



**Donna Wilson**  
**Questions and Answers**

**1. First of all, please tell me how you got into knitting.**

I started knitting during my MA at Grays School of Art, Aberdeen in Scotland. I wanted to work in a spontaneous way, and create textures, and I found knitting gave me the effects I wanted. At Grays we more or less taught ourselves the techniques and I still love the fact that you can construct a desired fabric out of a ball of yarn.

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**2. Please tell me about your career as a designer.**

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.

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**3. 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.

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**4. Could you tell me about your designs. You have very peculiar designs such as Edd Red Cushion or Bunny Blue. How did you actually get the idea of your design?**

The creatures are inspired by everyday oddities and deformities of life. They are loosely based on characteristics of friends. I also want to celebrate the odd quirks and differences in people. I like to engage people with each character, whether grumpy or angry or hungry, they all have a sense of humour and a feeling of comfort. I love every creature, like they are my children but I think one of the funniest ones is Edd Red head. He has an enormous red head and a tiny tiny body. As I make each one their heads grow bigger and bodies smaller. This one was inspired by my friend who used to say that I had a 'red head' when I got embarrassed.

My furnishings are inspired by childhood stories like 'Alice in wonderland.' My imaginary wonderland is a land where everything is made of soft wool, trees are knitted and instead of growing leaves, pom poms sprout out, strange knitted creatures eat cup cakes and doughnuts sprinkled with stitching. The creatures are different shapes and sizes like odd socks, some have extra long legs, some have two heads, some are grumpy or shy and all are not what they seem. Scale and proportions are stretched or squashed, there are no rules.

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**5. I feel a taste of North Europe rather than traditional British in your design. Do you think it's because you studied in Holland for 3 months?**

No I don't think consciously that has had an effect, although I do love a lot of Dutch design.

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**6.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.

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**7.What is your design concept for this winter?**

I've designed a 'Donna Wilson' forest! With distorted knitted trees. I'm showing them at Thorsten Van Eltens show at the Truman Brewery from the 22nd sept to the 25th for design week.

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**8.Tell me a little about your studio, can you describe it?**

My studio is a little room in my house which I am out growing at the moment. I like working from home as I'm always thinking of ideas and like working quite spontaneously, but the studio is bulging out at the seams with cones of rainbow coloured yarns, bits of felt and wool, knitting machines and odd creatures! It's all a bit unorganised and untidy but I seem to work better like that.

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**9.Do you feel that your friendly creatures can connect with people now, more than ever?**

I think people have always connected with them, when ever I've shown them I always get an amazing reaction, people feel sorry for them, laugh at them and want to touch them, I think they connect with their personality, and perhaps create a sense of nostalgia in adults. Also I think people find them refreshing compared to the mass produced Barbie type dolls you see everywhere. The fact that they are all individually made by hand appeals to people as it makes every one unique; some are happy, grumpy or mischievous. Certainly I think they are getting recognised now more than ever, this is due to 'Knit 2 together' exhibition at the Crafts Council, London, which has exposed them to a wider audience.

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**10.How do children react to them?**

I think most children accept them and they love them, I gave terry and Tina (the Siamese twin) to a friends child and he preceeded to make each head talk to each other as if it was completely normal. I like to think having these kind of creatures encourages children to use their imagination when they play with them, They are not intended to be disturbing or offensive, the fact that they are knitted in soft lambswool makes them is cosy and comforting.

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**11.I'm particularly interested in the crafted nature of your work, is the process of making just 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.

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**12.How do you work - from sketches etc. - or do you just start knitting?**

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.

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**13.Tell me about your upcoming show at the V&A - Touch Me.**

This is a show which is all about tactility in design, I also work with another product designer, Carmel McElroy to produce a range of rugs. For this exhibition we are showing a rug called Hands on, which is made up of thousands of knitted glove fingers cast into a layer of rubber, it is incredibly tactile. We are also doing a series of workshops in the V& A where people create their own rugs out of fingers.

Its important in all my work that it has a tactility that makes people want to touch it, that's one of the reasons I like using wool and felt.

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**14.What will we see next from your studio?**

More odd creatures with characters. I recently made a life size angry ginger, which is bigger than me; it's gone to an exhibition in Tokyo. I'd like to make more of these, which can also be used as pieces of furniture. Another rug I'm working on (in collaboration with Carmel) is a rug covered in hundreds of pom poms; we've managed to get this manufactured now.

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**15.Is there something you have always wanted to design?**

I really want to make a mutant family tree, starting at the top with a mother and father creature and showing how they morph together by the kind of babied they have and then their babies and their babies!! I think this would be an interesting concept for a future exhibition. You could get some scary results!

