**Commissions, exhibitions of glass work and art teaching**

**26.04.2018**

CG: So please tell me about your business and why and when you chose to set up your business.

XX: On the birth of my first child I decided I couldn’t go back to working in the City. I assessed companies requiring credit and the hours were really long. I have always loved being creative and didn’t get the chance to go to University when I was younger, so I enrolled in an Undergrad art course and loved it. I did a part time Masters in glass work at the University of Creative Arts (UCA) in Farnham and produced a business plan when I was there for my business.

I am producing mainly glass bowls of varying sizes with different glass finishes. I sell pre-produced items (bowls and bird baths) and often get commissions to alter my standard bowls for various garden positions, walls and events. My exhibitions are starting to grow which helps increase sales. I am about to show at The Ashgate Gallery in Farnham in July which is a very prestigious crafts exhibitor. With my own show there I will be able to approach the two key London galleries, which access international markets.

So 4 years ago (2014) I chose to follow my heart into a business creating art, which is a true passion of mine.

CG: What do you think have been the key milestones in the evolution of your business?

XX: Probably three things. My first sale for over £200 was a real joy because I knew it was profitable and I could sell my items to achieve a sustainable business.

Secondly being accepted in the Hampshire and Berkshire Guild of Craft; it is a incredibly supportive group of people who I can ask anything of. Many have been making a living out of crafts for more than 10 years, so they can be super helpful. I can talk them about how lonely it can be, on your own trying to drive a business forward at every stage and having those crises of confidence. It’s my work, I like it and understand but many people don’t. It’s taken me a while to be at peace with the fact that not everyone “gets” what I do. I used to take it so personally and find it upsetting. Now I can accept it and know that those buying do enjoy it for their own personal reasons and that’s great too. Being a member of the Guild also gives me access to lots of share exhibitions at country venues and learn the ropes. It’s just been a great group of people, who meet up regularly and are the only ones who really understand my struggles and challenges to make my craft and try and make a business out of it.

Finally becoming artist in residence at the UCA, it is such a stimulating environment and I can talk to my old tutor again who gives me very constructive feedback in my pieces. There are also some older students who are running small businesses alongside the courses and it’s great to catch up with them and see how they are getting on. Again, I can share my challenges and experiences with them and it makes me feel like I am not alone. It’s so good for me that they all talk to me as an artist, not as a mum or wife. It’s almost as is I need to keep proving that identity to my family and to myself. It is so easy to get lost in the day to day and not believe in what you are producing and trying to make it grow and develop.

CG: Just to confirm my understanding – you 100% own your business, who do not have any employees or contractors?

XX: Correct.

CG: So you started your business out of a love for glass making, what were your aspirations then and now?

XX: When I started I want to have a glass business, but I wasn’t sure how commercial I was going to be. I first made glass Christmas baubles and stars and sold them in local shops and fairs. They were incredibly popular and I always sold out. However I realised to make a decent living out of them, apart from being highly seasonal, that had to be high volume. I created a business plan and rang major suppliers (The White Company and Liberty etc), they were all really interested if the price was right. I then liaised with suppliers and started to get some designs together. Then I had a moment of clarity – I hadn’t spend 6 years studying art and glass to be a company wholesaling glass baubles made by a factory. I stopped the process and re-focused in what it was I really want to do; large glass pieces produced and designed by me or commissioned. So that is what I did.

I now aspire to create more products in my repertoire – but at the moment I am restricted to small circular items due to the shape of my kiln.

I would to have my workshop outside the house, so I can separate my domestic and work life. I might then be able to run glass classes too.

CG: What are the opportunities and barriers for scaling up?

XX: I need more investment – to create a studio outside and house a bigger kiln. There are some art funds that invest in small operations. I need the time to sit down and get together a business plan. For the moment I am working on getting into the highly prestigious London galleries. I can only work in term time and school hours – so that’s a huge barrier to my aspirations. I need to take a big leap, but I just can’t at the moment.

