

Bears with special seasoning

Relatively new to bear making, success has come quickly for Rebecca Lewis of Pepper Bears who seems to have been destined to be a bear artist

By Jill Mundy

Rebecca Lewis has always been a massive teddy bear lover and would enjoy painting bears and making them into greetings cards for a hobby. As a child, Rebecca was always creative and constantly had a pencil in her hand. This continued through school and into college before studying BA (HONS) Textiles and Surface design at university. "It was while at university that I had the opportunity to visit design trade shows both in the UK and Europe and also sell work to companies via these trade shows." After this, Rebecca worked as a freelance greetings card designer whilst her son was young. "This meant I was able to work from home and send work out to companies in the UK and

America. Once my son was a little older I trained to become a teacher; I have worked as a supply teacher and teaching across different Art and Textiles course at Sixth Form Level."

During a period of illness, Rebecca decided to have a go at creating a bear herself "...so I clicked onto Google, bought myself a starter kit and got stuck in. Of course from that moment I was hooked and decided to carry on."

The bear making was a great distraction from her health difficulties and helped Rebecca through a rough period. "My health is not 100% and occasionally I have bad days; however the bears always put a smile on my face and give me something to focus on."



Monti

A lot of Rebecca's friends and family received bears for Christmas that first year and they were all very kind with the comments she received back from them. This encouraged her to continue with bear making although it wasn't until she visited Hugglets bear fair for the first time that she was inspired to extend the bear making from a hobby into bear artistry. "The amount and variation of bears there was amazing. It was from that point I knew I wanted to sell my own work. I approached local shops to sell my bears for me so I could test the market to see if people would buy them. Each time I created a bear I would feel so excited to meet him or her which would then inspire the next bear as I had so many ideas of ways in which to develop. I still feel this way today; each bear seems to have its own personality that develops as I make it. Bear making really is an obsession; it's a way of life. I am sure any other bear artist would agree."

Rebecca's family have all been fantastic in supporting her bear making. "I have dragged both of my parents across the country to various bear fairs; as a visitor and to exhibit. My partner has also supported me massively. He too has travelled across the country with me to exhibit at different locations. Not to mention that as he is a chef, the wonderful food he makes for me while I am up to my eyeballs in stuff and fluff is very much appreciated." Rebecca sometimes thinks that if it wasn't for her partner cooking delicious meals for her, that she would forget to stop working and eat. "He does look after me!"

Whenever Rebecca and her partner go

Thatcher and Harriet



Little Fred and Little Ted



Ben



to bear fairs, their dog Pepper also travels with them. "She is our real Pepper Bear and the inspiration of my beary name. I haven't yet managed to persuade my 15 year old son Ben to come to a Teddy Bear Fair with me. Who knows maybe one day he will!"

Rebecca has been a full time bear maker since November 2011. If she is not making personalised bears to order, she is experimenting with new patterns and furs; and adding to the bears she takes to fairs or to sell online. "Or creating bears for competitions. The first competition I entered was the Brewins' Bruins National Teddy Bear Artist Awards. I submitted two different bears. A traditional style bear, undressed, who placed second in his class and a 40s/50s style bear made from

materials other than mohair. This bear also placed second in his class. I have to admit I was very pleased with myself at my first attempt. I have bears entered into other competitions including the Brewins' Bruins NTBAA Photographic competition. Myself and the bears have our fingers and paws crossed."

The style of bear Rebecca creates varies. Some are very traditional and others rather contemporary. "I do like to experiment and come up with new creations so I would never like to say I have an actual style, although I do love to make them look as though they have been well loved;

as if someone has owned them for a while and taken them everywhere."

The bears vary in size from about 10cm to the largest Rebecca has created at about 31cm in height. "I currently like to use mohair, alpaca and viscose furs to create my bears. I was recently commissioned to create a couple of memory bears using thick towelling material from a dressing gown. This fabric gave a lovely result, although using the furs still has to be my favourite."

Rebecca finds inspiration can come from anywhere. "I love to look round markets for old little trinkets that I could

Victoria, Peter NTBAA 2012 2nd place 1940/50s bear and Max



Theodore 2nd place NTBAA
2012 traditional teddy bear



use when bear making. These are always a great place for inspiration as you never know what you will find."

Rebecca's main source of inspiration though comes from bears she owned throughout her childhood ("and adulthood") or seen in books. "Over the years I have adopted and loved so many styles of bear. I like to mix and match my favourite elements of these bears, developing the size of their paws, ears and tummy."

