

her life

PHOTO COURTESY OF VICTORIA MACKENZIE-CHILDS



PHOTO BY KIMBERLY COOK

DESIGNING WOMEN

BY COURTNEY
RAE KASPER

Victoria MacKenzie-Childs and daughter Heather Chaplet are changing the world one think tank at a time

In a whispery voice, Victoria MacKenzie-Childs humbly recalls the moment she parented the whimsical pottery style that founded the Aurora-based company she and her husband Richard once owned: "I was sitting in my little studio and was making what you call a chowder bowl. I had never made one, or seen that shape before," she said with childlike excitement. "A whole rush of ideas burst forth out of control. All kinds of patterns and decorations just kept building and falling completely almost like jazz." Crafted on a table top, this piece defined the "stackable with the humor of it dancing on the edge" MacKenzie-Childs' shape.

But those familiar with the eponymous MacKenzie-Childs, Ltd. wares can thank daughter Heather Chaplet for its existence and cheerful childlike whim.

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Richard ("Childs") began producing their ceramic art as a means to bring Chaplet back to New York State from ballet school in England, and by 1985, the duo's artwork was in full-time production. And Chaplet's ability to cherish the child within is what mother Victoria credits inspired her her day-to-day outlook.

"When she was a little girl, it didn't matter what Heather was doing or what day of the week it was. She wasn't conscious of any kind of formula, yet she was very organized in her progression forward," Victoria said. "I started thinking like her. I didn't care if I was plaiting her hair, baking a cake, making a pot or hoeing the garden; I'm going to be playing as my work and my work will be my play. It changed my consciousness, my whole way of being."

MacKenzie-Childs notes that it might be

because she and Richard raised Heather to express herself without walls. "She's just so natural and fresh, and everything she touches is just so individual and inspiring to others. I love the way she and Nils are with their children and with themselves; they are a beautiful expression of family," said the rainbow-coiffed grandmother of two.

Now, almost 11 years after cutting ties with the company that still bears their combined surnames, Victoria and Richard have put their 43-acre King Ferry estate on the market and are forging forward with a new collection of whimsical wares, while an all grown up Heather quit running her family's on-property Home Again bed and breakfast to design her own organic clothing line.

Here, the mother and daughter designers talk about what they're creating now after life in Central New York.

VICTORIA MACKENZIE-CHILDS From bucolic emporium to floating emprise

On a pier in the Hoboken, New Jersey shipyard floats a 105-year-old vessel named Yankee Ferry. This 137-foot boat is the place where artists Victoria and Richard MacKenzie-Childs will now permanently call home, that is until the next natural progression moves them forward, Victoria said.

The couple, who both attended graduate school at Alfred University, live, work, eat, breath and sleep on board the historic boat they've transformed into their own floating wonderland. Yankee also serves as the showroom and studio for the duo's latest endeavour, Victoria & Richard Emprise (www.victoriaandrichardemprise.com), that features artisan ceramics and other fanciful household wares, plus the husband and wife designers' first and only jewelry line.

When asked about trading their sprawling pastoral Finger Lakes residence where MacKenzie-Childs originated for the bright New York City lights, Victoria compares it to the likes of a shared travel journal or moving art project:

"Our home there that we love dearly is a part of that wholeness and oneness of movement forward," she said. "It's time for it to have its next blessing expressed through somebody else who has a dream and a vision to pick up where we left off. Our mothers always taught us to leave everything better than when we

found it, which we certainly have done with our upstate dwelling."

As for finding inspiration for their artwork in an urban setting, she said it's more exciting than simply being inspired by one's surroundings, but that she and Richard are currently more mentally than physically profound.

"We're in a place where we're not really alone with our thoughts like we were upstate; we're in a place where it's like a great big giant think tank, a place where policies are changing and ideas are erupting, international cultures are converging and there's all this wonderment going on that obviously is not something you can paint a picture of," she explained. "It's more something that moves you forward in thought."

In the time that has passed between what Victoria calls "the anchor" people recognize from Aurora to its current state, she said that the brand is now completely the dichotomy of what MacKenzie-Childs, Ltd. was meant to be in their eyes.

She explains that it was a mere form of expression in that time and place that they've come to realize wasn't the body of their work nor did it represent what they are as visual artists.

"MacKenzie-Childs was its own think tank; it was a place of constant change and it's been so saturated in the last 10 years with the repetitive 'whitebread' patterns that are recognized in a regular way," she said. "But if you're not a



