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THE WOMEN'S MAKING



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# **INTERVIEWS**

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## Interview to Ross Stevens

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### **Abstract**

Ross Stevens, architect, industrial designer of many mass-produced products – including washing machines (Fisher and Paykel), lawn mowers (Morrison), televisions (Thomson, Saba) and lots of stereos (Perreaux and Plinius) also as a co-owner of PureAudio – and professor of design is engaged to establish a globally recognized design research expertise on multi-material 3D and 4D printing, at the School of Design Innovation of the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. In the MADE lab (Multi-property Additive-manufacturing Design Experiments) students enjoy being free to explore multi-material printing and experiment with new design solutions. Meeting him on the occasion of the last World Industrial Design Conference and Industrial Design World Expo (WIDC 2019 & IDWE) in China, we were fascinated by his way of promoting women's work in the area of new digital printing technology. He helped us to understand the perspective of female students to generate novel applications of the technology to form complex and highly customized multi-material structures, assemblies, and products biology-inspired that cannot be made by any other means. He draws an analogy of women weaving and 3D printing as a complex process that requires patience and sensitivities to things like color, texture, and tactile qualities of the fiber. Ross thinks those sensitivities empower women in relation to this new emerging technology.



**Q: We heard about your choice to involve students in your interesting research about new digital printing technology, advanced materials, and future vision. In your lab, you have been observed women students working in this area, their ideas, way of proceeding. What specific ability do you think women have in these areas? Are there any achievements from your projects made by women? What are the more representative projects of a feminine way of thinking and/or making?**

**A:** It is interesting to watch young women working with technology. It does seem to be slightly different to the way my male students have in the past. Probably at the moment the male students are falling behind. And the young women seem to be dominant on our program now and certainly dominate the prize giving. The technology we focus on is 3D printing, so things around how you make digital information into three dimensional objects. And I think there seems to be quite a built-up multi-generational sense of frustration that women have been pushed away from technology. There is a lot more patience with machines female students than male students. If you think of crafts like weaving and 3D printing, they are quite similar sensitivities. Even if you repeat something many times, you have to repeat it really beautifully to get a consistent piece of embroidery on fabric. It's very similar. You build one layer on top of another layer. It has to be tested. The machines can do prints and do a job gradually. I think a lot of young women seem to be very good at the same thing what the machine do. 3D printing requires two sides: a digital side, which is the file you send to the machine; the other is a physical side which is



the plastic melting and temperatures heating writers. This is lovely digital, physical and sensitivity. So physical strength doesn't play any part in it. Printing seems to be a neutral territory. You don't need to be strong to do it. It's not dangerous.

**Q: Do you believe there is potential in the creative areas of female students? Are they capable of expressing a sensitivity for technology, materials or sustainability in the lab MADE? Are they proposing a different type of innovation? What are their specific manifestations? Did you realize that women's design could have something different to express on projects with sophisticated technology?**

**A:** I think old people see technology differently to not have everyone exploring it and expressing themselves through it. It's just foolish because you get a really limited dimension of what I could do. A lot of the products are bought by women and yet they are often designed by men. But without the sensitivity of what we might want, I think it's a huge empowerment for a country that can get all of the people. The more I travel, the more I see other countries, the happier I am in New Zealand seems to be empowering young woman pretty well at technology. We expect that half of our program will be open to women. More than half the price is going to the women. I would say that 80% of the prices will be going to young woman because of their dominant international acknowledgment.

**Q: We all know that you are interested in the future of design, so what role do you think women will play in the future of design?**

**A:** Generation of campaigns, lots of good role models and discussion about women doing things, have convinced young women they can do anything they haven't traditionally done. 3D printing makes us doing things that we wouldn't have thought possible before.

**Q: Do you think there is in women designer a vision that subverts a masculinist bias in technology and design? Do you think there is a difference that could emerge through an overtly feminized technology or a critique of the production models supported by technology?**

**A:** Yeah, I do. I'd be fascinated to see while women will take technology it will be different. And I don't think we know what it is yet. But, from what I can see, when young woman comes in our program, that would be very different. We do a lot of work close to biology. And so a lot of our research is inspired by biology or trying to make dynamic creatures or plants that move like biology or acts like biology. We find a very particular sensitivity coming from young women and an interest in biology and natural world. And I think we're starting to see some projects that we wouldn't have got from a young man. The technology and biology of the two things are really pretty exciting. It's more like natural technology, but we're cutting edge mixing the two.

**Q: We have observed some 3D and 4D printing works designed by your students, which have bionic and organic forms, soft and delicate perception, close to nature, and material humanization, and so on. These characteristics**

## are more feminine or not? What outstanding characteristics do women display in design?

**A:** The materials become softer, more pliable and more precise. The printer that we use is a very precise printer putting down extremely small droplets. And one model can have a billion drops of reason that can be programmed. To do that, you really need a lot of sensitivity to tell it what to be. You have a lot of decisions to make. But as I say, if you're weaving something and weaving is a complex thing as well, and if you look at traditional woman and weaving, (there's a reason women have dominated weaving for a long time), it does require patience, sensitivities about things like color, texture and tactile qualities of the fiber. Maybe cooking is a little bit the same, too. But that's a complex thing where you bring a lot of subtle emotions into it. And it's really four dimensional, ingredients come from how you prepare them, to how you heat them and how you proceed them. I think those sensitivities empowering them. That's empowering hard and really cutting edge technology on top of those sensitivities.

