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## JOIN THE DOTS

Noj Barker's dazzling artworks, composed of millions of dots, have earned him a cult following – and given his house and family a makeover. The painstaking process doubles as a form of therapy, he tells Louise Carpenter



Noj Barker with his wife, Katy, at home with their children (from left), Violet, 11, Gifford, 8, Claude, 16, and Minna, 19, and Harold the whippet. Photograph by Tom Jackson



**N**ot that long ago, Minna Barker and her family were hanging out at home in Northamptonshire when a teenage school friend turned up. As she walked in, her eyes went to the walls, every single one covered with posters of millions of different-coloured dots. The four Barker children were dressed head to toe in dotty

clothes: T-shirts, bucket hats, dresses. Minna and her teenage brother were carrying their phones in dotty cases. The sofa was covered with a dotty throw. Minna's mother was wearing a silk shirt covered in dots and a headscarf, too. Minna's artist father, Noj, the origin of the family's eccentricity, emerged wearing a dotty silk tie. On the kitchen table there were plates covered in dots.

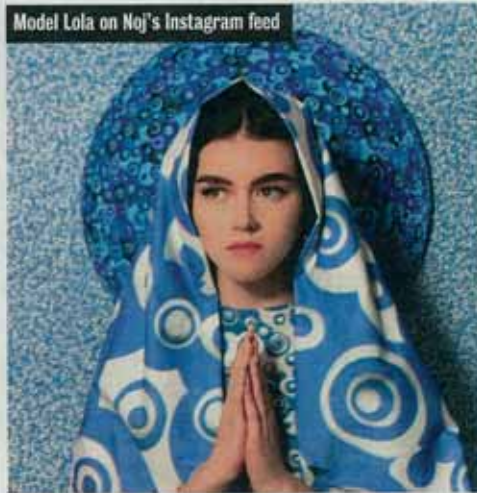
The dotty scene was the result of hours of Noj's painting – shades within shades of acrylic paint forming dots upon dots and then more dots on top, laid down on museum board using tiny brushes and toothpicks, then transferred to the computer and printed onto fabrics and paper. The dots have travelled far and wide in the form of posters, creating backdrops for family photoshoots in Ibiza, Croatia, India and Vietnam. "Noj is a dab hand at packing light," says Katy Barker, his wife of nearly 20 years. "He can pack up his paints into a small box."

The dots have come to define the family. "My friend stood there speechless for a second, astonished by the craziness of our family," Minna Barker, now 19, says of when her visitor walked through the door. "It was the height of my embarrassment around the importance of dots in my family, but I have since learnt to embrace it. It's come to represent the fact that our childhood has been filled with spontaneity and eccentricity, but I definitely haven't always welcomed it."

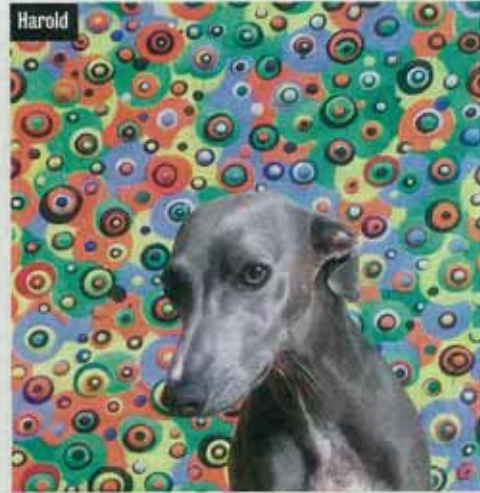
Today, the Barker family live in a big house eight miles from Banbury in Oxfordshire with their blue whippet, Harold. Dots are everywhere on the walls. One yellow dot painting they show me, for example, has been made into spotty Lycra pants, a dress and a divine silk shirt (adapted from an old favourite of the long-suffering Katy).

