

Miniatures with Soul

Melissa Toohey of Honeythorpe Bears talks about her bears

I met Melissa when she flew across from New Zealand to visit and trade at a Queensland show. Her sweet faced miniatures enchanted me and the care she takes with each piece was immediately apparent.

Melissa stumbled on artist bears in 1997 while visiting a doll show. She

had never dreamed that bears could be anything beyond soft toys, let alone the miniature works that fired her imagination. Melissa was caught up with finishing her studies and while bears interested her, she thought it would be some time before she found the time or money to try the new craft.

However some months later when the need to try had not abated, she found herself sewing together her first bear.

“My mother made a gift of lessons for me and they took me through beginner level. After that I made a few bears from patterns in Australian Bear Creations. It wasn’t until I finished Uni in 1999 that I began to really make my own designs and eventually I began to sell my bears in 2000.

“Apart from those first classes my mother paid for, I’ve done classes with Evelyn Penfield from America and Lesley Stipanov of Australia. They were worth it because it’s great to see how others do things, but best of all I found other artists to talk to and make friends with,” laughs Melissa.

Melissa’s output of bears is very much influenced by her mood. “I have to want to create the bear I’m working on. As soon as I feel I ‘have’ to make a bear, the fun and creativity goes out of the process for me. If I find that happening I put the fur away for a while and wait until the need arises again.”

Melissa’s output of bears is very much influenced by her mood. “Bearmaking isn’t something I can force. If I ‘have’ to make a bear, the fun and creativity goes out of the process for me. If I find that happening I put the bear away for a while and wait until I’m inspired again.”

Two artists who have influenced me are British artists Paula Carter of All Bear and Jenny Johnson from 3 O’clock

bears. Their styles are so different to my own, but they have such an integrity and passion for developing their bears and I hope to emulate that work ethic. Diversity of style is what makes bears exciting for collectors and the reason why I collect bears myself! “I love all things miniature. When I was four I was given a paint box that fitted in my hand and that started a love of mini things. This is very much reflected in my designs and work. Now, my favourite size of bear to create is between one and three inches tall. I love the challenge of imbuing a bear that small with personality. A ‘big’ bear for me is four inches tall and I very rarely make anything larger than this.

“I also have a fabric addiction, and no matter how much material I have, there’s always room for more. The thing I miss most with miniature bears is the lush array of mohairs that are available for larger bears. Luckily there are a few suppliers like Sassy Bears and Fabrics that are dedicated to serving the miniature bear artists out there. I love the smoky long pile velvet. It has a wonderful depth of colour and is so soft and super easy to work with. I also have a small stash of vintage long pile upholstery velvet that I make a few very special bears from each year.

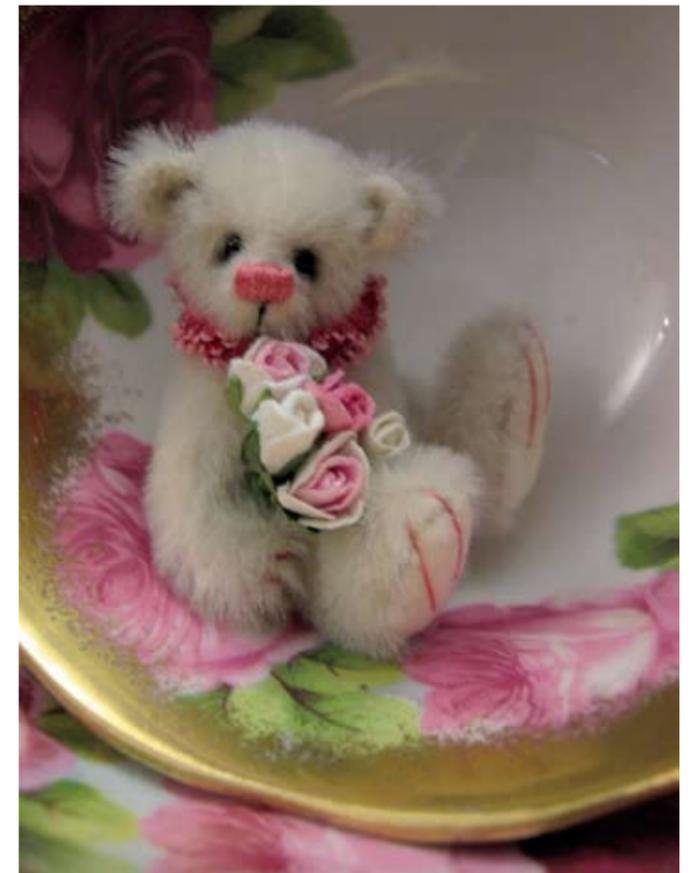
“Pandas are my absolute favourite kind of bear to create, and I love to use all sorts of colours on my pandas. I’d say only one in five is created in the traditional black and white!”

I have watched Melissa’s bear making for some time and know that her creativity spans a wide range, so I have to know where she draws her inspiration from. “Inspiration can come from a number of sources. Sometimes I’ll start with my fabric stash, just looking for a piece that ‘speaks’ to me. Other times, it will start with a piece of ribbon, or a particular accessory. I also collect children’s picture books and am often inspired by the colour combinations I see in illustrations. I also belong to an online group called Teddy-Talk. They will often have themed challenges that can help prompt new designs and push me to create designs I may not have otherwise tried.”

Many people are intimidated by miniatures and Melissa herself admits that she didn’t try for a small bear for some time, and I ask if she has any tips to help those of us who find small things fiddly and difficult.

She answers, “Anybody can make a miniature bear, it’s all about preparation and patience. Take your time and sew as precisely as you can. Many people have the perception that miniature bears should be fast to make, but my two inch bears take me longer to sew than my four inch bears! My key piece of advice would be, if it’s not working for you, don’t force it. I find if I’m struggling with eyes, or ears, it’s best to put it aside – whether for an hour, or a week, and come back to it later.”

Having said this, Melissa then admits: “I have a love/hate relationship with ears. On most of my bears, the ear piece is less than a quarter of an inch in size, and I have learnt not to cut them out until after the rest of the bear is complete,





as no matter how careful I am, one always manages to get lost when I'm sewing. But, once they're sewn on, they really make the bear's personality come alive, so they're a 'best and worst thing' rolled into one."

Working full-time restricts Melissa's time and creativity. "My annual production is probably around 30 to 50 bears. I would love to make more but I have a couple of other crafting hobbies that I try to fit in as well. My bears are available through my website. I love bear shows and always try to

do one or two a year, but working full-time makes it hard to find time to travel. I actually intend to make a couple of bears for myself this year, as I haven't kept any of my creations for my own collection.

"I haven't entered any major competitions (as yet!), and I do have a couple of ideas that I would like to make for some international competitions this year. I just need to find the courage to enter. So that is always an ambition when time becomes less restricted as well."

Melissa has worked slowly to build her name, reputation and website, and she offers this advice to others starting on the journey. "Keep persevering! My bear making journey has been 10 years of small steps. I do look back at some of my early bears and cringe a little, but really we should be proud of those first bears. I barely knew how to sew a straight line, let alone needle-sculpt when I began my bear making adventure."

I finish talking to Melissa with a question I always ask (it is a small obsession of mine.) What is her favourite tool? "My mini cotter pin turner, which I use to turn and stuff tiny limbs as well as for jointing."

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