## Q: Which is the consideration about the role of women in design in your country?

**A:** We have a female prime minister who is in charge. She's a quite young mother. I think that helps to tell other people and other women that they can be what they wish to be. We're a pretty young country, so our rules are not particularly rigid. That's why amazing technology suits us quite well, apparently quite a pioneering. We're not very good at doing traditional

things competitively. Other countries get more history of mankind, so they tend to be better at traditional ways of making. And we have to be quite fast with change, this also inspires technology, art and design. It is interesting how many young women are studying industrial design in our programs: about 50%. 30 years ago, that would have been closer to 2% or 3%.

**Q: There are topics in research field in your country that are preferred or dominated by women? Are there any specific topics approached only by women designers? Why?**

**A:** We're starting to see a lot of women and things like the creative fields like design and architecture – and our faculty too – are now dominated by women. It's extremely competitive to get into the architecture. It's very very difficult. Higher education has been dominated by women. It's quite a profound shift to more women studying in university, winning more of the prizes, with more ambitious. This generation has been told they can do anything, whether they believe it or not.

**Q: Is there any lack of technical ability of female designers in actual design projects? For example, how well do they master advanced materials or digital 3-4D printing?**

**A:** Not really. I think in a creative project, the technical competence is part of it. I think it'll be one of my complaints of a masculine way of doing technology. We're not finding a young woman in any way technically inferior. Basically they will learn as well as the young men. So no, we're not seeing women behind. Maybe in one area, and that's coding. I'm

not sure why the computer coding is still dominated by men. It seems to be one of the last bastions of victim traditional masculine gigs. It requires a very particular kind of person. We struggle to get design students to study coding. It's somehow the creative process and mathematics. I think to learn the programs basically require tenacity and effect. It's said the women know what they're trying to make and they will put the time to learn and make sure they have the knowledge. So now we're not seeing a big difference.



### **Q: What's your plan with your research in the future?**

**A:** I'm working on a game that's 3D printing, so everything I explore is emerging technologies that effect New Zealand industry. The research I'm doing is a multi-material printing.

It's very precise, multiple colors, multiple partners. And at the moment I'm trying to display inside prints so that once it is printed, I can still change things like color by keeping things locked up. When it's printed, it can still be reprogrammed.

I'm really interested in a lot of things such as where they come from, how they are used, where they go. Once you finish with them, you have a feedback into the system. Creating the material first and even at the end of its life history, absorbing it and making it into something else. Technically, we need to understand how to do that. That's one of the reasons I really like printing. It gets me pretty close to biology. I can't print a tree, but you know we're getting closer.

I am really interested in gender. You don't have to break down the barriers because they're not there. And as an example of how striking it is, we have a traditional workshop at the university and it's been so frustrating trying to give young woman students to go and work down there. But eventually we just bypassed. We set up clear time for the studios primarily, so the students wouldn't have to go and ask what the male team had to do something. And so that's one of the really big strategies. For years, we tried to break down the gender bias. We gave up because we couldn't change that. The culture was too loud and too old, too rigid, too harking back to the good old days of the past, so we literally bought a huge number of 3D printers and put them up in the studio. And now the students don't need to talk to people anymore, and they use the printers. They used to talk to their colleagues or other students. We give some demonstrators at the begging of how they work. So the students don't have to ask them for permission to use them or how to use them, what you have is a dialogue between the person and

the machine. And we find that much more equal. A woman is just as capable as men. And, the machine doesn't care watching the people who seems in the power, if it's not set up well. So that's one way we found really benefit to cut off the historical culture. I feel like they're equal to students. So, pretty lots of young women would go to the workshop. And the project would be pretty much made from them.

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V

# BIOGRAPHIES



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## META WORKSHOP.

### HOW TO DESIGN A WORKSHOP?

By **Òbelo**

12-13 settembre 2020

venue: AIAP Milano

## WEBINAR

### LET'S DANCE WITH LETTERS.

#### INTRODUCTION TO

#### ANIMATED TYPOGRAPHY

By **Gianluca Alla**

September 26, 2020

venue: webinar (Zoom)

### SLEEPING BEAUTIES

By **Archivio Tipografico**

+ **Studio 23.56**

October 2-3, 2020

venue: Torino, Archivio Tipografico,  
Via Brindisi, 13a

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HOW TO BUILD A BUSINESS

WITH LEAN APPROACH

AND DEVELOPE SYSTEMS

OF MONETIZATION ORIENTED

TO THE VALUE FOR THE MARKET.

By **Stefano Schiavo**

October 24, 2020

venue: webinar / Zoom

### BOOK ARCHITECTURE

#### AND STORIES FROM THE ARCHIVE

By **Cristina Balbiano d'Aramengo**

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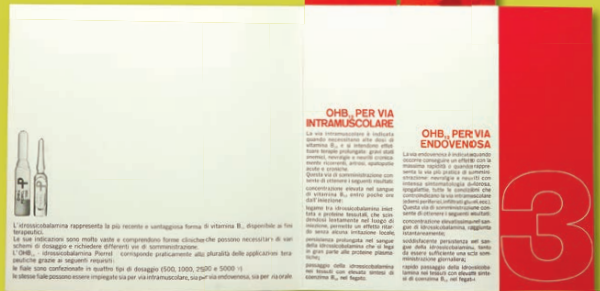
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