



Photographer: Warren Orchard

# profile



## Gidden Treasures

'Pushing through the market square...' Seems appropriate to quote line one, track one of the first album Angela Gidden bought. If you don't own it, buy it. And, as it says on the label of the vinyl version...PLAY LOUD.

If you own it, stop reading this for a bit, bung it on and PLAY LOUD.

**W**elcome back. Good gosh, we like Angela Gidden. Bit smitten actually. And it's not just because we talked Ziggy and Twenty First Century Schizoid Man and Yours is no Disgrace and stuff.

And Mick Rock and George Best and Roger Dean, and stuff.

It's also because she's absolutely 100% our kind of designer. Top, top eye for proportion. Loves to draw. No bull, sleeves rolled up, understands volume and profit – and designs kit that can be made in volume at a profit. And loads of other good things that we're already running out of room for.

So let's crack on, and let Angela do the talking.

'I once thought of myself as just a furniture designer, then realised I was a bit more multi-disciplined. My work is three dimensional – I'm involved in designing spaces, fashion, exhibitions...and furniture too. I've run my own design consultancy since 1993, and have been commercially involved in the furniture industry since 1986 – I'd always had a real desire to create my own signature furniture collection that I would market myself. I've been involved with various manufacturers, which was great, but when I was about 30 I

wanted to come out from behind the brands I was working for. I'd had a great time but I felt I was selling my soul. I'd cut my teeth with companies such as Christie Tyler (once the UK's largest manufacturer of upholstered furniture).

'Incidentally, my first project for Christie Tyler was a kidney shaped dressing table for Marks & Spencer. It didn't inspire me, but was a great opportunity working with M&S. Every designer at Christie Tyler cut their teeth on a kidney shaped dressing table.

'Christie Tyler was the best university I went to. My focus is design for manufacture – and I learned that there. My approach to design is to consider all the processes, not just design and creativity. It's about how the processes translate into development through prototyping and engineering. It's about a product being fit for purpose, effective in the market and yielding a profit. The commercial reality is that the product needs to make money. I strike the first line and start doodling. It's creative, but constantly receptive to manufacturing efficiency and effectiveness.

'In order for me to deliver what a client thinks they want, I have to understand them absolutely. When you start delving into the brief▶▶▶▶



▶▶▶▶the quickest possible time. If you have a good idea, why wait? These days a lot of companies focus on speed to market. I had a beady eye on fashion and how it operates – time is of the essence – it's not about shortcuts – it's faster, quicker and better in every sense.

'While I'm on the subject, here's my rant! It's design for disposability. In everything, not just furniture. One of the things I've learned is that just because something is cheap doesn't mean it has to be badly designed. I've been trained to engineer a product over and above its price point and perceived value. That's everything. I consider construction, what's used and where, materials. There is a certain level of over engineering in what I do, building in product

'Dad was really chuffed. He used to stand in Habitat shops loudly extolling the virtues of the piping detail.

'I realised I had a certain proportion in my designs. It definitely exists in Cwtch, my new collection for Orangebox. It's where shaving off 10mm makes all the difference. It's in my eye, and it's a feel too. I've always had it. Proportion is where I invest time – it's really important. But I never worried about it because I never worked in a box. It starts with the first mark on the paper. The first doodle. If it doesn't look right, I move on. When I compare an eventual design to the early sketches, it's always close to the first mark. The proportion and the detail are right there. Then I have to



assurance but without increasing the cost – producing stuff that's contemporary classic. My strapline's always about creating modern antiques of the future. It's all about designed sustainability.'

So what about the denim, the fabric – the burning idea?

'I'd started working with a textile company on a cotton drill fabric when Habitat approached me. They asked me to design a sofa to replace a product (Cairo) I'd designed for them years before at Christie Tyler. What an opportunity – I could also design-in the fabric! Pacino became a big seller, often referred to as a design classic. Launched in July 1994, Habitat's original target sales were 220 per week. By week four it was selling over 340 per week – by December it was selling 700 a week worldwide.

turn 20 sketches into three-dimensional reality – which still have to capture the real essence and honesty of the original doodle or sketch. That's the point of inspiration, and I never overwork it. I don't do CAD – my style is organic and human. I'm kind of 'old school' with a passion for keeping the art of sketching alive.

