

Jewellery designer Alex Monroe explains to *Emma Love* how hand-making will always remain at the core of his successful business

# Back to the bench



A couple of days before I'm due to meet jewellery designer Alex Monroe, I decide to read his book, *Two Turtle Doves: A Memoir of Making Things*. Partly filled with escapades from a childhood spent growing up in Suffolk, it also offers insights into the milestones that make up his successful 30-year career. Yet what comes through most, both in his writing and when we meet at his new £2 million workshop on Tower Bridge Road in south-east London, is that although his business has grown hugely over the years (he now employs 48 people and has around 400 stockists in the UK and abroad) hand-making remains at its core.

The workshop itself – a narrow, weathered steel-fronted building sandwiched between a mountain equipment shop and a pub – was designed by architect DSDHA (which was also behind his Snowfields studio and boutique near London Bridge). In a neat piece of timing, it was officially opened in spring to coincide with this anniversary year. 'I make jewellery for young, fashion people to wear and yet it has nostalgic references, and we've done the same with this building. It's ultra modern and functional but has its roots in an industrial past,' says Monroe,

Clockwise from above: *Swooping Swallow* hook earrings; *Bumblebee* necklace; *Bee* signet ring

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pointing out that everything here is also hand-made, from the steel staircase with deliberately exposed joins to the birch ply walls.

As we begin the tour, he talks me through the making process for the nature-inspired motifs he's best known for, which include dragonflies, daisies and the iconic bumblebee necklace of which he has sold almost 100,000 worldwide since its launch in 2008. 'You can only do so much on paper; a lot of the designing is three-dimensional,' he explains. The original daisy, for example, involved him taping three paper drawings of petals onto a 0.5mm silver sheet and cutting each one out using a piercing saw. The petals were then curved and texture was added with a hammer and chasing tool before the three layers were pasted and soldered together. A separate circle was cut out for the centre and soldered on.

Monroe's own workbench is at Snowfields where the 18-carat work is carried out, but the majority of the in-house, day-to-day making happens in the ground floor space here. Once he has a design he is happy with, the rest of the team get involved, firstly to help work out how a particular motif should be

worn and also whether it is feasible to turn a hand-made one-off into something that can be reproduced on a large scale. 'Some jewellery, such as the twist bangle, is completely hand-made from start to finish; elements of others are cast using a mould. The challenge is to work out what's best.' Sometimes there is no solution and he says that he has boxes full of relegated 'bits and bobs'.

On the day I visit, the workshop is fairly quiet and the jewellers I meet are finishing off pieces that have just come back from being cast (both the casting and gold-plating is outsourced, as are the chains for the necklaces). 'Casting is incredibly complex: it's the same as a sculptor working with a foundry, and an amazing craft in itself. The casting is an exact reproduction but you do lose some of the tiny detail, so when a piece is returned one of the team will bring it back to the condition of the original.'

We stop to watch jeweller Henriette Lofstrom removing the screws from the top of a series of oval, cast silver *Wildrose* lockets (part of the *Four Seasons* anniversary collection). Her next step will be to solder a silver wren charm to the inside of each piece and attach a chain. 'There's always a huge amount

Clockwise from below: *Winter* and *Spring* lockets from the *Four Seasons* collection; the new Tower Bridge Road workshop; Alex Monroe at work



WORKSHOP EXTERIOR: PHOTO LUCA MISEROCCHI



IMAGES: COURTESY ALEX MONROE STUDIO



of to-ing and fro-ing between us, the casting company and the gold-platers,' Monroe continues.

At the workbench opposite, Faith Tavender is in the middle of cleaning up a handful of rose gold cufflinks, while Gianluigi Zoccheddu is using a micro motor (it looks like something a dentist might brandish for teeth cleaning) to polish silver hearts, which he will then solder onto rings. It's such fiddly, intricate work – the hearts are each about the size of a fingerprint – that it strikes me that only someone with a huge amount of patience and skill could do it.

With four main collections (two of which are solid gold) plus several collaborations and special projects (with everyone from Nike to Buckingham Palace) each year, how much time does Monroe spend at the bench himself? 'All I want to do is get into the workshop and hand-make something; that is the whole point, but that time gets less as the business grows,' he says honestly.

Looking back to his teenage years, he says that he was originally interested in studying fashion, rather than jewellery. 'I didn't get into any fashion courses, but anyway I was much better at making things with metal and wood than clothes,' he quips. Instead, he decided to train in jewellery smithing at the Sir John Cass School of Art, Architecture and Design in London, and by the time he graduated in 1987 he knew exactly what he was aiming to do. 'I wanted to make jewellery that had all the craftsmanship of Bond Street but which was accessible for everyone. I achieved that straight away.'

His first sale was to a boutique in Hampstead, and over the years the number of stockists continued to grow (both here and abroad), and in 2005 his jewellery was picked up by Barneys New York and Liberty. These days, Monroe seems to relish all aspects of the business, whether it's whizzing off to Berlin for a shop event with a workbench he knocked up at the weekend that's small enough to take on a plane, or a 5am start for the Kempton Park antiques market hunting for vintage furniture and knick-knacks to create the right backdrop for a collection (all his stockists and stands at the many trade fairs his team attend are kitted out as mini Monroe worlds).

We do a whistle-stop tour of the rest of the building, meeting the online team and taking a peek into the jewellery sample trays from past collaborations before walking through Bermondsey to the Snowfields studio. At his workbench, he shows me initial designs for olive branches and doves, part of the



**Above: interiors of the new workshops and offices, designed by DSDHA**

S/S 2018 collection. 'My designs are always rooted in what's happening now and the next collection, even if you don't see it, will reference what's been going on politically. I'm using nature as a metaphor for thinking about coming together, rather than being divisive,' he says, adding how German scientist Gerhard Zucker's failed idea for 'Rocket Post' in Scotland during the 1930s, which was meant to link isolated island communities, has also been an influence.

Despite all the potential Brexit-related problems of the future (he reels off the

rising price of gold and the difficulty of visiting clients in Europe on a whim as a few of his concerns), he has a full-on, five-year plan in place involving underwraps collaborations, overseas expansion and even possibly taking his design philosophy into different disciplines. That aside, though, he still puts hand-making jewellery above all else. 'When I consider retiring, I'll get rid of all my other duties and go back to being at the bench. That's what I am: a jewellery maker through and through.' [alexmonroe.com](http://alexmonroe.com)