



Creative  
Lancashire

**Conversations in Creativity**  
Explorations in inspiration

Donna Wilson • 12 February 2014





Conversations in Creativity

In 2011, Creative Lancashire with local design agencies Wash, Because Studio and JP74 launched Conversations in Creativity – a network and series of events where creative’s from across the principles, crafts and trades can explore how inspiration from around the world informs process.



- Pete Fowler
- Wayne & Gerardine Hemingway
- Lemn Sissay
- Jeanette Winterson
- Nick Park
- Dave Haslam

Who's Involved

**Wash** [www.wash-design.co.uk](http://www.wash-design.co.uk)  
EST 2003

**BS** [www.becausestudio.co.uk](http://www.becausestudio.co.uk)

**JP74** [www.jp74.co.uk](http://www.jp74.co.uk)



Artist & Textile Designer

# Donna Wilson

Donna Wilson set up her company in 2003 after making odd knitted creatures for her final show at the Royal College of art. The creatures sold out and since then she has built her business designing and making a collection of curious cushions, luxurious lambswool blankets, and variety of products for you and your home.

Originally from Scotland, Donna runs a studio and workshop in London. Her hardworking team knit, sew, pack and send out products to individuals and design shops around the world - 25 countries at our last count!

Passionate about creating products that people can connect with, the studio is committed to making things that our customers will treasure. Donna uses UK based manufacturers and suppliers wherever possible, doing our bit to keep craftsmanship alive.

In 2010 Donna won the coveted accolade of 'Designer of the Year' at Elle Decoration's British Design Awards. She recently exhibited a solo show of knitted sculptures and paintings, entitled 'Endangered Species', at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park and has many other exciting projects planned for the year ahead.



## Q&A

What was your first memory of creativity?

I think it was at quite a young age, I was always drawing and making things, and was always happiest with a pencil in my hand. I didn't know what I wanted to be as a child, but I knew it was going to be something to do with art and design.

My grandmother also encouraged me to be creative and work with my hands - she was always trying to teach me things like how to knit and crochet when I was really young.

What impact have big name clients had on your career?

Big name clients have had a huge impact on my career. In my case, big name clients would be retail establishments like SCP, Liberty, and John Lewis. Their continued support and the business they bring me are important because they allow me to present my brand and products to a wider audience than I would have been able to reach otherwise.

So many people have been introduced to my products through these retailers, so the partnerships I have with these clients have been essential to the growth of my business. I'm very grateful for that.



## What was your creative journey to get to where you are?

I studied Textile at Grays College of Art in Aberdeen and graduated in 1999. I then got a job in a knitwear company as an assistant designer for a year. After that I went back to college to do my MA at the Royal College of Art, where I specialised in Mixed Media Textiles. I had fantastic tutors there- Freddie Robins and Karen Nichol. At the RCA I started making products and sold them in shops like Couverture and Supra Girls London. They started off as the long leggy dolls and evolved into the slightly more disturbing knitted creatures with 2 heads or extra long legs, each with their very own character, the more peculiar the better for me.

After the long leggy creatures I made the weirder creatures. I had a small family and I can't remember which one came first, as they were all born around the same time: Edd Red Head, with the giant head and tiny body, Angry Ginger who was ginger with a hairy chest, Bunny Blue who had 4 sets of ears and 4 eyes, and Canibdoll, who was inspired by a story that was in the news at the time- a German cannibal advertised to find a mate to eat and he got a few applicants!! Although the creatures sound a bit gruesome, they were not scary; they were more collectable companions that people wanted to look after.

## How do you establish your own style over a period of time and still stay relevant?

I think you have to keep it moving! It's sometimes hard to kill off products that you know still sell, but as time has gone on more and more people are producing similar items, which is sometimes a bit upsetting, so I feel it's my job to keep doing new types of products and pushing myself to keep evolving. It sort of depends how creative I feel at the time but I always try to do two new collections a year.



10th Anniversary Exhibition  
& Pop Up Shop



“ I get inspiration from all over the place – the landscape, music, dreams, magazines, ceramics, Scandinavian design, and the people around me! ”



## Does your work develop thematically or is it more distinctive and random?

I usually have a couple of themes on the go – it's always nice to have some new inspiration from places I visit and I suppose I'm always inspired by the landscape and the weather so that's a theme that I always seem to develop.