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**16.Describe what you do.**

When people ask me what I do I always say I make weird knitted creatures with two heads and angry faces, I love the reaction I get!! Most people look a bit confused and some just think I'm mad. My work is playful, tactile and bright, inspired by the everyday oddities and deformities of life. I like likes to think of each of her creations as a character in my very own wonderland, where scale and perception are toyed with. In addition to the creatures I make a range of interior accessories, cuddly cushions, felt doily placemats tea cosies and pom pom rugs.

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**17.Where do you stock?**

Mostly in small independent design shops, in the uk: SCP, London; Thorsten Van Elten, London; Places and Spaces, London; Moss, New York; The Future Perfect, New York; and Australia, Germany and Holland

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**18.What started the passion?**

The passion started when I was working as a knitwear designer's assistant, and was doing a lot of admin work, I really wanted to be creative again and felt I wasn't being creative in my job, so I started knitting and making dolls. I then wanted to make less conventional dolls and while I was doing an MA at the Royal College of Art I was able to do this. They keep getting stranger and more out of proportion.

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**19.Is this your full time job?**

YES!!! And I love it, it's still quite small scale but I think it's growing gradually, I'm still making everything myself by hand, which is a lot of work, but I want to keep them individual, as it gives each one it's own character unlike some of the mass produces dolls you get.

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**20.How long have your been doing what you're doing?**

Since leaving the R.C.A. In 2001.

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**21.What has been your greatest moment?**

I think my greatest moment to date was seeing my creatures on T.V. They were in an Exhibition about Knit at the Crafts Council in London; it was called Knit 2 Together. Also, seeing people's reactions always makes me smile and feel all that all the work is worthwhile.

Recently I worked on a project for MTV, I made 4 characters, which were stop-frame animated, it was so interesting to watch as they came to life. I'd love to make my own characters come to life too.

I'm inspired by my surroundings, I was brought up on a farm in Scotland, and I think this has influenced the way I like to use textures, colours and form.

I like using wool and felt, as it's a natural material, which can change its form when it is put through different processes. I enjoy knitting with lambs wool as it's such an instant process and the love the softness it creates, I think it's much more appealing than manmade fibres.

At the moment everything is handmade by myself. This summer I've had a couple of people doing work experience with me, which was such a fantastic help. I would not like to get them manufactured somewhere as I think they would loose some of their character. Each one is made with a lot of love an attention, and I hope some day they will become collectable.

My doily rug and place mats have had a lot of press. The circular rug made of 100% wool felt and is like a giant doily. It had been featured in many magazines and Newspapers. My knitted creatures are becoming more and more recognised and even appeared on breakfast TV in the UK! I selected to do exhibition piece a show called 'knit 2 together' at the Crafts Council in London. I made a 'picknit', where all the creatures sitting around eating knitted cakes and sandwiches. I think this has brought my work to a wider audience, which has been fantastic.

I've recently got an agent for Australia, so I have some shops there now- Space Furniture and Unit Concepts. I've supplied Moss and Future Perfect in New York, and shops in Edinburgh, Glasgow and London. I'm doing a show in Frankfurt in August and London in September so I'm hoping to get a few more shops around.

Typical for Donna Wilson... Colour, tactility, quirkiness and a sense of humour.

My furnishings.... a play on scale, quirky twist.

A sense of humour is very important when I'm designing, I want people to relate to the creatures or their character traits, (which are written on a tag attached to each creature) I'd like them to make people smile, and have a laugh their ridiculousness. My work is quite child like, it reminds me of the way children draw without rules or preconceptions, they might draw a cat with 5 legs or a face without a nose. I hope that my work captures this sort of the spontaneity and naivety but has sophistication in the colours and characters I create.

Canibdoll is a creatures inspired by a story I heard in the news about the German Canibdoll. Canibdoll is eating another Canibdoll. He is not meant to be a nasty or horrible creature, more of a cartoon like character.

**Developing and protecting your idea**  
**Interview questions for Donna Wilson**

**Personal/General**

**What is your job title?**

Textile/ Product Designer

**What qualifications do you have?**

BA (hons) Textile and Surface decoration and MA Constructed Textiles.

**How long have you worked in the industry?**

On and off 3 years

**What would your biggest achievement to date be?**

Ooh that's a hard one- getting the development award from the Crafts council- July 2004, getting an order from a really important design shop- moss New York, Being asked to participate in an exhibition in the crafts council gallery in feb 2005, and getting work into magazines. Still lots more things to achieve though.

**Who are the main companies you work for?**

Mainly my own business, but also design scarves, hats and gloves for Tait and Style in Orkney- knitted accessories, have done that for the past 3 years. I've done other freelance projects for MTV, Elio Caccavalle, Dcypher- colour trends, workshops for the V&A museum and Dundee Contemporary Arts.

**New Product Development**

**How do you generate ideas?**

I wish I knew- sometimes I do research- collect images of things I like, keep my eyes open for lots of interesting design or imagery. I work a lot with the materials in a very hand on way so sometimes ideas come from that.

