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JUDGES' REPORT

BUSINESS INNOVATION

EMPRESS MOTH

INTERVIEWED

Sarah Hunnisett

DATE

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JUDGES

Helen Smale, Dorien Vermaas, Bev Doole

INTRODUCTION

Empress Moth uses natural dyes and plant-printing techniques to give clothes that would be discarded a beautiful, new lease of life.

Society has become used to cheap, throw-away clothing. Empress Moth is the opposite of this, saving clothes from landfill by transforming them with earthy colour and unique leaf imprints to create a garment that is appreciated and therefore kept.

All parts of the process come from plants and minerals, and everything goes back into the earth.



Empress Moth is a visionary business that epitomises the environmental principle of Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, while creating works of art at the same time.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Fabric artist Sarah Hunnisett runs Empress Moth from her home in Spring Creek.

As a child, Sarah loved nature, plants, colour and magic and was always making concoctions and dyeing her own clothes. This curiosity continued to grow and as an adult she explored plant medicine, permaculture, horticulture and plant dyeing.

While living in Australia she learnt about pigments from ground up stones and was attracted to eco-printing, dyeing fabric and creating patterns from leaves, flowers and seed heads. This work evolved into Empress Moth after she returned to Marlborough with her son Sage in 2020.

Sarah sources used plain-coloured garments including dresses, blouses, trousers, crop tops, T-shirts, bloomers and petticoats from Op shops, Trademe and Facebook Marketplace. She selects only natural fabrics - wool, cotton, linen and silk.

As well as reusing clothing, Sarah dyes and prints blank linen and merino scarves that she sources from a women's collective in India.

The name Empress Moth came to Sarah after climbing a eucalypt and finding a big emperor moth. This made her curious about whether there was an Empress Moth, and the name stuck: Empress = Impress, Moth = the symmetry in her designs mimicking a moth's wings.

She is constantly experimenting with dyeing and printing to extract earthy, defined colour and create symmetrical designs. Sarah took the judges through the steps of her creative process:

1. Picks the leaves from local properties, included a stand of eucalypts planted at her parents in Tua Marina property to trial different dyeing effects.
2. Makes a bucket of mordant, a creamy mix of vinegar and her secret combination of minerals and lime, which prepares the cloth to fix the pattern.
3. The item of clothing is added to soak up the mordant then washed off with wheat bran mash and laid out flat.
4. Leaves such as black walnut, eucalyptus, feijoa and grevillea are placed on the fabric to create the desired pattern and the cloth is rolled up tight and tied.
5. The tannin from the leaves reacts with the mordant to create the pattern, which is cooked on to the fabric for about three hours – either in a very hot dye bath of black walnut shells and eucalyptus bark or boiled in clean water.
6. The bundle is untied and the pattern reveals itself.
7. The garment is hung up to dry before being photographed to sell on instagram or the Empress Moth website.
8. Items are elegantly wrapped and sent to customers in compostable packaging.

Each piece created by Sarah is unique. Climate, soil type and season all affect how the colours turn out, with late summer providing the richest results. It is the antithesis of mass-produced fast fashion.

Sarah keeps a journal recording where and when leaves and flowers were picked for printing. This is creating a database for her business and is a work of art in itself.

Empress Moth sells via the website and instagram and is targeted at women who want an earthy, natural look. She also sells at markets and festivals, along with son Sage who tie-dyes children's T-shirts for sale.

Thanks to instagram, the USA is her biggest market. Natural fabric clothing is expensive and niche in USA – there does not appear to be an equivalent to Glassons for affordable linen clothing, let-alone artisan one-off garments.

Sarah's prices have found an eager market. At the time of judging in November 2022, Empress Moth had 10,000 followers on instagram.

As well as clothing, Sarah has been commissioned to create a shroud for a natural burial and she sees a potential market for more of these.



She has also produced a tutorial on botanical printing pressing eucalyptus leaves on to woollen fabric, which is sold as an e-book through her website. She would like to expand to teach workshops and create an online tutorial series.

Environmental benefits of Empress Moth:

- Reducing waste by re-using and re-purposing unwanted clothing.
- Only natural fabrics and dyeing products are used.
- Dyeing liquids are disposed of back to earth and work well as weed control.
- Sourced cornstarch-based packaging that is compostable.
- Able to buy ingredients in bulk, direct from suppliers, saving on packaging and transport.
- Antidote to fast fashion – artistic dyeing process creates a garment that is less likely to be thrown out.
- Raising awareness about recycled fashion and making it desirable.

She acknowledges the beautiful garden and living space provided by her landlords Tim Newsham and Kerry Rayburn. "I am in a place where I wake up to nature and am inspired by nature."

