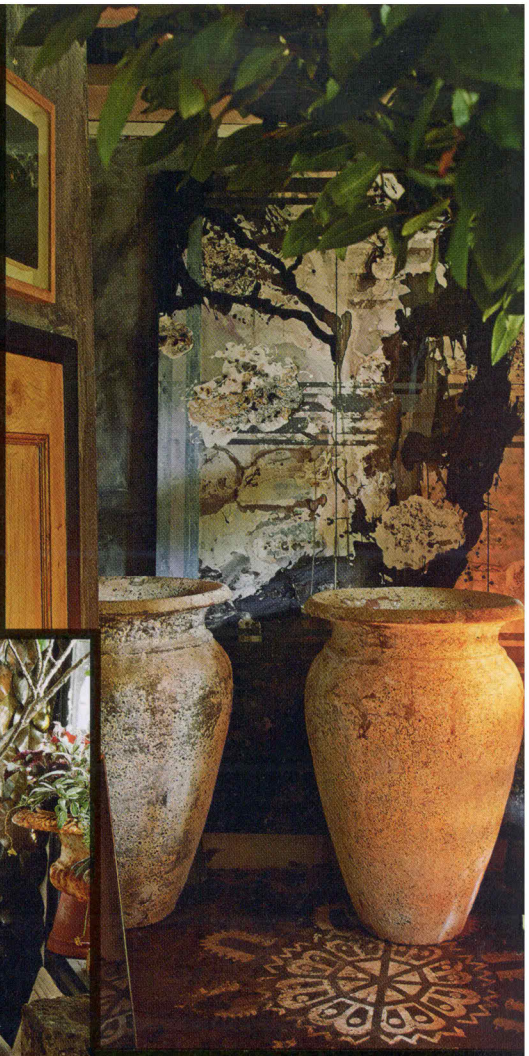
| HOW I BECAME AN |

ARTIST AND COLLECTOR

Su Daybell's enticing Tetbury studio and shop is a visual tapestry of vibrant paintings, beautiful floral arrangements, architectural pots and antique furniture

WORDS EMMA J PAGE | **PHOTOGRAPHS** ALUN CALLENDER



THIS PAGE There are many pleasing tableaux to be found in the shop; Su sources her stock locally as well as from France and as far afield as Vietnam. Closer to home, she also sells the work of her husband, Adam, a stonemason and conservator. Her collection of fabrics for Lewis & Wood is a new departure. ■

PREVIOUS PAGE Su Daybell with two of her new Womad designs for Lewis & Wood, which cost £230 for a 3m panel. **ABOVE** The exterior of her studio and shop in Tetbury, Gloucestershire. **BELOW** Scottish stone planters alongside Compton Pottery collectables.

Artist, florist and collector Su Daybell has combined her creative passions in Twig, a shop overflowing with paintings, handmade lampshades, flowers and antiques in Tetbury, Gloucestershire. Having studied Fine Art at Humberside College, Hull, she embarked on a postgraduate and MA course in Drawing and Painting at Heriot Watt University in Edinburgh, followed by a stint living and working in London, before opening the shop, which doubles as her studio.

Can you tell us about your background?

I've always enjoyed fabric, art and design. My mother had a fashion business and growing up, I loved smelling and touching the fabric in her warehouse. Before I started my art degree, I took a foundation course and it was there that I learned the most important lesson of all. Our tutor, Jim Curren, placed a bicycle on the table, instructed the class to look at it and then left the room. Fifteen minutes later, he returned, removed the bike and asked us to draw it. At that moment, I discovered how to really see the things in front of me in terms of their composition and proportion. I went on to complete my degree, followed by an MA, and before I'd finished my studies, my paintings were being exhibited in a gallery.

How has your career developed since you started out?

I followed my studies with a one-year fellowship at Cheltenham Art College, before moving to Battersea in London and opening a studio in Bethnal Green. I spent a long period working as a full-time artist, painting in the lyrical abstract style and exhibiting my works in various galleries, including those on Cork Street in central London. However, I wasn't keen on the networking involved with potential clients and other artists. It didn't feel right for me – I would much rather have spent my time browsing the fabric collections in Liberty. Nonetheless, I continued exhibiting and retained my London studio until moving to Wiltshire with my husband Adam, where we started a family.

How did the idea of combining a gallery with a flower shop come about?

Adam and I moved house several times and it was always my job to make our homes beautiful. We've often had very little money but we never minded, because I believe you can be at your most creative when you have to do everything yourself. As a result, our two boys, Dylan and Jesse, have grown up surrounded by stunning objects and have developed a great eye, too. Twig, therefore, evolved organically and purely by chance. I had become a little disillusioned with the way galleries sold my art and felt it could be done in a more holistic manner. I opened a shop, selling directly to the public, and filled it with my art, oversized urns and pots that appealed to me, garden furniture and gorgeous flowers and topiary.

