

QUESTIONS and ANSWERS WITH DONNA WILSON:

When did you realise you had a passion for design?

I think it was at quite a young age, I was always drawing and making things, and was always most happy with a pencil in my hand. I didn't know what I wanted to be as a child, but knew it was going to be something to do with art/design.



Where do your inspirations come from?

All over the place, the landscape, music, dreams, magazines, ceramics, Scandinavian design, people. Sometimes I just see a tiny snippet of something which triggers an idea, which is then developed into a product. I recently went to a small remote island off the coast of Newfoundland and came back feeling really inspired by its landscape boats and houses, but normally I find inspiration everywhere, it can be a tiny piece of cloth, a picture in a book, or found object from my travels.

How do you start your design process?

I usually do sketches in a note book, they look like little cartoons, tiny bodies with huge exaggerated heads, I get their look and idea on paper first, then start knitting, usually they turn out very much like the drawings but occasionally I'll make some out of the scraps or off cuts, sometimes these rejects are just as successful as the planned ones.

How do you feel about winning Designer of the Year - Elle Decoration Design Awards 2011?

I have always loved and bought Elle Deco, so it's really nice that my work has been acknowledged with this prestigious award. It inspires me to continue making and developing interesting, happy, exciting, beautiful cosy friendly products for nice people.

How did you get to where you are?

I graduated from Grays in 1999, and then got a job in a knitwear company as an assistant designer for a year. I then went back to college to do my MA at the RCA, where I specialised in Mixed Media Textiles. At the RCA I started making products and sold them in shops like Couverture and Supra Girls London. They started off as the long leggy dolls- still in my collection, and evolved into the slightly more disturbing knitted creatures with 2 heads or extra long legs, each with their very own character, the more peculiar the better for me.

How do you do your market research and why is it important to you?

I think that it's important to visit the shops you sell to, and see what the customer is buying and what the competitors are doing. It's easy to forget to do this is when you are working very hard in your studio, it's good to know what's going on around you too.

What has been the highlight of your career so far?

There has been so many highlights, working with a great team of people which help me to have the best job! Meeting designers like Rob Ryan and Orla kielely, and making the creatures and props for a music video for Gideon Conn. This year it would also have to be winning the Elle Deco British designer of the year award.

What do you hope to achieve in 5 years time?

I hope to continue developing interesting, happy, exciting, beautiful cosy friendly products for nice people!

What famous artists/designers do you admire or inspires you the most?

I like Alexander Girard, Stig Lindburg, My grandma!(but she wasn't famous)

What five words would best describe you?

Colourful, Smiley (most of the time) Messy, Bendy, Scottish.

What 5 things couldn't you live with out?

A sketchbook, a stapler, music, colourful paints the sea

How did you learn to knit? How old were you at the time?

My grandma tried to teach me to knit and crochet when I was really young but I didn't have the patience.

Even now I'm not very patient for hand knitting, I prefer to machine knit. We were taught the basics during my BA, how to cast on and off etc. That was in 1996, and after that I taught myself the rest to get the effect that I was looking for, I always love the way I can create a fabric from a strand of yarn, in the texture colour and pattern I want.

What did you study at the Royal College of Art? When did you graduate?

I studied mixed media textiles, from 2001 to 2003, I had fantastic tutors there, Freddie Robins and Karen Nichol

**How did it feel to have a sell out show at the Royal College of Art?
How did this effect your career plans?**

I was very encouraging, I knew that I wanted to start my own business when I left the RCA. It gave me to confidence to exhibit at a public show called Designersblock, which opened my work up to a wider audience too, I'd never have done that if it wasn't for the RCA.

**You've studied in Holland for a while? Do tell where, why and when?
And did it influence you? And if so in what way?**

I took part in a student exchange to Maastricht. It was such a great experience, being completely out of my comfort zone, meeting new people, and I still have a couple friends that I met there after 10 years. It was great to do some of the course in a completely different environment and with different tutors. I had a really nice time.

What was your first knitted creature? What inspired you to create him/her?

After the long leggy creatures I made the weirder creatures, I had a small family and I can't remember which one came first, as they were all born around the same time. Edd red head, with the giant head and tiny body, angry ginger who was ginger with a hairy chest, bunny blue who had 4 sets of ears and 4 eyes, and canbidoll, who was inspired by a story that was in the news at the time, a German canbidoll wanted to find a mate to eat and he got a few applicants!! Although the creatures sounded a bit gruesome, they were not scary, they were more of collectable companions that people wanted to look after.

How many people do you work with at your studio and workshop?

We have a fantastic team and they all play important roles. I just said the other day to my studio Manager Erin, I think we have a happy team and I hope that continues. All together we have 5 , Erin and Kristina are full time, Laura, Kate, and Imogen are part time, and we work with 3 or 4 out workers pretty constantly. I feel very lucky to work with such lovely and hard working people.

What does the job of a 'knitting designer' involve?

For my own business, I do a bit of everything, selecting colours, mood boards, designing making samples, production, marketing, admin, and everything to do with the day to day running of the business. I'm still learning as I go on.

How did you go about establishing your online shop?

I had a website pretty much straight after leaving the RCA, I felt it was important for shops and customer to see what I did, and the first site, was very hand drawn, and had a little animation of the creatures. I wasn't trying to pretend I was a big company, I liked the fact that I was just starting out, and independent and could do small numbers and small quantities.

The web shop took about 6 years to establish itself as a successful part of the business, It's really fantastic now, but I like the fact that my business has grown very gradually and organically.

As well as the animals we love your scarves and knitwear. How do you bring so much personality to these pieces? Everything we do is designed to make people smile. I love working with colour and I think that brings a lot of personality to people.

Do you have any favourite yarns you like to work with?

I always work with natural yarns, mainly lambswool, I love the colours you can get as well as it's felting properties.

Is the crafted nature of your products as important for you as the design process?

Yes definitely, when I'm making them I have use the same process in each type, but because they're made by hand their form varies from one to another, and when I get to the stage of stitching their features on I create a new personality every time- embroidery is like drawing with a needle and thread.

The proportions and placement gives each one a different look and that's why I enjoy making them, people have asked me why I don't get them mass produced, it would certainly be less time consuming, but for me I think they would loose their charm, identity and oddness.

Do you have a favourite knitting project you've worked on?

The knitted wedding was the most fun knitting project, organized by Rachel Mathews from 'cast off'. Everything from the cake, sandwiches, dj's microphone, even the confetti was knitted. I was a bridesmaid, and my job was to knit the 30meter long train. Luckily I had a knitting machine with a motor on it!

What's the most challenging part of your job?

Managing the business side of it, and making the right decisions as to what to spend our time doing. It's also a part I really enjoy, as I never thought I'd be good at this. But as we have had more success I think I must be OK. I want everyone to feel part of the company and us all to be motivated and inspired when we come into work.

What do you love most about it?

Designing, and I have only recently given myself a bit of time to do this, I used to design in my own spare time, and on the back of an envelope on the bus! But I have been spending the last few weeks making mood boards, sketching and trying things out on the machine, and I remember why I love it. Being creative is a fantastic feeling, and I'd recommend anyone to give it a go.

What are you working on at the moment?

I'm designing our Autumn/Winter 2011/12 collection, some new patterns for cushions and blankets, as well as working on an activity book for kids.

What do you think about the increasing popularity of knitting among young people/knitting's current fashion ability among young people?

I love it! I think knitting is a very healthy, creative and satisfying habit. I think it's fantastic that the stereotype is being broken.
