



A NEW WEAVE

Co Fermanagh born designer/maker Nicola Gates is the creative energy behind budding new handwoven textiles company, Olla Nua

Photography Simon Mills

Images courtesy of Craft NI



When did you discover your love for wool and weaving? My mum taught me to knit and sew when I was very young, so textile crafts have been part of my life for a long time. It was only when I went to Art College that I had the chance to try weaving, and I've been fascinated ever since! It's perceived as an old-fashioned craft here though, so I made it my mission to create modern designs using traditional, natural materials. The name I've chosen for my business, 'Olla Nua', is based on the Irish words meaning 'new wool', reflecting this vision for a contemporary take on a traditional material and method. I discovered my passion for wool after a short felt-making lesson during my Textile Design course. I just loved seeing how the wool could be transformed from raw fleece into a sturdy, yet soft and comforting material. Given our cool, damp Irish climate, wool is a wonderfully comforting and cosy natural material to embrace.

Where did you gain your experience before launching Olla Nua last autumn? I graduated from the National College of Art and Design in 2005 then used a bursary award to spend time back-packing around Bolivia and Peru, where I got to see local women using the most basic equipment to weave beautiful, unique textiles. It made me realise that you don't need expensive equipment to produce exciting designs, and actually, technology and mass production can diminish practical skills and meaning. Really, what you need is knowledge, time and patience. I spent the next ten years working in retail and heritage roles, while slowly increasing my knowledge of weaving and collecting the tools to get started.

Do you weave on a traditional loom? Yes, I now weave on a traditional Swedish loom, which is powered entirely by hand and foot. While it's challenging weaving everything by hand, I believe this is central to my work and design ethos. It means I can produce short runs of cloth as I need it, so waste is minimal, and the process itself can also be very satisfying. I enjoy being hands-on with the materials, right through from initial design to finished cloth. I love discovering the hidden patterns that emerge with each design, through the sequencing of the threading and weaving structures and the repetitive movements as I work.

Your core cushion range has a fresh, pared back Scandinavian look. Is this your signature style? I'm a huge fan of the pared back Scandinavian aesthetic and have visited Sweden, Finland and Denmark over the years. I have very fond memories of visiting these wonderful countries; my husband and I actually got engaged in Stockholm! I adore the pared back style, natural, cosy materials and restrained colour palettes. I've continued this theme in our home in Belfast, where 'less is more' with subtle touches of colour and texture bringing a cosy feel, combining natural materials with vintage/antique pieces. Our home is a small terraced house in Belfast, so I try to keep things reasonably uncluttered yet warm and inviting. I do enjoy the challenge of small-space living, as it means you really have to consider the objects that you own and the best way to use a space. To complement my restrained colour palette, my designs and patterns have a modern, simplistic influence.

Do you use locally sourced yarns? My yarns are sourced from mills in Ireland and England. Many of my yarns are from Donegal Yarns in Kilcar. I love soft, natural shades so in the instances where I use colour, the selections are very soft and easy on the eye, such as aqua blue and mellow yellow. I also source yarn spun in Yorkshire; many of these yarns are in shades of grey or chocolate but they are undyed and completely natural. Each cushion is then backed with natural Irish linen.

What does the Olla Nua collection include and where can your designs be found? The collection currently includes a range of cushions, limited edition throws and travel pouches. I'm currently working on designs for scarves due to launch this winter. A selection of my products is available at Space CRAFT, Belfast, and also at special events and exhibitions across the country. I also have some pieces in the Irish Design Shop, Dublin. I will also be at various exhibitions in the coming months.

What's next in the pipeline? I've recently started teaching tapestry-weaving workshops. It can be tricky because it's a slow craft, but I'd love to inspire people to experiment with new skills and be creative with natural fibres. My belief in the value of the making process and the personal satisfaction gained from it really inspired me to want to teach others about this age-old craft. This is something I'm keen to continue and develop. Stay posted with news, upcoming events, my workshops and all the latest new designs and sign up for my quarterly newsletter on the website. ollanua.com