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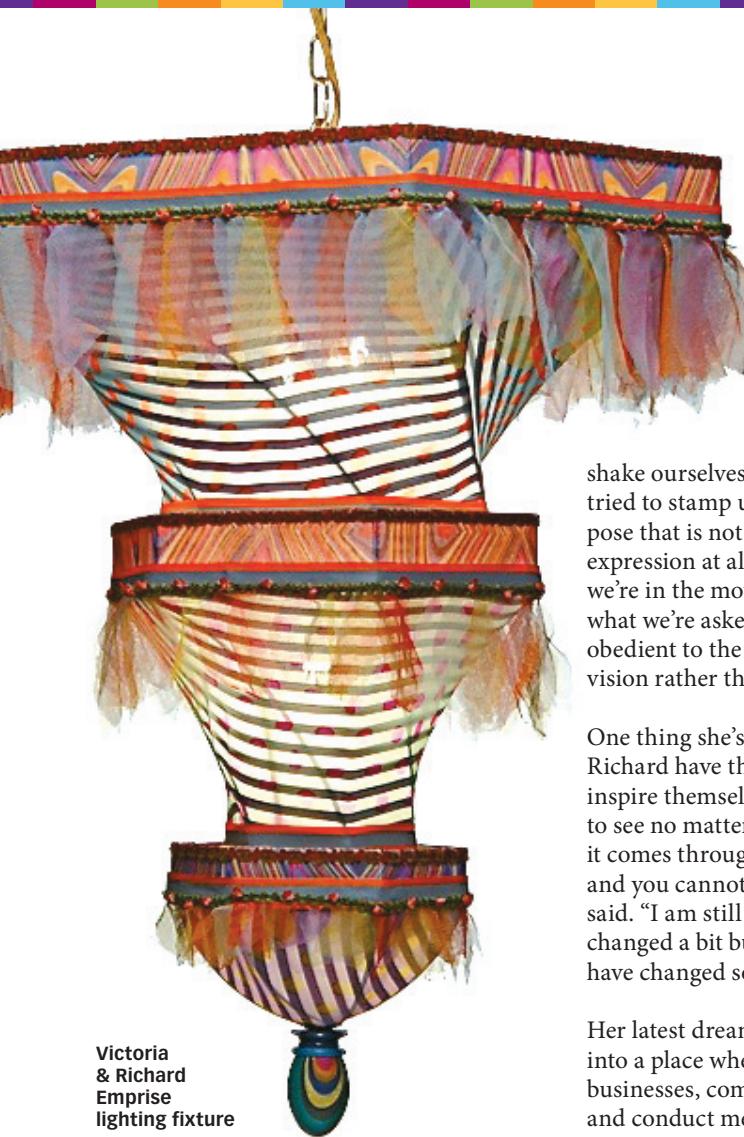
Top: Victoria and Richard MacKenzie-Childs at their countryside King Ferry estate

Left: Yankee Ferry in the Hudson River



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Victoria & Richard Emprise lighting fixture

“I haven’t changed a bit but the tools in my hand have changed so I’m rolling with it.”

Victoria MacKenzie-Childs

shake ourselves loose of everything that tried to stamp us into a place and purpose that is not the infinite idea of our expression at all. At the very moment, we’re in the movement of only doing what we’re asked to do today. We’re obedient to the inspiration, the bigger vision rather than material.”

One thing she’s realized? She and Richard have the God-given ability to inspire themselves into doing for others to see no matter the form of expression it comes through. “We are all artists and you cannot stop that,” Victoria said. “I am still the same; I haven’t changed a bit but the tools in my hand have changed so I’m rolling with it.”

Her latest dream: to turn Yankee Ferry into a place where people, especially businesses, come to “hang their hats” and conduct meetings out of the conference room to “become immersed with the rock of the ship.”

“No one comes aboard Yankee and leaves the same,” Victoria said. “If Yankee could be a place where thoughts are nurtured and upheaved what a gift that would be. When people come on board they are jarred enough that the child comes racing forward, and that freedom that it gives you for the momentum you can see anew.”

If successful, she hopes that Yankee will become the flagship think tank that she and Richard can create in ports around the globe.

“Our natural talent without even doing it is creating environments. We can’t help it. You could put us in the middle of the desert and all of a sudden we’d be drawing in the sand,” she said with



Victoria & Richard Emprise Bloomin Fairies bracelet

made it a reality in three years’ time.

“At the time, I was working on musical theater costumes and thought, ‘well I can sew and I can do things with textiles.’ I was so exposed to my parents’ work to know how to do all sorts of things,” she said, with a girlish laugh. “I thought I’d like to go into clothing making and textiles and find a way to market that work for the environment.” Chaplet added that both Richard and Victoria are talented clothing makers, and she remembers her parents were always creating garb for the whole family to wear.

In 2009, she took a four-month research trip to Africa and was later joined by her musician husband, Nils, and two children, Felix and Wittika. Prototypes rolled out one year later, and the company’s first production of 100 percent fair-trade cotton spun, dyed and woven hammocks, fabric and clothing debuted in 2011. New clothing collections for men, women and children

will be released this summer for fall orders, Chaplet said. The latest addition to the line: baby clothing constructed from a blend of cotton and kapok, a soft, silky milkweed-like fiber.

While Chaplet is the motor propelling the operation, she praises her husband’s support and ability to enthusiastically communicate the importance of the project to others. Optimistic about the future of the organic fabric market, Chaplet was careful to avoid using “eco” or “green” when designing her concept. “I hope that we’re all going in this direction and that in the end it won’t be an original idea to have organic clothing. It will be normal,” she said.

Along with providing customers with affordable, environmentally conscious fashion, the purpose of the project is to help support a more sustainable living and livelihood in Burkina Faso, one of the poorest countries in Africa. With more substantial financial backing (to join the effort visit www.xoomba.org),

Chaplet plans to establish a small scale spinning operation (the first on the African continent) to assist in meeting the regional demand. As a side project, Chaplet spearheaded an effort to sell 100 locally crafted bronze cow sculptures to fund a deep well for urban sustainable farming in Burkina Faso.

The sweet-spoken Brown University graduate is sunny about Xoomba’s potential success, and hopes that as the project grows they can expand the good doings to other countries, become a collaborative and stable resource for designers and spotlight their collection on a runway with music by Nils and choreography by Heather.

“That’s what I love to do,” Chaplet said. “That’s what makes me excited about the whole thing, being able to create.” And like mother like daughter, you can bet there will be many more wild-eyed, adventurous creations that this family of designers will continue to inspire the world with. ■



PHOTO BY KIMBERLY COOK

Heather Chaplet in King Ferry with samples from her African-made organic fabric line, which is currently only retailed at Ithaca’s Homespun Boutique. To excite and better educate the public about Xoomba, Heather and Nils are hosting an open house in Brooklyn on May 13.