CG: How does managing your family impact the business?

XX: It is super frustrating sometimes. I have all the home, kids, dog responsibility. When I work from home, there is always something to distract me – dishwasher, washing, cleaning etc. When you are working creatively you need to be free to really concentrate and let your ideas flow. I find it really hard not to worry about pick up time that a fixed deadline that I just can’t miss. It cuts straight into my creative time and if you lose an idea it is so difficult to pick it up. I can spend ages on a design and if I get interrupted and done build it well, the glass cracks and I have wasted all that time and stock.

I can be working and really concentrating and what feels like only 2 hours has actually been 7 and I am late for picking up the boys. The artist in residence really helps with this as it gets me out of the house and working in a creative environment.

CG: What would you say the positive and negative impacts of the family are on your business?

XX: I find then pretty negative I’m afraid. R. doesn’t support me one bit. His priorities are his work, the boys, his hobbies and then my life which includes my business. He just doesn’t take it seriously at all. His weeks are for work and he is absolutely not interested in helping me with anything at the weekend. I am completely on my own when it comes to my business. I’m not sure he would even describe it as that. He likes to talk about it socially, how his wife is an artist and has a small business but he doesn’t even follow me on Instagram. That’s my main shop window and I need as many followers as I can get. It’s where I always upload photos of my latest work. It just doesn’t register with him. Just yesterday, he called to say they were planning a cricket quiz at the weekend and could I sort the food. I mean I am just a secretary to him. I have loads l would love to do for my work, but he seems to think I can pick up all his needs at the drop of a hat. I find it so disappointing. So yes, it does affect my relationship, but perhaps that is symptomatic of how he would always treat me.

I have struggled and continue to make the business work. It’s hard with glass, you can spend hours working on a design and then it isn’t strong enough in the kiln and it cracks. Even in you make some great pieces; you have no idea if and when they will sell. It feels very lonely sometimes and I often wonder if I am losing my way. I can’t speak to him about it because he is simply not interested.

I feel like I have lost a lot of confidence. My friend visited a while ago and she said I was really losing confidence; I am not like the old Sigi who worked in the City. I think if I had a job outside the home earning regular money, he might take it more seriously. …but then who would do everything that needs doing here? I don’t know why I have to fight so hard to keep my business going? I sometimes wonder if it’s worth the agro and conflict and the constant battle. Yet if I didn’t do it, who would I be? I have always loved creating and I would lose something of me. I just have to keep going for myself and see where I can take it.

CG: Has the family had a positive impact at all?

XX: Oh dear, sorry I sound so negative, but I just can’t think of any. I love the boys and being a mum, but they definitely mean huge compromises for me in the business. I don’t think I ever compromise them, it always the business that takes the hit. Perhaps when they get older I’ll be able to dedicate more time, but for now I simply sacrifice.

CG: How localise do you think your business is, If you moved tomorrow how would it be affected?

XX: I think its pretty moveable. My customers come out of exhibitions and word of mouth mainly, and they come from across the country. Glass can easily be packaged and sent anywhere. Actually that is something that I have recently, really improved. My tutor at UCA said I have to be professional in absolutely everything I do. I have never really paid too much attention to the presentation of my glass. I put it on a white table and take a photo of it with my iphone, then email it off. Since he told me, I found a great (expensive) professional photographer who takes pictures in his studio (in Stroud, not very convenient). But what a difference he made. The images are really strong and make far more of a wow factor when I send them out to interested customers. I made sure to get some done for my summer exhibition at The Ashgate, so they are available to hand out. That’s definitely one thing I learnt; to always be professional. I just wasn’t confident at the beginning, but now I see presentation is so important. With art it’s a bit of a luxury and it’s how you can make someone feel about the quality of your product.

If we moved I would join the local Craft Guild and hopefully get the fantastically supportive network I get here. I would definitely miss the UCA, but I would apply for all the artist residences in my area, as that also a fabulous way to get connected and out of the house.