I usually do sketches in a note book, they look like little cartoons, tiny bodies with huge exaggerated heads, I get their look and idea on paper first, then start knitting, usually they turn out very much like the drawings but occasionally I'll make some out of the scraps or off cuts, sometimes these rejects are just as successful as the planned ones.

CIC 002 – Donna Wilson



## What has been the biggest influence on your work?

Nature is a big inspiration for me. I still get most of me inspiration from memories of my childhood growing up on a farm in Aberdeenshire in the North East of Scotland. My love of the Scottish countryside influences me to use texture and organic forms that remind me of home. I took part in a student exchange to Maastricht. It was such a great experience, being completely out of my comfort zone, meeting new people, and I still have a couple friends that I met there after 10 years. It was great to do some of the course in a completely different environment and with different tutors. I had a really nice time.



Yorkshire Sculpture Park  
Exhibition, images by  
Jonty Wilde

CIC 002 – Donna Wilson

## Which famous artists/ designers do you admire or inspires you the most?

I like Alexander Girard, Stig Lindberg, My grandma! (though she wasn't famous). Another designer I admire is Hella Jongerius - I love the sofa she did for Vitra a long time ago with the odd buttons! I'd never seen anything like this and I love the way she uses textiles and colour a lot in her work. Her designs are clever and thoughtful and have that human element.



## What inspires you or provokes the motivation towards creativity within?

I get inspiration from all over the place – the landscape, music, dreams, magazines, ceramics, Scandinavian design, and the people around me! Sometimes I just see a tiny snippet of something which triggers an idea, which is then developed into a product. It can be a tiny piece of cloth, a picture in a book, or found object from my travels. I think one of the things that motivates me is the fact that I'm earning a living from doing something creative and that's what I love. I feel very fortunate, and to keep growing as a creative business and making things that people love and relate to is a big motivator.



## What is it you love most about what you do?

Designing, and I have only recently given myself a bit of time to do this. I used to design in my own spare time, and on the back of an envelope on the bus! But I now spend time making mood boards, sketching and trying things out on the machine, and I remember why I love it. Being creative is a fantastic feeling, and I'd recommend anyone to give it a go. I also really enjoy making things that make people smile!

CIC 002 – Donna Wilson



Yorkshire Sculpture Park  
Exhibition, image by  
Jonty Wilde

# Crafts Council

The Crafts Council helps makers like Donna Wilson to develop the creative and business skills necessary to ensure sustainability and success.

Their professional development programmes range from supporting makers within two years of setting up their business to established makers wanting to increase their export activity.

The Hothouse programme for emerging makers is delivered in partnership with a number of organisations across the UK, and in 2014 Hothouse partners include Creative Lancashire.

If you are a maker and want to know more about professional development opportunities or an organisation interested in working in partnership visit [www.craftscouncil.org.uk](http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk) and follow @CraftsCouncilUK



Thomas Appleton, Hothouse participant 2013.  
Photo: Sophie Mutevelian / Crafts Council



Emma Yeo, Hothouse participant 2011.  
Photos: Sophie Mutevelian / Crafts Council



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## Upcoming Events

### A selection of creative outings on the horizon from around the North West

#### **Festival of Imagination – Helen Storey in conversation with Caryn Franklin** **20.02.14** **Manchester**

Don't miss a fascinating talk between two long-time collaborators that touches on science, art and the creative process.

[www.creativetourist.com](http://www.creativetourist.com)

#### **FutureEverything** **27.03.14–01.04.14** **Manchester**

The FutureEverything conference will feature some of the most eminent practitioners and thinkers from design, urbanism, art, business and academia, as well as numerous participatory sessions, workshops and fringe events.

[www.futureeverything.org](http://www.futureeverything.org)

#### **BCNMCR** **27.03.14–23.04.14** **Manchester**

A free design exhibition held at Manchester's TwentyTwentyTwo venue and a series of inspirational talks by a collection of the studios.

[www.bcnmcr.co.uk](http://www.bcnmcr.co.uk)

#### **ServDes** **09.04.14–11.04.14** **Lancaster**

ServDes, the Service Design and Innovation conference, is the premier research conference for exchanging knowledge within Service Design and service innovation studies.

[www.servdes.org](http://www.servdes.org)



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