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On the Cover

Lawrence West, winner of the craft&design Newcomer Award at BCTF 2014

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Snowdrop rings

Alex Yule by Rachael Chambers

"I was really delighted that so many of my customers and clients as well as craft&design readers voted for me, which has been a real boost; but most of all, to have been selected at the final stage by the specialist judge and to read her constructive comments made me feel this was a real achievement at this stage of my relatively new jewellery career, so I was thrilled."

Not only did Alex Yule win a Silver Award for Jewellery in the 2013 craft&design Selected Maker Awards, this year she has scooped the Gold Award too! Alex is still a little overwhelmed about her success, as she explains: "I was very surprised to receive the Gold Award, I almost didn't feel quite ready for it, as I still feel I have so much to learn in the jewellery world, I think it's one of those careers where you never stop learning, there are always more techniques to learn or skills to perfect, but then I think that is just one of many things I like about being a jeweller."

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Alex works in her studio space in South East London and currently has several projects on the go including a pair of 18ct gold wedding rings. And she has just completed a commission for a silver cuff style bangle for a special 40th birthday present which is inspired by Lily of the Valley flowers. Commissions are a significant part of Alex's work; these are juggled with producing her own jewellery collections and teaching jewellery courses at Flux Studios, the shared space in which she resides.

"I have a very relaxed working environment," explains Alex, "with a lovely group of self-employed jewellers, all at different stages of our career. It is a very friendly, creative and supportive atmosphere. Alongside doing our own work we run jewellery courses at the studio where

I teach on the beginners evening class. We also do group exhibitions and have an open studio weekend twice a year."

Commissions play a big part in Alex's work, "Each commission I do is memorable for different reasons," she says.

"I think the most memorable was not necessarily the most visually unusual, in fact it was very

traditional, but I made it from scratch in 18ct white gold, it was a very special diamond pendant commissioned to me by a mother, in memory of her daughter, whom I had the pleasure of knowing and working with in my days as an architectural model maker. I made an individual 18ct White Gold 6 claw pendant setting for this unique 1 carat yellow memorial diamond.

"Another memorable piece, but on a lighter note, was a cage style locket for a client's beautiful Tahitian pearl, I was very pleased with the outcome and so was she."

Alex has not always worked as a jeweller, in fact she began her career in display design, building props for major high street stores, as she explains:

"As a child I was always making things, usually small detailed 3-Dimensional objects of some kind, I used to dream of having my own craft shop one day. Later this led me to seek a career that would utilise my craft skills. I remember going for an interview at Epsom Art College when I was interested in studying jewellery design, but as I hadn't done A-levels it was going to take me 5 years to finish my studies; a 2 year 'general art & design' course and a 1 year 'art foundation' course to be able to access the 2 or 3 year BA Degree in Jewellery Design. Having not particularly enjoyed school, this seemed like a long time, so I decided to do a BTEC National Diploma in Display Design at the London Institute instead (now UAL).

"After this 2 year course, I worked for a company building bespoke props and window schemes for stores such as Harvey Nichols, which I really enjoyed. But I soon decided I would prefer to work at a smaller scale and moved on to pursue a career in architectural model making, which suited my precision and eye for detail. Alongside this 12 year career, I was inspired to explore my curiosity in jewellery design again, so I enrolled on an evening class at City Lit and later began a City in Guilds course at Sir John Cass, where I learned the skills of working with precious metals. It quickly became a passion and I continued to develop my proficiency in fine jewellery making."

However, it wasn't until Alex experienced major changes in her full time work that she realised that her side-line career could become her full-time career.

"I had already been developing my skills alongside my main career for several years but the idea of



Lily of the Valley bangle

Mussel Earrings



Urchin rings

taking the leap to being my own boss full-time was very daunting," she recalls. "I had previously cut down to doing 4 days a week at work, allowing 1 day and some weekends for my jewellery, but this only really allowed enough time for private commissions by word of mouth and to add gradually to my portfolio and develop my skills, but not really to launch a proper business or market my work. It was actually in November 2010 when I was made redundant after being at the same company for 10 years that ironically gave me the push I needed and, despite my fears, it seemed like the perfect window of opportunity to give it a go."

Being self employed as a jeweller gives Alex freedom to explore her creativity whilst harnessing the attention to detail that she has brought from her previous career in architectural model making. While the precision in model making follows guidelines and rules, jewellery making for Alex is free from these restraints, a freedom she finds very appealing.

"I not only get pleasure from the challenge of realising my ideas into physical objects, I also get the sense of achievement from creating something precious that will be treasured by its recipient. But I think what I like most is the fact that there is an element of freedom to jewellery design, it can be



what you want it to be, delicate or bold, it is designed for its aesthetics, to be attractive, but also has a small element of function or purpose, but it's not like designing a product like a vacuum cleaner or a building, where there are strict regulations."

Alex's current collections, like much of her work, are largely inspired by nature; her most popular being the Mussels and Urchins. These small batch collections are created from casts of real shells. "I often explore ideas with Delft Clay casting initially, but in order to achieve the finish and quantities I require, I get a mould made of the real shells to be able to reproduce the form perfectly in solid silver," explains Alex. "Once the pieces are back from the casters there is then a lot of work in cleaning up the raw cast, cutting off the sprue (a small rod of silver where the molten silver was poured through a channel into the mould, leaving excess silver attached to the cast), then I file, emery and polish the pieces one by one. This is a very repetitive process. Once the casts are all finished to a high standard I start to make the earring hooks and rings bands etc, hammering and shaping, again I do this in small batches. Then there is the assembly process, setting up and soldering components together at the hearth, pickling to remove oxidation and more finishing touches. I usually set aside a separate day dedicated to enamelling as this is a whole process in itself.

"With commissions and my non-cast pieces, there is a slightly different series of techniques involved, starting from scratch with the silver usually in sheet or wire form, I then proceed to pierce out shapes with a fine saw blade or shaping wires."

Be it a gallery piece or a commissioned heirloom, Alex's work has impressed many, so much so that their admiration for her jewellery encouraged them to vote for her in the craft&design awards, which resulted in winning Gold. Congratulations Alex.

www.alexylejewellery.co.uk



Urchin bracelet



Judge: Amanda Stücklin, publicist

"Although my personal preference is generally for large, bold jewellery there was something very appealing about Alex's jewellery that jumped out at me. It is whimsical and romantic, beautifully observed and commercial in the positive sense of the word. Much of its attraction lies in the fact that it is detailed but not over-laboured. There is an

obvious passion and integrity about Alex's jewellery, but at the same time her collections are clearly well thought out and focussed. Simultaneously each collection has a distinctive theme and look, so there is a cohesive thread in evidence which makes them hang together extremely well. Even her commission work reflects this as, although the client has clearly had an input, the finished design bears Alex's signature. Alex uses an interesting repertoire of techniques. I am looking forward to seeing how her work develops and how she plans to introduce enamelling and stones into her designs."

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Susan, student

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