THE JUDGES WERE IMPRESSED BY:

- The outstanding example of innovation and efficient use of resources to create a business that is promoting recycling and diverting waste from the landfill.
- The commitment to sustainability is evident throughout the process, from growing the eucalypts, to sending the finished garment in a corn-starch bag.
- Sarah's strong visual aesthetic and wide range of talents: creating the leaf designs, styling the photo-shoots for instagram and designing her own elegant and easy-to-use website and instagram page.

- Knows her market and stays focused on it. Harnessing internet sales to export to US customers is a significant achievement.
- Not afraid of failure – by her own admission there is a lot of trial and error but her natural curiosity is at the core of the business and her success.
- Values-driven business – All natural products, recycled clothing and careful eco-sourcing from like-minded suppliers. Does not buy new silk because the farming of silkworms is against her principles.
- The systematic approach to keeping a journal of plant locations, leaves, bark, dying techniques. These creative and beautiful books are documenting, monitoring and storing data about her process.
- A model for flexible self-employment that supports and fits in with her family life.



PROBLEMS AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN TACKLED

- Sourcing ingredients. It took about a year to work out how to source all the ingredients from within New Zealand, but strong relationships have been built up with wholesalers that allow her to buy direct in bulk.
- How to set prices. Sarah is constantly told to put her prices up. However, she wants to keep her products affordable and accessible. A basic garment that she buys for \$10 would sell at \$65 after being through the dyeing process. She accepts that to reach her goals she needs a better understanding of her financial and time inputs.
- Learning through experience. Mastering the techniques and mix of ingredients to ensure garments are completely colourfast has been a process of trial and error before success. As has learning the properties and peculiarities of certain leaves for printing. For example, liquidambar, maple and oak can only be used in summer. Sarah has used her journal to document changes and how she solves the issues.
- Managing acidity of left over liquids. These are returned to the garden to control weeds and the soil is tested to ensure the waste product is evenly spread and not harming the garden.
- Adapting to her physical space. While very appreciative to be able to live and work in a beautiful garden space, Sarah is limited by having to do the preparations and dyeing outside and packing up each day. She has a goal to grow the business to enable her to buy a customised trailer for markets and festivals, and eventually her own house and all-weather shed for a permanent workspace.
- Limits to growth. All of the recycled garments are one-offs and there are often several people wanting to buy the same item. Sarah is working on how to scale up her business

from dyeing unique items to meeting demand for more. She has contracted a local seamstress to sew up skirt blanks for Sarah to dye. She is also sourcing calico bags from NZ and plain scarves from India to enable creating new lines of similar designs.

SUMMARY

Empress Moth is a creative and inspiring business that gives consumers a natural and artistic alternative to fashion waste and the throwaway culture.

Sarah has a strong streak of innovation and exploration. She makes things happen with what she has on hand, refining and adapting, and is building a business based on integrity and enjoyment.

Her sense of style infuses every step of the process. This is a business with a hard-core environmental ethos, and it is happening on the smell of a beautifully dyed oily rag.

SUGGESTIONS

- You have created a fantastic, environmentally friendly business. Now is the time to get a feel for the financials to sustain that success. Start with an Excel spreadsheet – what you are spending on business inputs, hours worked, sales made – to get a feel for what your actual costs are. This will help you build a business plan.
- A better understanding of the financials will show whether your prices are keeping up with your inputs (including your time). This information may help you to decide to charge more for your work. Your professional endeavour deserves a fair reward.
- Developing a relationship with a business mentor may help with this side of your work. www.businessmentors.org.nz
- Create an Empress Moth label – the design on your business card would work well. Consider two versions: one for the one-off clothing items. The second for bags, scarves and seamstress-provided blanks.
- If you're seeking social connection with like-minded people, have a look at a space at the creative hub at Flight Studios in Burleigh: Sawmill Creative Society, Sawmill Studios, 7 Waters Ave, Blenheim. Contact Stu McCormick stu@stucam.co.nz
- Follow up your idea for creating burial shrouds. This could be a significant business opportunity. Personalising each one may not be viable, but a range for families to choose from would be a good start.
- Selling at more markets would help you work out which ones are going to be worth your time and effort. Talking to customers face-to-face will build your following and share your ethos and integrity.
- Once you have a suitable studio space, hold small group workshops to share your skills, art, and plant magic.
- Depending on the commission charged, consider expanding your sales network by placing your work with local art galleries that also attract international visitors.
- There is a group of like-minded earth-friendly fashion businesses in Wellington. Considering making contact to see if there is any potential for collaboration:
- <https://sponsoredinteractive.stuff.co.nz/sustainable-style-in-wellington/index.html>