

It's Nice That

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Stylish set design and art direction for a host of star names – we talk to Petra Storrs

Posted by Liv Siddall, Monday 16 April 2012

Particularly talented set designer and creative director Petra Storrs has been lavishly decorating the creative world for many years now. So with a portfolio bursting at the seams with marvellous costumes, well-sourced props and fantastical sets, we have asked Petra to share with us the secrets of her craft...

Can you briefly define what you do?

I work with photographers, performers or advertising agencies to come up with and develop visual ideas and concepts for projects; then design and make them. This can be set design, costume design, props styling or anything in between, as long as the results are other worldly and exciting.

When did you realise you were good at this?

I trained as a product and furniture designer, which I loved, but once I left university I naturally fell into this type of work; making props and costumes for singer Paloma Faith. This then lead to opportunities to work for others such as Lady Gaga, Range Rover, *Dazed & Confused* and the V&A. I enjoy this work because I don't like routine or repetition, so it suits me well as every project is a new challenge.



Petra Storrs: V&A installation

Set design is becoming an increasingly competitive art form – how did you establish yourself in this field?

It's a very gradual and ongoing process. At the beginning I made lots of things from paper, as it's low cost and a great way to demonstrate your creative abilities. I think you have to prove your skills by using low cost materials in a creative way which adds value to make the outcome look premium. Now I am given larger budgets and can afford more expensive processes and I don't have to do everything myself. For instance I recently had a giant fibreglass tea cup fabricated and a metal dress in steel made by an armoury maker in France, which, for me, was a very exciting experience.

When given a brief based around a musician, how do you go about translating their music into visuals?

Well, its often actually quite straightforward. For instance for Florence & the Machine's *Cosmic Love* video, I was approached by Tom Beard and Tabitha Denholm to do the art direction – they wanted to create a cosmic other-worldly environment for Florence to perform in. I had been doing lots of work involving infinity rooms, mirrors and light bulbs at the time so suggested this as a set design idea to create our cosmic effect, from there we also designed and made the light up dress she wears and an orange rotating forest with lots of smoke for her to run through. I think the results are always more pleasing if it's a collaboration of both people's ideas and styles as you then arrive at an outcome neither could have imagined at the beginning of the process.



Petra Storrs: Range Rover Evoque yacht party



Petra Storrs: 'In all the world I dream in paper'

How do you source the props used in your videos and images?

Much of what I do involves making from scratch or adapting existing objects, and living in London makes it easy to get hold of anything fast. Myself and my assistant Tash research and develop the ideas, then after looking at the budget work out what it is possible to achieve: where to get all the materials and props needed. We then think through the making process in advance to iron out any problems. If there is time we order things in, but normally we then go on a mad dash around London and assemble everything together in time for the shoot.

Is there anyone you'd particularly love to work with or style for?

More with Lady Gaga, and I would love to work on a short film doing costumes or set design, I'm looking for a director who would like to work with me! Also dancers, I would love to do another moving costume project with dancers. Directors like Tarsem Singh, Photographers like Dan Tobin Smith and Tim Walker, singers such as Beyonce, Lana del Ray and Nicki Minaj. I could go on, the list is endless...



Petra Storrs: Dazed Digital presents Lady Gaga