**Wallpaper and Soft Furnishings**

20.9.2018

XX set up BG with a good friend A in 2009, whilst still working as Living Editor at X and before the birth of her children. They design and produce wallpapers, fabrics and accessories sold directly from their web-site and through Liberty and Rag & Bone.

CG: Looking back, how did you business start up? What drove you to make that decision?

XX: I started it with an old friend of mine, who had a history on fine art and I had a history in magazines. We had been at University together and gone on separate careers. We had working in London for 8-9 years and she was pregnant with her first baby. I was newly married and thinking about it.

CG: So you didn’t have any children at that point?

XX: No. Although we try not to publicise the fact that we started a business because we were starting families because it just doesn’t sound professional. It happened at that time because I suppose both of us, at that time, wanted to step out of the corporate world. The 5 day a week, being at some else’s beck and call. It just seemed like a really great time to pool our experience, to work on something we both felt really passionate about. To take that risk I suppose, it just felt like the right time.

It seems like such a crazy time to take a risk doesn’t it? Like you are having these children and you need the income for all the extra expense, but at the same time it just left it was a window – it was now or never.

I was actually in a full time job when we first started. A. has stepped out of her completely and she was ready to go for it. So I was working at Vogue at the time we started and it was a very useful place to be for connections and exposure to the latest trends and upcoming changes in interiors. When we first started the business I thought I was going to run the two in tandem and then I had a year off (maternity leave) with my first baby and we really put a lot into the business during my maternity leave, a quiet launch towards the end of my maternity leave. I then went back 3 days a week to work and very quickly I realised, the two jobs and being a mother just weren’t going to be possible.

CG: Was that because if the corporate hours? the culture? or because you had changed now you were a mother?

XX: It was a combination really. I went back to a job that I had loved and been passionate about before I had children, but that’s a job that really just works for people who are single. Who have the time and energy to go out in the evenings seeing all cool things that are going on in London. Instead of looking forward to an evening event I was clock watching at 3.30 to get home.

CG: So in effect, your values changed towards the job because you became a mother?

XX: Yes. So I suppose I was in a very fortunate position of having already launched the business, I could take a risk knowing what I was stepping into. I was able to leave my job to carry working freelance in bursts (carrying on doing what I was doing before) whilst working on the new business. I kept the freelance work to keep up my contacts. It felt like a very scary book to close, walking away from such a fantastic job.

CG: Yes, you are walking away from a secure position that you worked towards and aspired to for so long. Not only is it a big risk, it’s also a huge step into the unknown.

XX: Yes I mean working at CN you feel like, they do this weird thing to you, you feel that there is no life outside the CN world! What was I doing leaving? So yes it was a big leap that I took when Lily was one.

CG: In effect motherhood was a catalyst and what would you say was your biggest driver – creativity, control…

XX: It was definitely the creative drive, to do some purely of our own, not controlled by anyone else. Of course now I end up doing a load of the admin stuff and so you are pulled into doing the structure and the ordinary but when you are working for someone else it was endlessly restrictive in that way.

Also I really, really wanted to control my own hours. I wanted to be able to have a career and be a mummy, at the same time. I never wanted the career to be the number one. I think it would have to be if I was working like I used to, for a big company.

CG: So setting up the business gave you the creative control and freedom, whilst also being able to be present for your children. In your view, that’s not something that is possible in a corporate environment.

XX: No I don’t think that is possible at all.

CG: When you built the business up, did you find you set milestones around the children?

XX: We never sat down and said “right this is our 5-year plan and this is where we need to be to get there” because that felt completely unrealistic thing to do. A. has just has her first baby, we then for the first five years had a baby every autumn between the two of us. So in a way that was a really nice thing because it meant that the business had to grow organically, around our lives. We were both in the same boat, we had the same drive and ambition and commitment to succeed, we were working all the hours we could possible do in between having the babies, but it could just only go at a certain pace because of that.

Then we did find that just naturally, after I think 6 or 7 years when A.’s youngest started nursery (2.5 years), things just gradually took on another pace, a step change in the hours we could commit. So each year after that, we have had increasing hours available so we could continually build and grow and consolidate and expand.

