

The alchemist

Producing her iridescent, dichroic glass jewellery and homeware is labour-intensive but great fun, Deborah Hewertson-Tisdall tells **Nicola Jolly**

Photography by **Phil Rigby**

Approaching the age of 50, Deborah Hewertson-Tisdall is enjoying the most creative and productive period of her life.

Happily settled with husband Gerald in west Carlisle, and running her own business – Dancing Peacock – with a workshop from where she produces stunning pieces of dichroic glass jewellery and homeware, Deborah has a busy programme of exhibitions and fairs this year.

Her colourful hair and brightly patterned clothes instantly reveal a unique personality; she oozes energy, passion and flair. Her individual creations perfectly reflect those qualities and are inevitably soaked up by the person who wears or owns them.

The self-taught jewellery maker has been an expert in her craft for more than 20 years and has continuously developed her techniques to challenge limitations and, more importantly, exploit colour to its fullest potential.

She started out with a relatively simple wire-and-bead method (“then everybody started doing it”), moving into enamelling (“it became too limiting”), and finally to the labour-intensive but ultimately fulfilling dichroic glass method.

Dichroic glass is produced by dispersing thin multi-layers of metal oxides upon the surface of glass in a vacuum at a very high temperature. The coatings transmit certain wavelengths of light while reflecting others, resulting in a piece of jewellery that looks different depending on its background and where you view it from.

Deborah compares it to the iridescence observed in the gossamer wings of a butterfly or dragonfly.

Using materials mainly from America, she hand-cuts shapes from sheets of dichroic and other glass in a variety of colours, patterns and finishes. They can be different textures, with pieces of frit (crushed glass) or not, translucent or opaque, milky or clear, etched or not.

“It’s like having a painter’s palette,”

Deborah says.

She then glues them onto a base surface to



Dichroic glass is produced by dispersing metal oxides onto glass. Every piece is unique

form her chosen design, a painstaking process using cocktail sticks and tweezers. The whole thing is fired in a kiln at intense temperatures for varying times and then slowly cooled.

She explains: “It’s labour-intensive but great fun. It’s like meditation for me. I get in the zone.”

“I enjoy the feeling of alchemy between myself, the glass and the kiln, transmuting certain elements into something entirely different. You never quite know what you’re going to get. Often the outcome is brilliant and every piece is unique.”

There are earrings of all shapes and sizes, and bangles are popular sellers, as are pendants, bracelets and rings. Deborah also makes specially commissioned pieces – tiaras for weddings for instance – and personalised jewellery.

“These long drop earrings are my talisman,” she says, pointing to her ears. “I get more business off these than I could have imagined. When I’ve lost them, they’ve always turned up. People love them. It’s one of the first things they mention when I meet them.”

“I love working with glass,” she enthuses. “It’s such an incredible substance; it’s almost like a living thing. You know, if you score it and leave it, it will eventually heal itself – it’s almost like liquid underneath – and it will be harder to break.”

“With enamelling, I could never get the colours bright enough for me, and I can’t live without bright colours.”

Deborah believes in the healing power of colour which is bound up with the body’s chakras and the flows of energy. She is convinced that when people buy her pieces, they unknowingly choose the colours their body needs, and she is keen that they feel the vibrations from the colours and materials.

It’s evident that she’s far from conventional. Her home is crammed full of colour and pattern: soft toys, ornaments, drapes, art.

And her past is as colourful as her present. ➤



Deborah Hewertson-Tisdall with one of her pendants. Below: two of Deborah's pictures, Circus II and Red High Diver. Her work is inspired by Klimt and Kandinsky



It includes an art history degree from St Andrews, and jobs as a cloakroom attendant, shop worker, life model, aspiring popstar (with a glimmer of success in Czechoslovakia) and yoga teacher.

She met her first husband, the artist Rolf Parker, in 1985 and after moving around through work, they opened the Skylark studio and gallery in Cockermouth in 1994.

But in the early Noughties, while touring abroad with a Cumbrian choir she had joined, Deborah met and fell in love with former lawyer Gerald, who was also married and is more than 20 years her senior.

They both gave up everything to be together in what was a difficult time for all those involved but everything quickly clicked into place. Deborah's ex-husband Rolf remains a good friend; he sells her jewellery at his gallery and frames her artwork.

Deborah says: "Gerald is my muse. He does the business side of the business; he takes all the admin off my shoulders. So many women want to hire him."

Under his guidance, she has now branched out into a sort of "jewellery for the home", using dichroic glass techniques to create artwork such as pictures, clocks, tiles, coasters and photograph frames.

Her pictures are inspired by Klimt and Kandinsky and the new artwork is being displayed at an exhibition at Thornthwaite Galleries near Keswick in June.

She says: "Big glass pictures have a real colour impact and I'd love to make triptych of three 18in squares to make a real statement."

An Indian astrologer once told Deborah that she would never be rich but would always have enough to get by.

"That's how it has always been," she says. "Money is not the most important thing. Yes, I want to sell my jewellery and make a profit to live on but it's more important for people to enjoy it and to feel something from it."

"It's a craft first and if people want to buy my work, then that's a bonus."

■ *Dancing Peacock jewellery is stocked at 10 Cumbrian outlets, including Tullie House in Carlisle, The Gincase near Silloth, Lanercost tea room, Upstairs Gallery at Melmerby Village Bakery and the High Head Sculpture Valley near Ivegill.*

Dancing Peacock regularly exhibits in the boathouse at Talkin Tarn near Brampton and the next event takes place from Tuesday, May 11 to Thursday, May 20. She will also be at the annual Craftsmen at the Priory exhibition at Dacre Hall, Lanercost Priory, near Brampton in August. Her Colour in Space exhibition, featuring her artwork for the home, takes place at Thornthwaite Galleries, Thornthwaite, near Keswick, from Wednesday June 9 to Wednesday June 23.

■ *You can contact Deborah and Gerald on 01228 514877 or see www.dancingpeacock.co.uk.*



Deborah has branched out into 'jewellery for the home'. The range includes Art Deco-inspired clocks



The Dancing Peacock jewellery collection includes pendants, earrings and bracelets

