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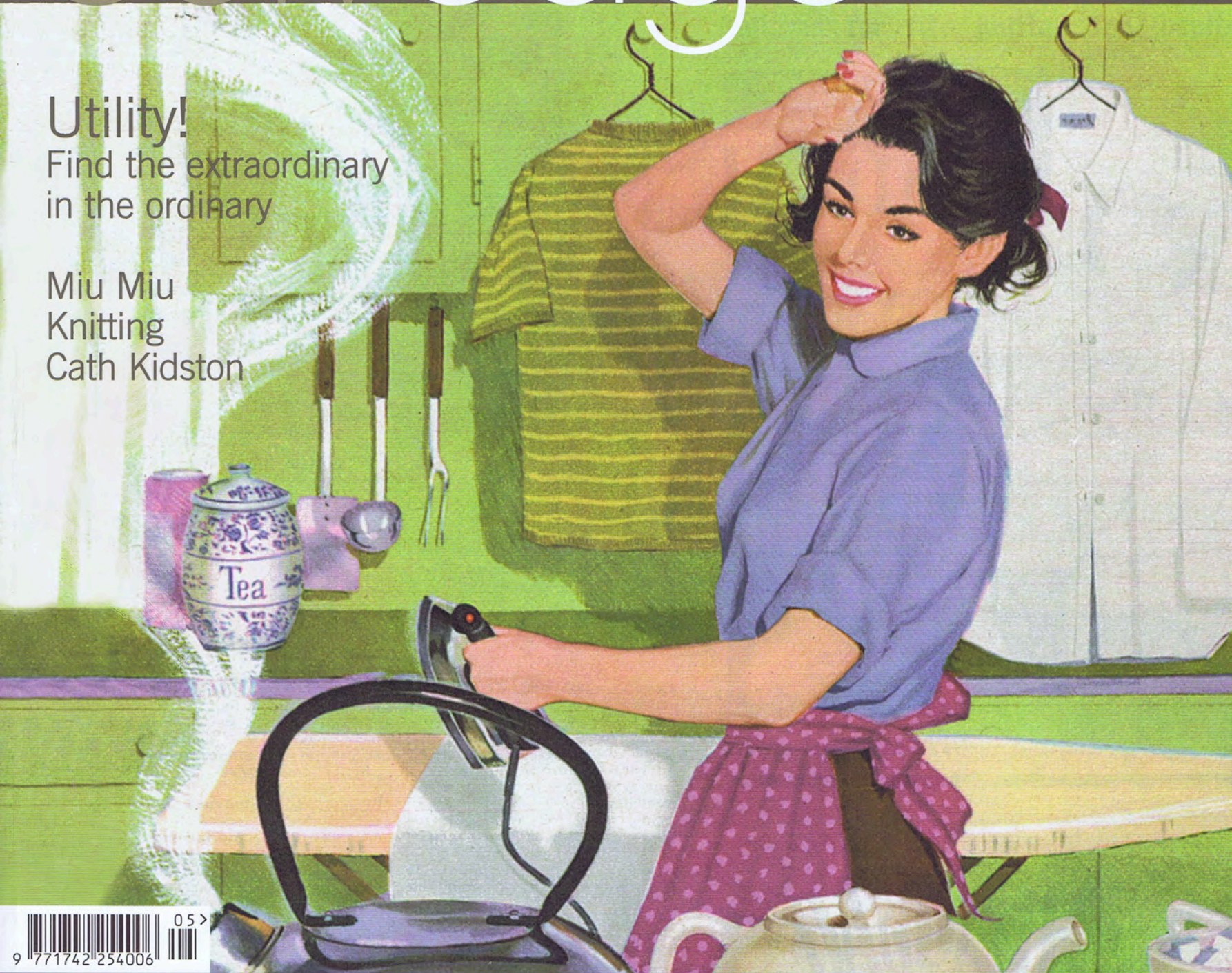
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THE FABRIC OF YOUR LIFE: TEXTILES IN FINE ART, FASHION, INTERIORS, TRAVEL AND SHOPPING

information via bulletin boards at the Australian Country Women's Association, Crompton teamed up with Australian Reader's Digest to conduct a survey into where people stored their tea towels. The overwhelming response was 'the third drawer down'.