CG: Was there anything else, like the nursery hours that represented a step change in the business for you?

XX: I think it can only be attributed to the actual hours that we were able to commit. Each step change came when we had more freedom gained by each of our children going to school and then spending longer hours at school as they grew older. We have been at slightly different levels, she still had a younger child when both of mine were at school. The biggest difference was when they were all full time at school. Then we completely structured our business – we had 3 school terms of proper hours and we really focus and really push the business and the holidays when we are desperately trying to keep our head above the water.

CG; Have you found, in a way that’s a safe way to run a business? You don’t step up ahead of time, only when you are fully comfortable to taking that next step. Rushing ahead may mean costly mistakes?

XX: Yes completely. It wouldn’t have come naturally to A. and I to have sat down and followed some strict business plan, with financial drivers and targets. I suppose we are both naturally “creatives” in that way and that never would have suited our characters. At the same time, she is very good at controlling the purse strings and seeing where we are with profits and stock. In fact a steady growth and nothing too scary, has been really successful for us. We have consistently grown and expanded.

In fact we were really lucky because I think we launched in 2009, off the back of a deep recession. We were thinking gosh, if we can succeed in this then we should be good for when it really does pick up. We both put a small chunk of money in at the very beginning because there was no big ask in that respect. We deliberately kept very low overheads, I mean we were doing it from a basement in our London flat to begin with and then when we moved out to the country it was the kitchen table. We have never had to ask for money, to involve any backers. It became a profitable business straight away and we always kept our control. We had no pressure to answer to financial investors who might want to change how we did things.

CG: If you look back now to what your start up aspirations were and what you have achieved, are there differences?

XX: I think when we started, I never really thought it would take off as successfully as it did. I never really projected that far ahead. Then it suddenly did start to become a full time job. I have always struggled with balance of work and home. Because we have always done it from home, rather than invest a lot of money into setting up a separate office elsewhere, but that does mean the distinction between business and home has been blurred for a very long time. I really try and be strict about it; as the business has grown bigger and it’s holiday time, I am able to say right this is now time with my children and focus on them.

CG; How do you reconcile the mother identity and the business owner identity, that can be very separate and in conflict?

XX: I find it very difficult …. I spend so much time, when I am working, pretending that, I mean sometimes that you are not even a mother because it feels unprofessional and it feel unprofessional to let people know that you run the business from home or that you might be off on the school run. I am not that 9-5 in an office business woman, so yes I do battle with it because I see myself so much more as the mother than the business woman.

CG Does that affect your confidence sometimes?

XX: Yes I suppose sometimes….it depends who you are with. I think there has been so much progress and you really notice with the flexi time, job share, all the stuff that just had to happen. It’s all been since I have left the office environment, so perhaps you can be more honest but I think I still have my view because I haven’t been in an office with these changes.

CG: I find some mothers put on a different persona. The image of “credible business woman.” Do you find it a relief to be able to assume a role outside motherhood or do you enjoy the combination. Does it strengthen your commitment to the business?

XX: I definitely find it a relief to do something outside motherhood. I couldn’t be a 100% only mother, I adore them to bits but I just couldn’t do that solely. I do need another outlet. I am in a fortunate business because the interiors world is a very women heavy sector. Then at the same time, because it is so women heavy, there are a lot of women who are like “so I became a mum and then I decided to become an interior designer” and then I worry that people are looking at me in the same light thinking “well she’s not serious about her business, it’s just a hobby, a lifestyle, a phase…just a mum who has gone into interiors” So I am definitely battling that.

CG: How would you judge your success?

XX: My target is to be making a certain amount money, whilst being able to afford to pay someone else to do the admin side of the business. So I could concentrate on the creative and for us not to have to slog away at all the ungodly hours that we have done for so many years. We have recently been able to employ someone in our studio to help with the admin workload, to give us more structured time with our children in the holidays. It used to be when we took time off for the holidays, it was horrible because everything stopped and you came back from holiday to a huge backlog and a mess. We’ve had someone in over the last year and it feels like another milestone – I was able to take a holiday for 2 weeks at the same time as A. and we came back refreshed knowing there would not be a massive workload to face. That’s the first time.