It's this kind of creation and re-creation that has seen Noj Barker's Instagram following grow from 3,000 in November to 15,500 now.

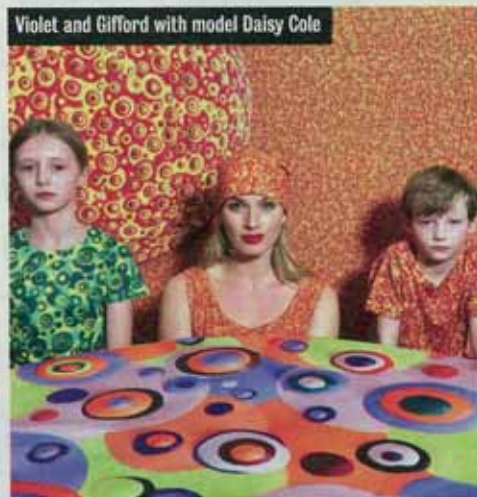
Noj's dotty artistic explosion works on two levels. The first is that he is the perfect example of what has come to be recognised as an Instagram artist, much like the New York-based CJ Hendry with her "scribbling technique". Both are gathering thousands of followers on social media whom in the past they would not have reached – people who might not walk into galleries out of fear or lack of resources. Such reach through



Model Lola on Noj's Instagram feed



Harold



Violet and Gifford with model Daisy Cole



Gifford and Minna

## One painting can take him 20 hours. 'I only stop when I can't go any further, when there is no space left at all'

social media is essentially the democratisation of the art world.

The initial draw of Instagram artists is their mesmerising and bizarre feeds that detail finished work, videos and pieces in progress. These artists work without gallery representation and yet can – with luck – command high prices outside the established art world, either through private sales, high-end brand collaborations or both. Just as CJ Hendry has said of her uncanny drawings, "People still can't get their heads round it."

Noj, too, attracts attention for the fact that he spends hours and hours on the kitchen table meticulously laying down the dots. One A4 painting, for example, in just 2 colours will take 20 hours. Watching a video of him paint (on his Instagram account) is strangely

compelling. As his wife says of her husband's approach and his art's appeal, "He's not professing to be anything he isn't; he is what he is." In a world where modern life makes so many of us time poor, however, Noj Barker's work challenges the fact that we are victims of haste, and forces onlookers to get drawn into the mesmerising spectacle of dots upon dots upon dots, applied at a busy kitchen table by a slightly obsessive father-of-four with no training in art. "I only stop when I can't go any further, when there is no space left at all. When the only option after that would be to use a needle."

"There are moments when I'm starting a painting and I think, 'Oh my God, I've done so little and I've so much more to do.' But I walk away, do some yoga and then return." ➔

"People look at the paintings and they cannot believe that anybody could sit for 20 hours painting dots," says Katy (who is a former model and knows her way around a photoshoot). "It's as if they are thinking, 'How can he have that patience and that time?' But I often say, 'Well, he uses up all his patience on the dots.' At the end of a painting, there is no patience left."

The dots stay as an original painting but, in addition, they find new life as a digital image, either in spheres that are made into limited-edition prints (sold at a recent exhibition at the Ivy Club in London), or transferred to prototype fabrics and home furnishings. When the children wear the clothes out and about, on holiday or just for fun, they are stopped in the street for details of how to buy the various dresses/hats/umbrellas. A clothing line is one of a few possible outcomes.

"For Noj, it's a way of dealing with the stuff that he finds hard. It's a resolution to a very difficult past," says Katy.

The weird, mesmerising dots, bisecting and eclipsing each other, apparently so colourful and cheerful, are the result of Noj, at the age of 59, finally coming to terms with a deeply unhappy childhood.

When he was an infant, his mother left his more traditional father to discover herself

in London, taking her four children with her. But the children were neglected and their father fought a long custody battle, which he won. When Noj was seven, the children were returned to their father. But they resented him for taking them away from their mother.