Crompton, who regards herself as a curator, says that the purpose of the collection is to promote 'an ongoing dialogue between art and everyday'. David Wlazlo's design, Static White Noise, features a densely compacted scrawled transcript of the entire Australian Constitution – a satire on Australian politics and democracy. Margaret Morgan's A Portrait of a History of Modern Art as a Sanitary System uses a technical drawing of the plumbing system in a Victorian house to demonstrate – and at the same time question – the controversial modernist theories of American art historian Alfred Barr. Third Drawer Down's tea towels are marketed via the internet. Their success has led to the development of a new product, the lapkin, an oversized napkin intended for collecting crumbs and catching spillages while eating on your lap. The first lapkin features a surreal design by Lori Jean Kirk called Bird and Man.

The London-based company Unity Peg – established in 2000 by husband-and-wife duo, artist Robert Shepherd and furniture designer Jane Atfield – was also prompted by the idea of fusing art and design. 'After having a second child we were looking for a way of working from home on a project that would allow us to collaborate creatively together and explore visual ideas,' explains Jane. 'Tea towels seemed a perfect vehicle for this and ripe for challenge because of their somewhat predictable and prosaic nature. Our designs are characterised by vibrant colours, bold outlines and graphic imagery depicting everyday

things.' Printed on cotton and sold for a fairly modest price, Unity Peg's tea towels have proved a big hit amongst the design cognoscenti but also enjoy wider appeal.

Their first collection, Wash Up, was wryly self-referential. Designs included aerial views and cross-sections of sinks and plugs, a drainer stacked with crockery and a row of plastic detergent bottles. In the Secondary Functions collection, printed patterns double up as toys. One features an image of a rag doll, with instructions for self-assembly. Another depicts a snakes and ladders board. A series called On the Shelf is adorned with stripy vases, stacks of tableware and rows of books. Their latest collection, Still Lives, features line drawings of miscellaneous domestic objects, such as plants, bottles, jugs and fruits. Two tablecloths have also been produced. One depicts a giant image of a bicycle; the other, called Picnic, features birds in silhouette, and can double as an educational tool.

Glasgow-based textile artist Joanna Kinnersly-Taylor was already well-known for her large-scale commissioned hangings when she branched out into the domestic field a couple of years ago with a range of tea towels, napkins and tablecloths, hand screen-printed on Irish linen. 'Creating textile products that have a very practical use in a domestic setting was a new way of working for me,' she admits. 'I had to adopt a totally different mind-set but I found it very satisfying making multiples in collections. Working in this way has opened my eyes to all kinds of new applications for my work.'

