile Design course at Chelsea College of Art and Design



Nehdi uses watercolours, acrylics and gouaches to paint her pattern designs, which are finished digitally using Photoshop. Photograph: Liz Nehdi

The range of practices in my cohort spans weavers, screen printers, knitters, mixed-media textile designers and digital printers. Many of my classmates are tackling environmental issues by incorporating natural dyes and organic fabrics in their work. But I have decided to approach sustainability from a different angle, by looking at why people acquire things.

Over this past year I've thought hard about why I make the work I do, a process that has been encouraged by a series of fantastic lectures from fashion history and theory curator Emmanuelle Dirix. I have explored concepts of slow design, emotionally durable design, the power of the unconscious and nostalgia, which have all fed into my work on the MA to create cherished, enduring objects and in doing so encourage slower, more meaningful, consumption.



Nehdi's research led her to a 2CV rally to explore themes of nostalgia and joy. Photograph: Karim Nehdi

Before starting renovations on Orangina, I visited a rally organised by the Deux Chevaux

Club of Great Britain, which gave me insight into what the 2CV means to collectors. One enthusiast summed it up best: they just love the physical experience of driving the 2CV, the smell of petrol and the constant whir of the engine. The 2CV is, to them, a touch of spice in a bland world.



While the mechanics get to work, Nehdi finds an idyllic spot to finesse the pattern designs for the exterior. Photograph: Liz Nehdi

Before moving the car to the UK, Orangina needed work. We had to rewire electrical components, fit a new engine, revamp the brakes, and rebuild the seats. During this time I worked on the design for the car's exterior. I developed a colour palette of pink and orange, and a pattern of undulating lines that reference the rolling hills of Provence. It's all brought together with meditative black dots and curved pen lines.



Nehdi's fabric designs will transform the car's battered seats. Photograph: Liz Nehdi

For the final piece I've chosen to replace as few functional parts as possible so as to focus the renovation efforts on my custom designs. This 2CV is a collectable and its history is evident in the nicks and imperfections. I've designed additional fabric for the interior walls of the car, and in the weeks leading up to my degree show have been cutting the patterns and adhering them to the walls. I've also bought cord and ribbons to make my customised seatbelts and braided steering wheel. It's coming together which is just as well with the show just about to open!

Orangina will be proudly displayed in Chelsea's Parade Ground from 5 September

MA textile design is just one of 16 courses featured in the Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon postgraduate degree shows, from 5 September 2013.

Further information about the exhibitions - which showcase the work of over 450

masters students, are free to visit and open to the public - is available online.

If you can't get to the shows, you can view the newest graduating talent from all of University of the Arts London's six colleges in the online portfolio Showtime gallery.

To find out more about Liz Nehdi's work, visit her website.