

Emma Freud on the joy of using power tools

They didn't teach her how to manage a drill at the convent, so now she is going back to school to find her way around a toolbox



Learning to use tools creates a joyful feeling of independence
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Emma Freud | Tuesday May 21 2024, 12.01am, The Times

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W e didn't study woodwork at the convent in any of my eight years there. All the girls took cookery, sewing and needlework, but there was nothing involving angle grinders, power saws or portable sanders. My childhood was admittedly in the prehistoric era, but there's a legacy to historic educational sexism when it's coupled with other factors including a distinct lack of role models (there are no *Babs the Builder* books) — and one of the outcomes is that, even now, only 1 per cent of people working in skilled trades in the UK construction are women.

There are ten of us in the workshop at the Goodlife Centre near Borough Market in London for the “Basic Drill Skills” class, and we're almost all women. The first question we're asked as we stand around the workbench is, “Why did you sign up?” I take a deep breath, look at the floor and confess that I'm genuinely ashamed to be an adult who can't hang a picture, fix a chair leg or replace a broken tile. I feel embarrassed by the gender stereotype and can't believe it's taken me 40 years to enrol in a class to address it. The next student simply says, “Same.” As does the next, and the next ... it actually turns out to be everyone's story. It transpires that girls do want to work with power tools.

Our teacher is a goddess, a feisty, funny woman in her sixties — beautiful in a headscarf, dungarees and tool belt. Ten minutes into the class I'm in love. I want to be her, with her upfront ability to fix life's problems using a masonry drill bit and some Rawlplugs. I don't simply want her in my lifeboat, I want her to build my lifeboat. And over the next six hours she refuses to “give me a fish to feed me for a day” — instead she teaches me how to make my own dinghy (or at least how to drill a rivet into the oarlock).

We master a wide selection of dirty tools, learn how they work and why, we drill and screw, hang hooks, make holes in wood, stone, tiles and walls, learn what to look for in power tools and discover the miraculous “stud finders”, which electronically test walls for life-ending electric cables that may be lurking behind them.

There is definitely something heady about developing new skills when you're an old dog. We're learning by doing the work and making mistakes, rather than reading textbooks that tell you which mistakes to avoid. And the feeling it creates is pure and simple ... joy. The joy of independence, of wielding power over the elements, of feeling strong and capable, with the additional thrill of looking like a Chippendale but feeling like Wonder Woman while simultaneously flipping the bird at some long-dead nuns.

I celebrate the next day with the purchase of a set of tools — bought IRL from a DIY shop, and a tan leather toolbelt that, as items of clothing go, makes me about as joyfully sexy as this 62-year-old is capable of looking.
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