'I also love sketching 1:1, it's so liberating. And I use these sketches when I produce my actual full-scale frame drawings. Of course technology has a key part to play, but for me it's about employing technology in the process at the right time. I'm far more productive modifying and working in 3D as opposed to creating 2D iterations – it's touchy feely stuff, sit on it, walk round it, feel it. It's human critical.'

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Since she'd talked about sketching, we thought we'd ask Angela about art. Plus, we could witter away happily about Rothko, Doig, Uglow and the rest.

'I love drawing, but it's photography that does it for me. Since I was a little I've always been sketching. I remember drawing my grandmother's living room when I was nine – including all the reflections and the view through the windows. I had an eye for detail, but I was always enterprising and crafty! Aged seven, I produced sketches of George Best and sold them to family, friends of family, in fact anyone who'd buy them – that afforded me more crayons and paper. That evolved into Rotring pens and airbrushing.

'Music's always been a passion – at one time I had three paper rounds to afford records. Bowie's my hero. Ziggy Stardust was the first album I bought and of course that links to photography with Mick Rock. Roger Dean's album covers got me into airbrushing. I loved that whole Yes, King Crimson, prog rock genre – I'll be listening to it on the headphones later! I'm so grateful I was a teenager in the 70's, I got a great creative kick from that decade and it continues to inspire me. I'm proud of my album collection from that time. Music and art go together in a such a human and emotive way for me. I'll never be a down-loader, you can't beat owning that piece of vinyl, that CD – I'm a collector, it's a piece of art in your hand.

'With my paper round money, I'd be outside Spillers Records (the oldest record shop in the world) to buy the latest releases. When Nick Todd took over Spillers he was a champion of interesting stuff, like John Peel, like OGWT as opposed to TOTP. I bought my first album, Ziggy, there. And when Spillers recently moved I was the last customer in the old shop and bought Bowie's Live in Philadelphia. I had to.'

Moving back to matters of business, we ask how the Orangebox relationship started. 'I happened to be at Eco Design Wales where I met Gareth Banks. Mino and I met following that and chatted, and both felt a synergistic fit. Orangebox have a strong task chair background, but are still relatively young in their soft seating offer, whereas I've got 28 years experience. Importantly, Mino was interested in my approach, not just my designs. That 'sleeves rolled up' approach to development and manufacturing that I talked about earlier. Mino was also keen on a fresh perspective,

and that it was the right time to engage a female designer. In the home, furniture had softer lines, but in the corporate workspace it tends to be a harder sit, more masculine. Today boundaries between home and work are becoming blurred. There's a need for a softer approach. So I got under the skin of Orangebox first. I didn't want to design something without relevance to them as a brand. My design approach was to bring a fresher, more organic approach – but it still had to be the right solution. It couldn't afford to be too radical.

'Detail exists not just to make the product look better. It has to add another level of integrity to the design. Stitch detail is not common in contract – with Cwtch I've made a feature of it. My wardrobe is full of clothes and footwear where a detail (to my eye) makes all the difference. From the moment I started designing Cwtch, it free floated. I gave considerable attention to the appearance and detailing – a 360° perspective. There is no excuse for what I call a 'Beauty and the Beast' piece of furniture where it looks great from the front but the design and finish on the back is ill considered. It's good detail, the reveal seam. It's a natty detail you see in Savile Row tailoring. I'd been playing around with the idea for a while; it's a contemporary version of contrast piping. Cwtch is a well-tailored top-to-toe piece.

'Why have I added that detail? It's an emotional choice, it's an effective point of difference. I just know it's right. It's based on knowledge, skill and experience too, of course. But sometimes you know instinctively when it's right. At an early informal design meeting with Gareth, I showed him a tiny doodle. 'This is the one I'll go forward with,' I said. 'How do you know?' he asked. 'I just know.' And if you look at Cwtch it's there.

'It's the intuitive that adds value. It's from the heart. Not just the head.'

Since being launched in February this year, Angela has been awarded the Design Guild Mark for the design of Cwtch, an award that reflects excellence in design where the focus is on volume production.

And we haven't even mentioned that, in the Queens New Year's Honours List 2007, Angela was awarded the MBE for services to business and design in Wales – of which, she says modestly, she was 'stunned but very proud'.

Bet you're smitten now too, aren't you? Smitten with Angela, and smitten with The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars too. PLAYED LOUD ●