CG; So your goals are to build enough profit in the business to employ enough resource to run the day to day, so you can be solely creative. That would be success. Is respect from your children part of that?

XX: I battle with that a bit. They have never known me not to work, it’s not like I ever didn’t have a job and then they have seen a change when I did start to work. I have worked throughout before and after birth. I think the fact they have always known I work is great, a role model for both of them particularly my daughter. But because of the blurred boundaries I have to manage between work and home, they are getting to an age when they can see that I am not focused on them, that I might have to be on my phone, even just checking it regularly. I suppose I often check my emails when I should be paying them attention. They do vocalise that now “would you JUST out your phone down!” you know. There is me trying to restrict their screen time or not letting them access things online and them I’m doing it all the time.

CG: Do you find it does bleed into a lot of your time. As a business owner it’s very difficult not to take the call?

XX: I go through phases because we have busy times of year: autumn and spring. Big surges to Christmas but not December. I am very bad at putting the phone away and not looking at until my children are in bed. I look at quite a lot and I find it difficult not to check. It is something I am constantly trying to talk to myself about and I feel guilty about. I might be making tea and I hear the phone vibrate, I just have to check it. If emails have come through and one of them is really stressful and yet I can’t deal with it now because I am having dinner with my children and they are in the room. BUT it still has an effective on your temperament, because you are immediately tense.

CG: Mothers guilt….

XX: Yes, a man is allowed to come back from work and be able to “I’m sorry guys I am still working, I can’t do that I have to work” and to continue to work, no problem all. Whereas we (women) can’t do that, we just have to get on with all the others things as well, to juggle and feel the pressure to meet everyone’s needs. My husband respects the fact that I do both roles, but at the same it is just expected that I have to do both, no question. There are certain things that they are just not going to take on board. Those responsibilities are simply yours, no matter how hard.

CG; Even with a supportive husband, I have found women are still picking up everything else whilst they focus on “their job”.

XX: Yes it is very blinkered. You are constantly torn. There is no solution. I am constantly thinking about is there a home help I could get to relieve the burden a little. Our business is still at a stage where it needs to be me or A. that responds. We can’t delegate it. But I don’t want to be with my children any less than I already am – so I can’t cover the business or the children, I want to do both, I need to do both. It’s not reconcilable.

CG: What makes you feel successful?

XX: It’s a mixture, each year we pay ourselves more that’s a absolute measure. Also it’s being recognised; we received an award recently for one of our prints. That doesn’t do anything for us financially but it a great feeling of recognition for what we are doing, that incredible important to me and feels like real success. Recognised for out creativity, I think it gives our brand long term legitimacy.

CG: It that just as important as money, in your assessing your success?

XX: Yes it is, it other people’s perceptions of you as a brand and you and what you are achieving. People have no idea what profit we are making, but they do judge us by our product; that’s reputation. The feels good, it’s our brand longevity, it’s our future.

CG: So do you feel this is you now. You don’t aspire to go back and being an editor etc?

XX: Yes I think so, I don’t have an aspiration to go elsewhere. I suppose when I feel super stressed I think; wouldn’t it be lovely to hand the running of the business over to somebody else and just be creative. My head is still staying with this business for the long term.

**Personal Details**

Age: ~~16-29~~ 30-39 ~~40-49~~ ~~50-59 60+~~

Nationality: British (white)

Country of origin: UK

Mode of working: Full Time: ~~Part time:~~

Children: (1) ~~0-2 3-4~~ 5-11 ~~12-18~~

Children: (2) ~~0-2 3-~~4 5-11 ~~12-18~~

Children: (3) 0-2 3-4 5-11 12-18

Children: (4) 0-2 3-4 5-11 12-18

Highest educational qualification: Degree

Location of business: Winchester

Home working: Yes

Last position held in employment: Magazine Editor

Husband Occupation: Film

Husband highest educational qualification: Degree

Household income: Dual ~~Single~~ (Both incomes required)