Critters Crocheted With Love - *Brú Bears*

by Pam North

 Angela McGinn was very lucky as a child in Ireland to have a mom who trusted her at a young age to use the sewing machine. Angela started making basic bears from fur fabric when she was about 10 years old, often giving them away as gifts to her friends. After a few years, as a student, she began creating in earnest and did craft fairs in the weeks before Christmas to earn extra money. At this stage she was still working with fur fabric and using basic patterns. In her 20s, she earned a Certificate in Textile Design online, which opened her eyes to the ways different fabrics could be created, combined, and embellished, and she spent a lot of time developing her crochet, knitting, and free-form embroidery skills. She enjoyed experimenting with different textiles, and it gave her an invaluable knowledge of different yarns and fibers.

 Three children came along, and Angela moved from Dublin to the beautiful Boyne Valley in County Meath, an area rich in tradition and history. She described her next venture, “One day while browsing online, I spotted a tiny crocheted bear. It looked so perfect, and I could hardly fathom how anyone could make something so small and perfect. This find led to a search which turned up more and more of these miniature bears made from tiny stitches, and a search of Ravelry.com revealed patterns for these little wonders. The next challenge was to source the crochet hooks, which are as fine as sewing needles, and cobweb/lace yarn with which to crochet. Living where I do, all yarns had to be purchased online, as I could not locally source them.”

 Like most artists, Angela had to go through trials and errors to develop her artistry and her own style. “I remember the frustration of my first efforts, the absolute impossibility it seemed to me of being able to see the stitches, or even keep their tension. My first attempt was hilarious and pretty awful, and I nearly gave up! I finally figured out that, when crocheting arms and legs, you need to do them both at the same time to maintain tension. I joined a very supportive Facebook group with many skilled members who encouraged me along the way, and I strongly recommend this. It is a great way to share both failures and successes. After a few attempts, I finally created something I felt happy with, and I starting making bears free-form with no patterns. This was more by accident than design. I would begin a bear with the full intention of writing down the pattern, but then get so carried away by the process that by the end, the only written evidence was to ‘start with a Magic Ring’.”

 Angela's menagerie is extensive: rabbits, foxes, mice, badgers, monkeys, pandas, and bears. She crafts 2 to 3 of them per month, in a 4” to 10” range, from very fine mohair and alpaca wool yarn, adding needle-sculptured accents for definition, joints, glass or onyx eyes. She likes to use earthy green and brown colors that reflect the landscape of Ireland, and the fineness of her crochet stitches lend an almost fabric effect to to her work.

 Angela found new ways to accent her creations. “I began to explore the craft of needle-felting using Merino wool, and other natural fleeces. I started with a kit, progressing from there. Much positive feedback from family and friends led to the birth of my business, *Brú Bears*. The name comes from where I live, close to Brú na Bóinne, the name meaning ‘Palace of the Boyne’, a megalithic structure. It is a world-renown site in County Meath, located at the bend of the River Boyne, and is one of the most important ancient prehistoric valley landscapes in Ireland, due to its rich historical significance, Celtic heritage, and burial sites.” Miniature knitting is challenging; Angela likens it to knitting on sewing needles. Her experience from knitting full-size garments, along with perseverance, enabled her to create tiny Aran jumpers and cardigans for her animals. “I like to push the boundaries of what I can create in miniature, which led me to a way of combining crochet with needle felting. It seemed that a crocheted surface would make an ideal base for needle-felting, so now many of my creations have felted muzzles, which allows for detail that crochet alone never would accomplish. I make all the additional details, such as noses and tiny buttons for clothing, from clay.”

 Having mastered the combination of miniature crochet and needle felting, Angela set up her Facebook page where people could see her work and request commissions. “Needle-felted dogs are particularly popular, where I work from photos sent to me by customers,” she explained. “Soon after I set up the page, people started to request patterns. While I jealously guard my bear patterns, I tried my hand at creating miniature crochet patterns for other animals. A hippo, a mouse, and an elephant were the result, which are available through my Ravelry and Etsy pages. Pattern creation is very time-consuming, but is something I love to do. I recently created a pattern for a Pom Bear for Largo foods, which they shared via their Facebook page. I constantly try to develop my skills; I think you definitely can see progression in my work, I look back at my early pieces, and consider that people must be very kind; some of those early works should never have seen the light of day!”

 Her hard work has brought her several awards. “Early on I started entering competitions, and was very grateful to do well. I was particularly thrilled when my fox, with his needle-felted hound. won a Toby Industry Choice Award this year. He led to the creation of a female companion. I also won an International Teddy Bear Artists Award in 2014.” Her success seems to be spurring her onward to new horizons, much to the delight of her customers.

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