

# Cheeky Bare Cub Designs: A Consuming Passion

Artist Helen Gleeson tells how “all” her spare time is spent sewing

ARTICLE WRITTEN BY SANDRA WIGZELL

In 2003 Helen Gleeson attended a craft show and saw Jennie Boylan’s Teddy Tree stand. She was instantly captivated by the bears. Helen, however, was already involved in many crafts and was at the show to look at cross stitching, paper tole, stamping, beading and more. She most certainly was not there to look at another craft, and it was therefore most disconcerting to find that her feet kept bringing her back to that teddy bear stand.

Helen soon found herself purchasing Australian Bear Creations magazine and found her way into The Teddy Tree shop and was soon seated in a class being taught by Jo Rhodes of Tumbling Teddies. Helen had soon completed her first bear. “I actually still have him and am quite fond of him. He is really the only ‘early’ bear I have and he will always be special. Within the year I was designing my own bears. I was hooked.”

“I have always liked bears but learning to make artist bears has given me a new appreciation of the time, skills and techniques involved. It is strange now to see a manufactured bear that at one time I would have bought. Now I look at them and think... hmmm.that’s not made very well.”

Helen considers herself blessed for having some of the best teachers to help her in her early learning stages.



Oreo



Macca



Ollie



“Living in WA I had access to not only Jo Rhodes, but Brigit Charles and Netta. I started out with a pattern from Bear Creations and then went on to make some patterns designed by these ladies. Jo’s patterns are so original and offer so much scope for creativity. Jo especially encouraged me to use my imagination in combining furs and techniques so that the bears I made looked nothing like those on the shelf.”

Helen soon found that she preferred making bears in the 10 to 25.5 cm range. “I have actually found that nearly all my bears lately have been in the 7.5 to 10cm size, so I’m going even smaller,” she laughs. “I love natural colours, browns and creams. I adore recycling furs, mink especially appeals as it offers the best faces. I love seeing the faces come to life under my needle. It is amazing to me that you can make a baby come to life with a handful of fur and joints. I find it gives me an amazing feeling.”

Artists are often asked if they draw inspiration from the fur or look for the perfect fur, so I ask Helen this question. “To start with I like to pick out a fabric and have it near the couch for a few days so I can let the bear develop in my mind before I start cutting. I draw what’s in my head, but it wouldn’t look like that to other people. I draw the shapes and then develop the face from there.”

As Helen often works with recycled furs she is constricted in that many of her patterns must be developed to suit the fur she has, and she must work around any weak spots in the leather. So I ask her what tools she finds essential to her work. “My curved haemostats, both the three-and-a-half



Cookie and friend



Tim Tam



Chai and Choc Chip



and five inches - great for stuffing the feet in miniatures and just about anything." Another tip Helen lives by was given by Jo Rhodes: "I'd be sitting in class with a fur and paw pad material in one hand and another set in the other, agonizing on which way to go or how it would look. Jo would walk past and say 'Nike', which is her way of saying....



just do it! If I was silly enough to ask her opinion, she would say, make both. So now I live by the saying, 'just do it'! Enter that competition, try that pattern or technique. A miniature is always a good training tool because if you make a mistake by a millimetre it will make such a difference. Miniatures are really not very forgiving."

Helen lives 90kms out of Perth and works full-time, so it is only through the support of her husband that she manages to make between two to six bears per month. "It depends on what I am developing as to how many I make, however if Ray didn't support me in helping me to find time to sew I would find it difficult. I always have a bear with me and a very close friend from work, Lucy, helps with naming them and keeping me motivated.. She offers suggestions and encouragement and I count on her honesty with new designs and ideas."

Despite working full-time, Helen has a wonderful website [www.barecubdesigns.com](http://www.barecubdesigns.com) which is the work of her brother Philip. Through this site collectors can see her new bears and makers can purchase her patterns and kits. "I really don't get the time to attend bear shows, although every year I vow I will find the time. So I sell mostly from my website and sometimes on

ebay. I also sell through The Teddy Tree in WA, Meems Dolls and Bears, Bear Essence in Victoria and Bears n' Ceramics in New Zealand. I do try and enter competitions though, as I find the feedback wonderful."

Helen has had a great deal of success with competitions and has many medallions from shows in Sydney and Brisbane from 2005 and 2006.

Many collectors find Helen's bears easy to pick from her trade mark puffy cheeks and baby 'cub' look. She also has a rather large collection of accessories for her little creations. "I like to give them something to hold, like an ice cream or cherry. I am careful that the accessories are always of good quality and in proportion but yes, the collection of extra bits is growing," she says shrugging.

I ask Helen what has helped her most in making her bears. "The support of my family and friends. Without my husband Ray looking after me so well I would not get anything made. My



brother is wonderful with my website and my mother is always supportive as well. Lucy at work has been a great motivator. Without these people, who believe in me and encourage me, it would be really hard.

Having held one of Helen's little cubs myself and seen how they can twine around your heart with their



soulful eyes I can attest to their appeal and sweet faces. Visit her website at your heart's peril.

*Helen Gleeson of Bare Cub Designs can be contacted at:  
Phone: 0400 797 700  
Email: [Helen@barecubdesigns.com](mailto:Helen@barecubdesigns.com)  
Website: [www.barecubdesigns.com](http://www.barecubdesigns.com)*