Noj says that his father struggled when it came to parenting. "I remember going to see my mother in tweed trousers and a waistcoat and being sent back to my father wearing orange corduroy flares," he says.

The children were brought up instead by a nanny. Three years later, when Noj was ten, his mother took her own life, unable to cope with the loss of her children and a failed love affair. His older sister was featured on the front page of *The Sun* under the headline, "Heartbreak of an 11-year-old".

The dots are, he says, a way of coming to terms with the emotional damage and creating a new, happier life for his own children, determined as he is not to scar them by passing on the legacy of his past.

"I hope that it shows it is possible to go from being a very damaged and depressed child to having a great, fulfilling life, if you remain open to new possibilities."

Perhaps it is about control, too. For years, after a period as a ballet dancer, Noj went from

one business venture to another – recruitment, property development, successful gastropub – but with no deep sense of purpose, despite handsome financial rewards. Now that equation has been reversed. He admits he has always suffered from an element of obsessive compulsive disorder, but the dots have channelled it.

His story of dot obsession is, in some ways, reminiscent of the famous Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, whose show has just finished at Tate Modern and who has lived voluntarily in a psychiatric institution since 1977. In its introduction to the show, Tate Modern highlighted how Kusama's work was marked by an obsessiveness and a desire to escape from psychological trauma. "In an attempt to share her experiences, she creates installations that immerse the viewer in her obsessive vision of endless dots and nets or infinitely mirrored space."

"People seem oddly comforted by Noj's dots," Katy says, giving weight to the idea that such displays of obsessiveness can be transfixing for the rest of us.

For Noj, the dots represent happiness, even though unhappiness might have been at their root.

"It is so important to be able to write your own rules and establish your own priorities,"

he says. "I do see that it is very peculiar that a middle-aged, middle-class, happily married father of four should suddenly start and be compelled to carry on painting millions and millions of dots. But for me, my family is absolutely everything. What we pass on and leave behind is the most important thing that defines us. I could not paint unless my family and my art are joined at the hip."

It has been far from easy. Since 2011, when the family left London to reinvent themselves, first in Norfolk and then in Northamptonshire, the children, especially Minna and Claude, 16, have had to cope with the consequences of their father's new calling. Their sacrifice – and Katy's, too – has mostly been to do with moving away from London and their friends.

Noj initially began painting the dots in 2007, but set them aside in 2011 after a lack of commercial success. (He had two shows, one successful, one not.) It was then that he began to rethink his life.

"I felt I'd failed and that I wasn't good enough. It's so easy as an artist to lose your confidence. I felt a bit like an outcast."

It was the joy of having Violet, now 11, however, followed shortly after by Gifford, that made him return to the dots. "I realised



The family pose at home in Noj's designs

## The dots are, Noj says, a way of coming to terms with the emotional damage of his unhappy childhood

how beautiful my family was. I don't think I'd been a particularly good father until that point. In 2016, we went on holiday to Ibiza and I started painting again and found I couldn't stop. I began to realise that I love my art. I feel it is interesting and original and now it's changed into something theatrical, eccentric and fun, and something of which my children can be proud, too."

"The Third World War could be going on and he'd still be dotting," explains Katy. "He is utterly immersed."

"I do sometimes still think, 'Am I completely insane? Is this all for nothing?'" Noj admits. But then he adds, "I had an overwhelming desire to get it right. To focus on my family, but also repair all the damage. I might not become rich or famous or critically acclaimed, but I do feel the dots are unique and distinctive. This house we live in is a dot factory. I have painted millions upon millions upon millions of dots. When you see this kind of dot work it can only be me, and that brings me so much pleasure."

"For me, each dot is suffused with meaning, possibly too much meaning. I find them so beautiful, and they helped me see that beauty in other areas of my life, too." ■

[nojbarke.com](http://nojbarke.com); [instagram.com/nojbarke](http://instagram.com/nojbarke)