When she first started to make bears, Rebecca would follow the pattern, complete the bear and that would be it. "As my bear making has developed, I have found that the actual making of the bear is only part of the process. It is as though the bear is a canvas to develop a character and personality onto. Creating the face and developing the bear's personality has to be my favourite part of bear making. I love adding the finishing touches and making the bear become a whole little character."

Like many other bear artists, stitching on the ears is the part that Rebecca enjoys the least. "I can never seem to be able to decide if they are in the right place or the right size. I think the ears can be vital to how the bear's character is developed and

as I feel they are one of the most important parts, I really have to be careful."

Rebecca has a special name for her workroom. "I usually spend most of my time in the spare room, or as we now call it, The Pepper Den (or the bear room). However I tend to take over the whole house. Sometimes I stitch in front of the T.V or maybe sitting up in bed. I even take the bears with me if we go out for the day or on holiday."

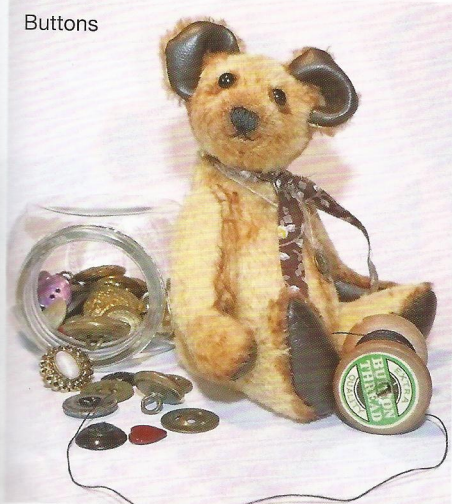
Rebecca tries not to collect bears herself but does have a few by various artists plus every bear she owned since being a child. "The first bear I made sits in pride of place above the fire place. He reminds me of the first feeling of satisfaction and excitement I felt when I created each stage, from the first leg to the finished bear."

Rebecca admits to having a favourite bear that she has made so far. "Theodore, the bear who won second place in The NTBAA 2012 Traditional style bear undressed. He has now been adopted and part of me wishes he was mine. However, I know he has gone to a loving forever home."

As for the future, Rebecca says: "To be happy, healthy and surround myself with the people I care about - which includes making my little furry friends."

One day she would love to have a Teddy Bear Workshop, open to visitors, and that could double as a small shop. Currently Pepper Bears are sold from Rebecca's website www.pepperbears.co.uk and through her Facebook page, where she receives a lot of the personalised bear requests. "I also like to exhibit at bear fairs and craft fairs across the country." You can find out where Pepper Bears will be, to meet them in the fluff, by visiting the website. Pepper Bears can sometimes be found at Apple Pie House in Gloucester and Brewins' Bruins Bear shop in Swanage. **TBT**

Buttons



Just for fun...

● Name five facts about you that are not bear related

- When I was three years old I decided to give my pet goldfish breakfast. I then proudly went to tell my sleeping parents that the fish had eaten its breakfast. My Mum found the poor thing floating upside down in its tank that was now filled with strawberry yogurt!!
- I like to travel and would love to one day visit South Africa, the birth place of my partner and see Giraffes and Elephants out on safari.
- Although I love to be by the sea (especially somewhere hot) I hate sand, it makes me cringe.
- I love pigs and would one day like to keep them. I also love ducks; whatever mood I am in ducks will always cheer me up. It's the way they quack at each other, they sound like they are having a mothers meeting. So I guess I will have to have a few ducks to go with the pigs.
- I like to cook but my partner is a fantastic chef and creates the most delicious food so I tend to leave the cooking to him. It is like eating out in a restaurant every night. Of course I am biased but it's true. I am a lucky girl, although my waist line disagrees!

● What is your favourite TV show/ movie?

I guess I have to admit I like to watch Home and Away plus American comedies and I love a good Rom-Com

● If you were stranded on a desert island, which five things would you have with you?

My teddy bear, water, a good book to read (or my Teddy Bear Times), a towel to sit on (as I hate sand) and sun cream.

● If you could have any other career in the world, what would it be and why?

An architect; I have always loved the idea of designing my own home, amongst other things. Creating spaces the way I want them; some to be functional, some to be fun and others to be relaxing and comforting. Or an illustrator as this was the first job I would say I wanted to do when I grew up. Although, I did tell my Mum when I was about seven or eight years old, whilst sat drawing Forever Friends, that I would like to have my own bears when I grew up!