CG: Have you connected with local institutions (like a local government department) or a financial institution (like a business loan from a bank).

XX: No.

CG; Clearly your main networks are the Guild and at UCA, are there any others?

XX; No they are the only ones, but they are invaluable to me. At UCA I also get my mentor feedback from my old tutor which is great. His wife has her own business so he has an understanding of what I am trying to do. I can be really critical, but in a way that’s what I need. Getting out of the house and working in a creative environment is so stimulating, it great for ideas and setting a time disciple for developing new work and ideas.

I often don’t take either the Guild or the UCA business advice because I think I know my business well and I have a City background. However creatively and for admin stuff, like tax and VAT and paperwork, they are brilliant. And just not feeling so on my own.

CG: So now you know lots of business owners in your local area, have they had any impact on your business?

XX: Probably in terms of accessing exhibitions and fairs which gets my names out there, but not on my fundamental way of doing business.

CG: What would be the one thing that could support your business?

XX: Investment. I would love £10,000 to build a small studio in the garden. I could buy a much bigger kiln which would extend my product range massively. I would not be working in the house, so I know that would make me work so much more productively. My children might treat me more like I have a business rather than just coming in all the time and breaking my chain of thought. I would help me so much to have that separation from all the domestic tasks and holiday noise. I know when I go into the UCA my head is clear and I work so much better.

I could run one day glass workshop classes in it. I have looked into it and there are simply no glass work classes in the south east. I think it would make a great day, as it’s not like drawing which can be frustrating, and you get a lovely piece at the end of it. I would really enjoy seeing what people could achieve. For a whole day, attendees could come from a far distance then, so I would have a great expanse to pull customers in from. I wouldn’t want to commit to regular weekly classes, as that would need official and expensive childcare (one off workshops I can arrange with other mums). I have taught arts club after school for 3 years now at Alton College. I had to give that up for the Artist in Residency at UCA, but I really enjoyed the teaching part. Workshops would be great way of earning money on a regular basis and I enjoy the teaching creative process, it sets off ideas for me. It’s also a great way for me to get my name out and as an artist it gives me some standing if I am teaching.

You never know what opportunities could come out of it.

I have seen some funds available for arts investment; I just need to get on with it. My confidence isn’t great though. I have been waiting to send some pieces through to a London gallery, I just wasn’t sure they would be interested in my stuff, so I keep outing it off. Then one of the managers visited UCA and he told me they do feature styles like mine and I should submit, yet here I am 2 weeks later and I haven’t. I need to just get on with it, but I can’t see why they might like my style.

It’s hard I think I do miss some opportunities because I am not a sales person. I started in 2014 abd it has been a slow burn. I have definitely gone down some wrong paths, but then a get clearer where I am going. I think I need to confidence to grab any opportunity that comes up, rather then talking myself out of it because I don’t believe in me enough. I had someone visit my studio the other day and when I showed her around, I could sense she wanted to buy, but she walked away with nothing. I decided to be more positive and so I emailed her my website links and photos and the stock she seemed to like and gave a discount on the one I think she was most interested in, and she bought straight away! I have to get better at sensing and grabbing those opportunities. It may not come naturally to me, but I am getting better.

**Personal Details**

Age: ~~16-29 30-39~~ 40-49 ~~50-59 60+~~

Nationality: British (white)

Country of origin: UK

Mode of working: ~~Full Time~~: Part time:

Children: (1) ~~0-2 3-4 5-11~~ 12-18

Children: (2) ~~0-2 3-4~~ 5-11 ~~12-18~~

Children: (3) 0-2 3-4 5-11 12-18

Children: (4) 0-2 3-4 5-11 12-18

Highest educational qualification: O’Levels, BA and MA as mature student.

Location of business: Winchester

Home working: Yes

Last position held in employment: Credit Manager

Husband Occupation: Debt Structuring

Husband highest educational qualification: Degree

Household income: ~~Dual~~ Single (Business income not required.)

