

Wild Beads

AFTER TRYING HER HAND AT MANY DIFFERENT CRAFTS, RANGING FROM PHOTOGRAPHY TO TASSEL MAKING, TRACY BROWN OF WIDLIGHT STUDIOS DISCOVERED THE ART OF MAKING ART GLASS BEADS ... AND (AS REPORTER SARAH EZZY-DICKSON DISCOVERED) TRACY HASN'T LOOKED BACK SINCE.



IN FACT, IT WAS WHILE TRACY was searching for materials to use in her various other crafts that she stumbled upon a US-based art glass bead website, which then prompted her to attend a two-day glass bead making workshop in 2004. Tracy's other craft interests include jewellery making, and with her new knowledge of glass beads, and her talented fingers, Tracy began creating masterpieces to revolve around her beads.

Tracy says that bead making and jewellery making are the perfect balance. "The jewellery and bead making actually feed each other. I

can be inspired to make a piece of jewellery from a bead that I have made, or be inspired to make a bead to fit into a jewellery design I have in mind. It seems to alternate between the two."

All of the crafts that Tracy has tried her hand at have had some influence over her bead and jewellery making, such as photography, which she says has taught her to use her eyes properly. "You see things a bit differently when you are constantly trying to turn them into a picture."

While she was making tassels, she would often dye her own threads, which taught her



interesting colour combinations. "I think you can be taught the basics of how to use colour, and then you can learn to break the rules. Colour to me is infinite and shades and tones can be mixed and changed continuously."

Tracy works from her Queensland home, in a small studio under her house that she says is 'getting a bit too small'! She juggles this with her other full-time job of being mum to three children. Her bead making helps her relax, especially when she's making frit, orb or spacer beads. However she warns that you can't get too relaxed while making beads. "You use a lot of concentration, but you do tend to go into a bit of a meditative state. That can also be when the real magic happens, when the glass flows beautifully and the Glass Gods are smiling and everything just comes out great. That is when you come up with something brilliant, new and awesome!"

In the three years that Tracy has been making beads, she has seen the awareness of art glass beads grow considerably. Tracy was lucky enough to have a stall at the Bead & Gem Show in 2006, and she noticed that people were actively seeking out her art glass beads. "People knew what they were looking for, and looking at – and bought up large. I think that the magazines have been brilliant for educating the public about hand-made art glass and lampwork beads. Educating people about how they're made, the control needed to make them and the time it takes to make

some of them. People are very willing to pay for something that is unique."

She believes that as her beads often inspire her to create fabulous jewellery pieces, they do so for other people as well. "I think that the beads inspire people to make brilliant jewellery, and that is part of the lure and beauty of them. I find my customers are looking for something a bit different and unique, and that is what I offer; one-off miniature works of art."

Her glass inspires her to create, with other influences such as art and nature also taking a big part in the creative process. "I like to sit down at the torch and let things flow; allowing the glass to create a bit of magic. Looking at the different colours and putting them together will inspire me. Inspiration comes from everything around us, all of the time. I think art and craft is about perception and your interpretation of everything you see and have seen, and learnt in the past. I've taught myself to be open to the inspiration when it comes, or to draw or write it down if it's not at the best possible time."

For beginner art glass bead makers out there, Tracy has a word of advice: Practice!

"The secret to becoming a good bead maker is consistency and being able to repeat a style or type of bead that you have made in the past, and get consistent results with your techniques. This comes with practice and dedication to the glass. We have a bead maker's mantra: P, P, P. Practice, practice,

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practice! You can take classes to learn techniques but you will still need P, P, P!

Tracy says she is constantly learning from the glass, and will never be bored with it. "That is something you hear a lot in bead making and glassblowing circles, the fact that there is always something else to learn and make! It's what challenges you and keeps you coming back for more."

Her mistakes are more like experiments than mistakes. "Some of my best beads have been mistakes, or should I say, experiments. If I do make a mistake, I usually try to turn the bead into an organic!"

Along with making her own beads, Tracy also offers 'introduction to bead making' classes at her local bead store, The ArTTable in Brisbane. "They're a lot of fun, and everyone goes home with a lot of inspiration, and some nice beads to make something with."

Tracy also teaches through Flying Arts Queensland, an organisation that sends artists all over rural and remote areas of Queensland to give people all over the State the opportunity to learn how to make art glass beads. Tracy says that as it is heavily subsidised by corporate sponsorship, it makes it quite affordable. The classes run throughout the cooler parts of the year, from April through to October. Flying Arts Queensland has been running programmes for more than 30 years, and anyone interested in booking Tracy for a weekend workshop can contact www.flyingarts.org.au

After spending so much dedicated time on her art, Tracy admits: "It can be very hard to part with some of my beads and jewellery. I like them to hang around for a while before I put them up on the website."

Her current favourite beads were born from an experiment with a new type of glass. "They are made from NZ Gaffer glass, which is a glassblower's glass that has been pulled into thin rods that bead makers can use. It has some gorgeous colours and reacts differently to the Italian glass. Some of the colours are very intense, so I'm having fun experimenting with it. I actually managed to make them into a bracelet for myself!"

Tracy gets numerous requests from people wanting copies of beads she's made in the past, sometimes in different colour combinations. Some beads can take as little as five minutes to make, while other more detailed ones such as floral or multi-dot patterns can take an hour or more. "They are very intense and satisfying to make. I find now that sometimes less is more!"

While creating her jewellery, Tracy uses many other materials as well as her art glass beads, ranging from various textured fabrics and resin to Paua shell, glass and wood. "I love new products and utilising new things if I think I can make them work with my jewellery." These other materials add an incredible richness to her beads and bring out subtle colours that you otherwise wouldn't see as clearly. Her art glass jewellery pieces aren't just

limited to earrings, bracelets and necklaces, but also include bookmarks, brooches, lavishly decorated kilt pins and beaded tassels.

Tracy is pleased that the number of local suppliers has increased over the last few years to cater for the growing popularity of beading and jewellery making. "I'm very visual, so being able to see the beads and products in person is good inspiration. I like to have local suppliers that I can go and chat to, and see what's new. I also like looking at the Australian beading magazines and going to the Bead & Gem Shows for further inspiration."

She can't see the popularity or support of our favourite pastime dying, either. "I don't

think it will lose its popularity any time soon, and that's great! I am also seeing a shift back to supporting local artists and craftspeople, and to buying unique hand-made products rather than buying from the huge influx of imported jewellery that has flooded the market in recent years."

Tracy's absolutely gorgeous beads and jewellery can be seen at www.wildlightstudios.com where you can admire her gallery pieces or spend hours trying to decide which colour of the baroque beads you think will go nicely with your new dress, as this particular reporter did. ○

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