**Can you describe your product development process from idea to reality? What structures (if any) are in place?**

No structures as for me it's a fairly spontaneous process, but I suppose the structured way would be to start with visual research-, collecting inspiring imagery, make a mood board of ideas, start sampling with materials, do sketches, more sampling, make adjustments and get finish right, think about ways to produce- e.g. Is the piece a hand made one off piece, can it be made by a machine, do I need to source an outside manufacturer? Finished product.

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**What is the environment like in your studio? Does this differ from other places you have worked? (E.g. atmosphere etc)**

The studio is rammed full of scraps of knitting and machined, I really need more space to function properly, but until I have built up the business enough it will have to make do!

I like listening to music, which I think, makes the atmosphere a bit more fun and connects me to the outside world. Natural light is very important to me, as I need to be able to get colours exactly right.

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**How do you launch your products?**

The plan is to make a catalogue, and also put all new products on my web site, this had been quite a good way for stylists to see what I do if they are looking for things to put in a shoot, they sometimes contact me for loans, and when the product is featured in a magazine it generated interest from the public but also from shops. Also I have done a show called Designers Block which was a success last year, as it gave a database of names and also some press, so I can keep the contacts I've made and keep people updated with new products. Also some shops are really good at getting press for their own products.

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**What are your costs and resources are required?**

- Web site-
  - Catalogue and printing
  - Knitting machines
  - Computer and printer
  - Materials for making the products,
  - camera, the list goes on!
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**Have you ever designed something and then discovered it has already been done?**

Yes! It's so annoying and I didn't pursue it, I wanted to make ceramic plates, which looked exactly like paper plates, but a friend told me one of her friends had done it at college. So I stopped the idea.

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**Do you carry out any market research?**

Yes- I try to look around the shops a lot and also style magazines, I think it's quite important.

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**Who would you say are your competitors?**

There are a lot of people who make knitted accessories and kookie toys are quite popular too but I try to make mine a bit different from what I see around.

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How would you describe your differentiating factors?

I think most of my products have a twist, slightly off the wall, odd bods! Which I like as I think I challenge myself more by designing something that I feel is more creative than a lot of the mass produced products we see on the high street.

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**How do you position your products? Forward thinking, design, style shops?**

If I like the atmosphere, people and the other products in the shop then I think it's right for my work.

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**What has been the main issue/problem that has arisen with dealing with other companies? How did you overcome these?**

My main problem is price and keeping it competitive as most products are made overseas where the labour is much cheaper.

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**Do you keep a design log?**

Yes. I keep photos of everything before it goes into the shops and have rough sketches of my designs.

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**When selling you designs to other companies do you give exclusive rights to your design? If so why? If not would you ever?**

When I design for Tait and Style, they keep the design rights, as I have designed the products specifically for them and they go out under their name. But when I sell my products to shops the design rights remain with me, as I am manufacturing and distributing them.

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**Have you ever had an idea/design stolen?**

Yes- The Next directory and H&Ms copied my designs of scarves, Ingrid From Tait and style, got solicitors to write and they settled out of court, they are not allowed to sell or produce the design, which is featured in their catalogue or sell the design.

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**Do you believe enough is being done to protect designers such as yourself?**

No- I think it is difficult for designers in the first stages of their businesses, as we do not have the power or money to fight larger scale companies. It is all too easy for them to rip us off and get away with it. Even protecting your designs costs about £60.00 per design, which adds up when you produce a range of products. There is a law company in London called Briffa, who specialise in design copying issues.

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## Knit 2 Together: Concepts in Knitting

### 1. Name

Donna Wilson

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### 2. Who or what has most influenced your work? Who is your favorite maker/designer?

I love Julie Arkel's little people. I'm influenced by the everyday oddities and deformities of life, and inspired by documentaries I have seen about Siamese twins and people with gigantism.

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### 3. What does knitting mean to you?

It means I have complete control over the fabric I create, colour, pattern texture as I am making a fabric from a piece of yarn. I still find this amazing!

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### 4. Who normally buys or commissions your work? Please give details if possible

Helen Hamlyn from the RCA's Helen Hamlyn foundation, I currently have a rug in the offices of Saatchi and Saatchi London. Various private customers have commissioned dolls and creatures. Graphic designers, accountants, housewives.

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### 5. What is the price range of your work?

Retail £15 to £80 for creatures, £120 to £2500 for rugs and floor pieces

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### 6. Are there any interesting angles or stories about you for the press e.g. past career, family connections, interesting home, famous collectors who have purchased your work?

The tactile quality of my work comes from my childhood spent in the Scottish countryside. I was brought up on a farm and spent a lot of time playing out side. The vast landscape and roughness has had a strong influence on me both in my need for textural and organic forms. I enjoy using handcrafted techniques like felting, sewing, knitting and wrapping. My involvement with wool and felt allows me to create a closeness and cosiness that I want people to connect with.

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