Extra Two Questions (22.09.2018)

**CG: What does success mean to you?**

XX: Firstly it means if I finish an exhibition and sell a piece then I feel successful. I have designed and created something of value. That is validation for what I have done, all the organisation of the business behind the scenes comes down to that.

But the other thing that is success it getting my children to school, fed and the house is clean… because I also fail in that.

Business and family are the two things that are important to my success, but they are always fighting each other. If I am trying to achieve something – get into a gallery, finish producing a design and I get called away (Cosmos had a migraine, whatever) then that success that I would have had is not achievable anymore, if I miss the deadline or I can’t squeeze so much in.

CG: Is it the sale that makes you feel successful or is it being exhibited and recognised for your creative output?

XX: A sale is validation of work. Getting into an exhibition, if its curated, is also great because someone with knowledge has chosen my work to be included. If something looks amazing when I open the kiln, then that’s success because I am achieve the artistic output I wanted.

So there is lots of elements. With artists there is that difference between what you love as an artistic piece and what will commercially sell. Sometimes I bring a beautiful piece into our home, that I am really proud of and they respond negatively and just don’t get it. It is so personal and I can’t be offended when people don’t like my work.

As an artist you must love your work. That conflicts with other peoples love or lack of for your work. But you have to stick with your own love and that takes confidence. The problem is when you create something you are not that proud of and it sells well.

For me as an ex-banker, making money out of my work feels good and feels like the right thing to be doing.

CG: Is it important to you that you make your own money?

XX: Yes, but I have realised that’s not what I am here for, however much I would like to contribute the same amount. It is impossible because I provide full time care for the children. That was the deal, my husband continued his career. It’s the choice you make, you work as a team and you have to keep reminding yourself that is the choice you made. You wanted to be here for your children and therefore my job is to keep R. free so he can concentrate on his career. I can’t then say later on, it’s not fair because I made the choice. He also can’t say, well you’re at home all day and not respect me.

It’s that eternal argument, if you are not half and half there is always going to be disequilibrium. I always wanted to do something because I think the children need to see that I am not just the housemaid, butler, cook, window cleaner…because I have so much more to give than. I wanted to do something for myself and it enables me, once the children are have gone I can carry on.

So I have successfully reinvented myself to do something that will fit around the family and will outlast them so that I can, when R. retires, I don’t need to retire, because what is retirement? It’s when you go off to do something you love. Well I have something I love that I can carry on with and when I have unhindered time I can really focus 100% on it.

CG: So in way the success of you business now is building a future for you? It’s true success will only be known over the very long term?

XX; You set up the starter for 10; you’ve got the clear idea of what you want to achieve, the validation, the proper training to do what you are doing, you’ve got membership of various associations where you have got access to talented and experienced people and some resources.

It means that I have got off the first rung so once the children leave home, you won’t start something new then because it’s so uphill. I’ve used my years to try ideas, find the best product for me, get all the training and connections and it’s been great. I have been fulfilling my creative potentially and learning how to function as a business owner.

As mothers we are really good organisers and we are always anticipating things. I think as you are building up a business from scratch on your own, you are constantly anticipating, planning and organising plus alongside there are all the daily needs of the children to manage. There are so many things you need to think about and juggle; starting up a business is so similar. Running a busy household is like running a business.

CG; Do you feel successful because you are building a business for a future whilst maintaining the harmony as a team player at home?

XX: Yes I feel I have succeeded in that. I feel like coming out of a corporate world, having done art foundation and then my degree whilst the children were very young to what I do now independently, without needing any more training, I think yes I should remind myself I have come a long way. I wouldn’t have been able to go back to work, just too long hours.

**CG; Identity have you struggled to reconcile motherhood and business owner? Are they incompatible?**

XX: What I do as an artist, in terms of a nurturing attitude, it doesn’t conflict as much as I imagine my previous job would have. I don’t spend time arguing with people, there are no tough negotiations that I have to carry out, well apart from with myself. So in terms of putting on some sort of face, well I tink that is where my past experience is really helpful; I can be business like, I know what is required, I can step into that role.

