

SPYGLASS

ALISTAIR McALPINE
continues his journeys
of the eye

in April and May the same year she found herself in somewhat different circumstances, assisting in the ladies' wear department of Marks & Spencers, helping to choose designs for the 1995 collection.

During August the following year, she worked in the glass-buying department of John Lewis. Her work has been exhibited in the City Gallery, Barcelona, the Design Centre in London and in the Natural History Museum, where she showed a 4ft-long creation knitted in silver wire and lurex in the insect gallery.

Her latest collection comprises mostly fabrics made with a combination of elastic and paper fibre. When exposed to steam, the elastic and the non-stretchy quality of the paper forces the fabric to contract in an unpredictable, rigid shape at odds with the pattern. The sculptural quality of Miss Meynell's fabrics has drawn her towards

tailinery. (Her hats could well have come from beyond the Khyber Pass.)

She regards her strengths as 'a dogged determination to be independent', wisely adding that she is 'able to listen carefully'. Of her success she is modest: 'Since I graduated only last June I think that I need a little more time to mature.'

I admire such modesty, but her work speaks for itself—it already has incredible maturity. Her work is intensely personal: 'The evening cloak I made for the wife of the Master of the Drapers company could not be more different from the Bishop's cope. I pride myself on being versatile enough to work with clients on any project, whether ecclesiastical, private or theatrical.'

To Miss Meynell, success—or rather recognition of her talent—has come earlier than it has to many artists. 'I started in—and have to admit that I haven't yet progressed from—a one-bedroom flat near the Oval, south London, working on a makeshift table against one wall. I shared this with my husband, a theatrical director, who is also self-employed. He sits at his desk within a paper dart's throw of me. Surprisingly, we seem to work well together—except when I need more space and move onto the floor, preventing him from getting out of the room.'

'We have everything we need in terms of conventional equipment, although when we are both busy with calls and faxes, and the computer is whizzing away, it can all seem much closer to chaos than it should.'

There is, however, no benefit to be gained by working away in a wilderness of neglect. What she does with her talent is now up to her. She explains her skills in terms of her upbringing: 'Both my parents are practical people—my father is an architect, my mother a lactation consultant and midwife. They encouraged creativity. My practical textile abilities must at some stage have come from my mother, as I used her sewing machine from an early age.' One thing is quite certain—Miss Meynell's mother was absolutely right to encourage her daughter in her future career.

Photograph: Peter Searle at the Drapers' Hall, City of London.



Polly Meynell at the Draper's Hall with the Bishop of London's cope

'FABRIC has always captivated me,' Polly Meynell maintains with enthusiasm. She has recently finished a degree in constructed textiles at Buckinghamshire College, part of Brunel University—which, until recently, was not a university renowned for its knitting. During the past two years, however, graduates of this course have given their discipline a new dimension, and their work is exerting an increasing influence on the textile industry.

'I'm sure I irritate my family and my husband immensely, because I hoard pieces of interesting fabrics with no immediate plans for their future,' Miss Meynell continues. 'I cannot resist looking through the bargain bins in shops, to make quite sure that I'm not missing anything exciting.'

This trait is common to fabric enthusiasts. Should you ever come across a collector and ask to see their treasures, you will be shown to a series of wardrobes, cupboards, trunks and cardboard boxes. Each gem is unpacked, shown with pride and then lovingly folded, wrapped and stowed safely away again. These enthusiasts differ completely from collectors of paintings, who tend to leave their treasures in the brightest light or leave them propped against the furniture.

I first heard about Miss Meynell's work from the playwright Ronald Harwood. Her new cope for the Bishop of London had me gripped with excitement, as it is unbelievably beautiful. However, 'in terms of becoming a textile designer, I did not take my talent seriously,' she claims. 'I certainly did not think I would make a career out of it—until I went to Brunel.'

Since then, Miss Meynell has had a number of other commissions, ranging from a wallhanging for the Chichester Theatre—and the interior design of three luxury apartments for visiting stars—to an evening cloak for the wife of the Master of the Drapers' Company, worn at the Master's inauguration in June 1995. She also made a silk suit for Lady Queensberry for a television appearance in 1995.

Miss Meynell is not just an artist: from May to September 1994 she worked as a dresser at the Chichester Theatre, and