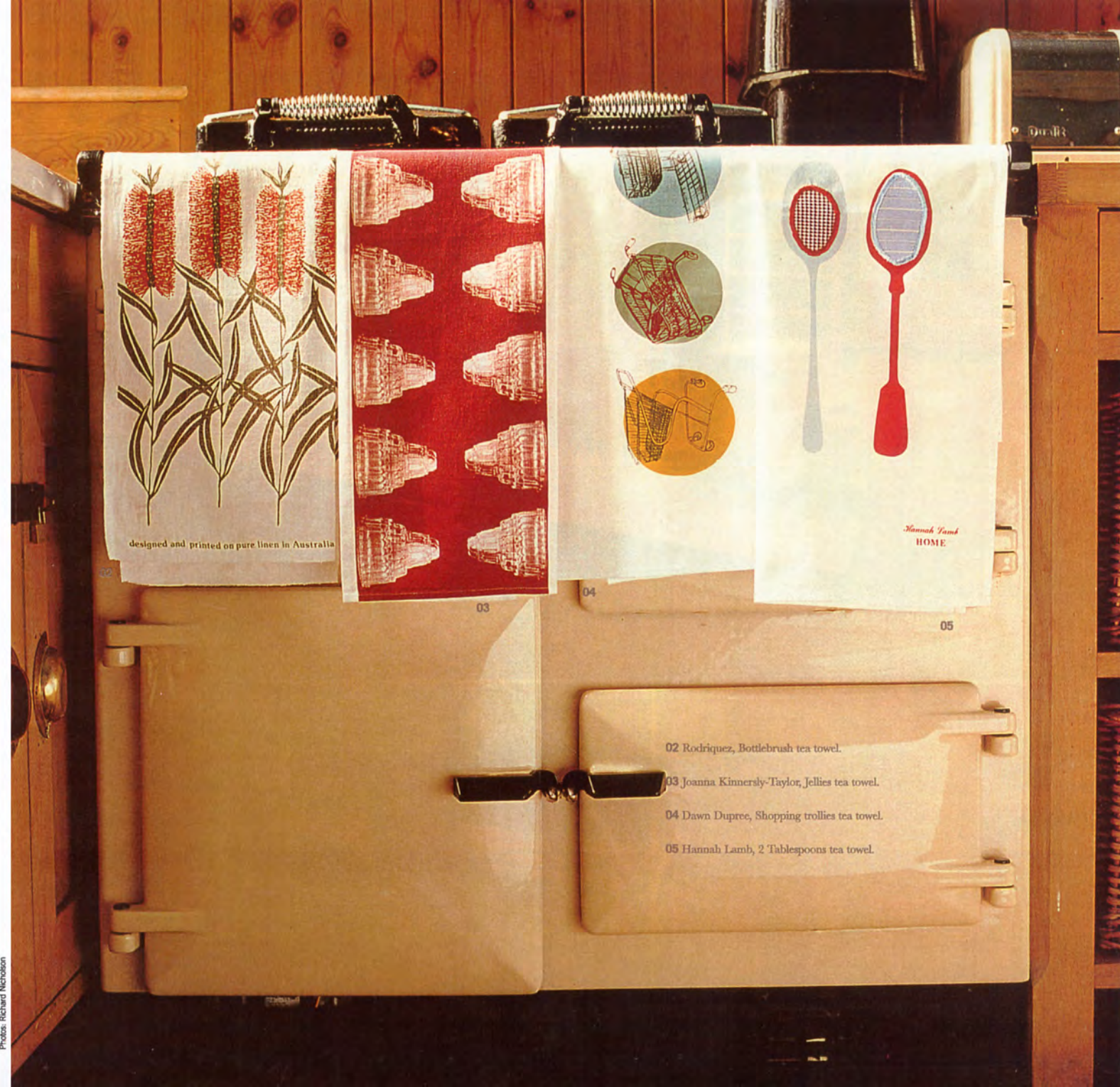
Her first collection, Jellies and Cutlery, inspired by Miss Havesham's abandoned wedding banquet in Great Expectations, features photographic images of spoons, forks

and jelly moulds arranged in 'rhythmic compositions'. Abstract Culinary also exploits domestic imagery, but this time, rather than depicting the actual objects, six kitchen utensils are symbolised by pictograms: Poach, Pour, Mash, Sift, Squeeze and Whisk. Joanna's latest range, Pulse, fuses an image of a colander with a paper doily motif. 'The two-colour print takes the form of a bold circular geometric pattern that is also delicate, giving the impression of a punched-through or cut-away effect,' she explains. Joanna, who holds the post of Research Fellow at Glasgow School of Art, has recently published an authoritative technical manual called Dyeing and Screen-Printing on Textiles. Although she currently prints her own pieces, the growing demand for her table linen may prompt her to use contract printers in the future.

As more and more artists and designers elevate the humble tea towel, consumers face a mounting dilemma – whether to wipe or to hang? Abigail Crompton confesses: 'The funniest thing about my tea towel fascination is that, before I started Third Drawer Down, I only had three tea towels. My mum raised me with the idea that using tea towels to dry dishes could be unhygienic! So my third drawer down is full of tea towels stored for archival purposes only.' The Third Drawer Down website includes a raft of ideas for what to do with your artist-designed tea towel. The best suggestion of the lot: 'Hang one over your oven and enter the controversial world of installation art.' ♦♦♦ **Lesley Jackson**

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Third Drawer Down: www.thirddrawerdown.com
Unity Peg: www.unitypeg.com
Joanna Kinnersly-Taylor: www.designnation.co.uk

Photos: Richard Nicholson



02 Rodriguez, Bottlebrush tea towel.

03 Joanna Kinnersly-Taylor, Jellies tea towel.

04 Dawn Dupree, Shopping trolleys tea towel.

05 Hannah Lamb, 2 Tablespoons tea towel.