That gives me confidence; the fact that I can pull on my experiences and I can use them to do things I wasn’t sure of. It’s great to find that you can do something you didn’t think you could and I haven’t forgotten. That is a really nice reminder because as a mother you lose your confidence. You are so 100% absorbed with children and so having your own business and going our into situations and remembering and reapplying old skills, it reminds you that you can do it and that gives me more confidence to push forward.

I think that’s a good thing; I think the two roles complement each other.

CG; Do you enjoy being the business owner as well as a mother? Is that valuable to you?

XX: Yes you spend a lot of time just being a mother, then you move away from that have different conversations. It’s like going on holiday, you need a rest from something that can be very draining and exhausting and isolating. You step out of the mother role and even though it is challenging and can be difficult, it is different and so becomes refreshing to you, so you can go back to being a mother and feel you can continue.

CG: Because you step away from the role and mother and you enjoy adopting the role of business owner, does that make you feel legitimate.

XX; Hhhmmm yes now that is always where I struggle. I think I have always struggled with it, I had difficulties being taken seriously in a very male environment in the City. It has been exacerbated by motherhood, you lose more confidence. What I am doing now, in a glass environment I worry that I am competing against people who have done this for years, since school whereas I am quite recent to it. I worry that people think “ well she’s had her career in the City and now she wants a lifestyle dabbling in glass, she’s not serious about it, she’s just a bored housewife.” That is what I worry about, I see it with a lot of people.

CG; What makes you feel that, do they say or imply it to you?

XX: Yes that is interesting. Why do I feel like that? Well I don’t sell little glass pieces at Christmas fairs …there you go I am doing it, belittling them, that’s the problem isn’t it! I want to sell my individual prices in big, professional, curated galleries in London ….la la la.. It’s that City person in me coming out again, you get that job in order to get the next job. It’s ..

CG; Is that you saying, well actually I am really serious about this and my business? I am not playing at this, it’s my future.

XX: Yes, I’m just not content with selling at the village hall. It’s not what my business aspires to be. I want project my seriousness, I want to achieve something that is the absolute best of my ability. I didn’t think village sales were my best, I felt I could do more, push and grow more.

So my identity as a mother, is she taking it seriously or is she just doing it to full some gaps in her time whilst the kids are at school I don’t want people to think that, I want them to think that I am an artist trying to create pieces that challenge and evolve for a future.

CG; Is that why the curated galleries are so important to you?

XX; Yes that is validation, that’s credibility, they think I am good enough to exhibit. You need those markers. I remember a visiting artist smiling at me and saying “It’s like badge collecting at Brownies!” this is what we do in order to differentiate ourselves and to feel confidence in what we are doing and to project legitimacy, a marker that we are serious.

You can’t do that with childcare, it’s drudgery and monotony and you can only control your own success. Not that of your husband or children. It’s yours to achieve. Separating their success and letting them see you work hard to be successful is really important for their idea of what life is all about. You try your best and it gives you great rewards, but you can’t expect by dabbling, you have to commit and work you hardest with every hour you get, but then it rewards.

You won’t feel proud if you have worked.

Additional Comment

XX: I have had men comment to me “why are you doing this, well you don’t need to work do you?” I mean seriously how do you even start with that one. That may be true….

CG: You were a highly ranked professional woman, with so many skills …why would you not want to work?

XX Well exactly, you job is part of your identity, it validates so much for you, your self-worth, your self –confidence. It is only when men retire do they realise who big a part of their identity work has been. We realise it when we have children; you see depression rates are high for women in 30s and high for men in 60s. That’s why we have to work, we need to do something around the children, you can’t simply stop.

You need continuity of your true ambitions and fulfilling your underlying potential. Even if it is a very slow route around the children, you have to be going somewhere. When you become a mum, you could lose all the ambitions you had before, they could vary or become truer, but you can’t abandon them because what’s left? It’s not an aside but it is something a father doesn’t experience, until retirement.