Mad About Bears - It's All in the Name

by Pam North

In the southwest coastal town of West Kilbride, Ayrshire, in Scotland, a small studio is the workspace of Lynn Bowie, who crafts her magical menagerie under the name of Madabout Bears. Her whimsical bears, pandas, cats, rabbits, raccoons, and occasional other species, all have wistful faces that capture the heart. Crafted of mohair, alpaca, or faux fur, their expressions are soulful and endearing, their bright glass eyes inviting customers to take them home, and their cotter pin joints allow clever posability. They are impossible to resist.   
 “My bear making career started over seventeen years ago,” Bowie explained. “I had worked for fourteen years in Scottish theater, where I did stage management. When I had my children, I was no longer able to tour. My sister, Ali Morton, was making the award-winning Brodie Bears then, and I started assisting her with simple things like cutting out pieces, pinning them, and making the coffee. I made my first 3” bear from an Emily Farmer kit, and then slowly started off on my own creations, gradually growing in confidence, and I began to experiment with different techniques and hone my craft. With Ali's help and encouragement, Madabout Bears was born. In 2005/06 I was asked to design for Dean's Ragbook Company, Ltd., Britain's oldest (1903) toy manufacturer, which I was delighted to do. I worked from home for many years, and then about three years ago, I became a member of Craft Town Scotland, where I have my studio. Only a few miles from my home, my studio is a bright and lovely place in which to work, with its own little kitchen, and lots of space to store my vast amount of fabric, and to display my bears. There are eight studios which make up Craft Town Scotland, all featuring different artists and crafts: silversmithing, weaving, lampwork, hand-painted wool, card making, textiles, glass painting, and me, the teddy bear artist. We also have our hub, The Barony Centre, a beautifully refurbished church with galley and workshop spaces, as well as a very enticing café.” All profits generated by Craft Town Scotland are reinvested into sustaining and developing Kilbride's cultural hub as part of their vibrant community. The studio has become an integral part of Bowie's life, and she elaborated further on its importance to her focus. “I think my designs have become a tad more inventive since I moved into my studio, as it really lends itself to getting my creative juices flowing. I love creating more adventurous and fun pieces, and I have now designed a new bear on all fours which stands only three inches tall. A few of them together look like a little herd! I've also loved working on some fun tableaux, one of which was bought by Susan Quinlan and is now in the Quinlan Museum in California.” Bowie's husband is a prop maker for the theater, and he helps her occasionally with small props for her creations, and also makes backgrounds for her to display and photograph her bears for shows and museums.

Bowie's animals have come a long way from the first one she made, a 3” bear from an Emily Farmer kit. She has made bears from 3” to 30”, but prefers working in the 3” to 14” range. She makes at least three animals a week, stockpiling many for shows. Every so often she sneaks a little “playtime”, she says, so that she can develop some new ideas. Some of her new concepts in the planning stage are two raccoons, in 6” and 12” sizes, and a “spaniel-esque” dog, she confided. “I keep my options open; never say never to new possibilities!”  
 “I'm delighted to say that my bears have taken me all over the world, from Europe to Japan, and lately to three shows in the States (two in Philadelphia and one in New York), and I hope to be back over at TBAI in Syracuse in August, 2016. I also organize the Scottish Bear Fair, which is distinctive as the only 'bears-only' fair in Scotland. It happens the first Sunday in November.”   
 When asked what motivates her, Bowie joked, “I like to pay my bills! I only hope that my endeavor remains profitable, and that collectors continue to find them appealing enough to buy.” It goes beyond that, however. Bowie loves her work; it is a full-time occupation for her, and she derives great satisfaction from transitioning the ideas in her head into adorable, fluffy reality. “I get immense pleasure from making my bears, and I enjoy the 10-mile drive through beautiful country to my studio. I like doing shows, as I've met so many wonderful people there. Bear making is great!” She does about four shows a year.

Collectors are “gladabout” Madabout Bears, and look forward to Bowie's future critter  
creations.

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