How does your environment complement the business?

I can bring together all my passions at the shop. I love the idea that someone can come in for a bunch of flowers and leave with a painting. Also, I can hear people's reactions to my work as they browse, and I find that fascinating. To me, the shop itself is one big painting; every item in it has a special place and is integral to the whole atmosphere of Twig.

Can you describe your typical day?

My working hours are very long. Many of my days start at 4.30am with a visit to one of the several flower markets I use – I get a huge buzz from it. I like to be the first there and I find at that time in the morning I am alert and focused. Hauling plants and flowers around is very physically demanding, so I think it helps that I have a sporty background. At the shop, I tend to be absorbed by the task at hand, whether I'm working on flowers for a wedding, rearranging the layout or painting. I work as many hours as I can, to the point where sometimes I'm impatient that I have to wait until the next day to start another painting or work on a lampshade. I think as an artist you have to create all the time, in the same way as you need to eat, sleep and breathe.

Where do you find inspiration?

I have spent hours in front of the paintings in the Rothko rooms at the Tate. I am also greatly influenced by Rinsey in Cornwall, an area that I have been visiting since I was a child. I paint under my maiden name, Trembath, which is a Cornish name, so of course the region is very special to me. I have spent many holidays there and associate it with freedom – running around cliffs and beaches or just being still, taking the time to look and listen. Being in Kenya also inspires me and informs my work. For about 15 years, some friends and I have been working with the Maasai tribe there, building schools and water tanks or laying pipes. In the evenings, we all sit round the fire and gaze at the planets in the sky. The Maasai people learn by watching and not asking too many questions; they observe and then they do. That's a philosophy that's very dear to me.

How do you source your products?

I have an eye for large, unusual items, including huge oversized pots, garden furniture from France and contemporary pieces from Vietnam. A lot of the dealers I work with know what I'm looking for and they will contact me when an item comes in. Sometimes, a piece from a family's estate is offered to me – it's always an honour to handle something that has been in a family for years. My husband, Adam, a stonemason and conservator, has recently made some huge Medici and Borghesi-style vases to sell in the shop, too. It means that every piece is unique and of good quality.

How did your lampshades come about?

I could never find the kind of lampshades I was looking for when it came to furnishing our home, so I started buying good-quality parchment shades, which age beautifully. I hand-painted them with florals or sometimes with more abstract designs. Friends admired them and soon I started making them at the shop. Interior designers often order them to complement a fabric. They take hours to make, but it's a rewarding process.

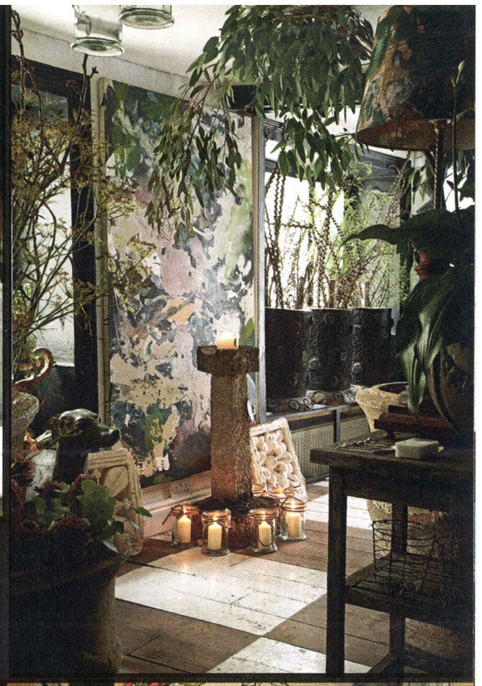
Do you have any help in the shop or do you prefer to work alone?

I do have the help of an assistant from time to time but, to be honest, I don't know how easy I am to work with because I am very passionate about everything I do and am a perfectionist. I prefer to work alone but that isn't always possible.

How would you like to see the business expand in the future?

I don't know what the future holds, but I'm not very good at treading water, so there's always something in development. I'm really fortunate that other people's confidence in me has helped my business to grow, whether through being asked to design wallpaper and fabric for Lewis & Wood, taking on commissions to design gardens, or sourcing antiques for clients. I think my confidence in my own ability as well as my determination to work as hard as possible to expand the business are key ingredients to its success.

Twig, 46 Long Street, Tetbury, Gloucestershire, GL8 8AQ, 01666 502080, twigoftetbury.co.uk. Lewis & Wood, 01453 878517, lewisandwood.co.uk. ▶



THIS PAGE In her shop, Su sells a disparate mix of items that she loves. As well as her own lyrical abstract-style paintings, she offers a range of unique pieces sourced mainly through her network of private dealers. Su's exquisitely patterned, hand-painted parchment lampshades (below), which cost from £250 each, are one-offs, each taking her several hours to complete.