

Alexander Blank

FREE
Gallery
Guide



Alexander Blank

Born in 1975, Alexander Blank is from the German town of Büdingen. It was not originally his ambition to become a goldsmith – he intended to undertake an internship as a photographer. But the shop where he applied already had an intern and it just so happened that the shop next door was a goldsmith's. However, he has admitted that he was not initially focused on learning the craft and was more interested in his friends and sports. It was not until he attended the advanced technical college in Hanau in 2001 that he began to be truly interested in goldsmithing. After studying here he moved on to the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, where he worked



under the guidance of the well-known jeweller Otto Künzli. Here Blank was able to work fully on his own interests, with freedom to explore jewellery in all its traditional and contemporary forms. He said of his time studying that he suddenly "noticed that it was possible to approach a jewellery piece to criticise, comment, use, and narrate everything I could imagine". Since this realisation, he has seen jewellery as a playground. He uses many recognisable symbols within his work – such as the McDonald's logo, Superman's emblem and a yellow smiley face – to function as symbolism that we might associate with modern consumer society. He cites some of this influence as coming from his teenage interests in the American sports of skateboarding and basketball. These symbols and well-known characters – such as animals, Looney Tunes characters and cyberpunk kitties – are manipulated from their familiar forms and reformed into jewellery pieces which bridge the gap between traditional jewellery and kitsch items of consumerism.

Imbuing his items with elements of comedy, he balances out their kitschiness with his technical perfection. The execution of his pieces is so precise that he is able to be critical whilst at once demonstrating he is always and completely in control of his creations.

For example, in his series of Looney Toons skulls, he demonstrates his skill in negotiating the boundaries between contemporary society and the traditions of jewellery making. The smooth surface and well executed paring down of well-known cartoon characters to their basic structures are beautifully finished so that they are at once both morbid and decorative. The death of these characters, represented as skulls, is made beautiful through the hands of Blank. This interest in creating animal forms in jewellery is extended further through a series he created called 'Evil Ed and Friends'. Exhibited as a group, they come to look almost like a gang, with Blank applying his own narratives to his pieces in the same way that a child would make up scenarios for its toys. These brooches, which are created in a similar smooth style to the Looney Toons skulls, look as though they may also be small stuffed animal trophies. Evil Ed, the frog of the group, is the only one to have eyes with which to observe his 'friends', who are all made of dark black foam and are mounted on the wall. They are made to be worn on the chest like a traditional brooch, challenging not only the traditions of jewellery but also decoration in a broader sense, looking at the overlap between how we decorate our environments and ourselves.

However, there is an element of his work which he always wishes to keep personal: he writes in his artist statement that "every jeweller is justified in keeping his intentions hidden". To try to read too much into his jewellery would therefore be a mistake, as not only does he want us to keep guessing but also to apply our own stories to his work. The characters and symbols he uses are so recognisable that they allow us to link them to our own stories and memories. The details of his narrative are therefore not the most important element of his works. Instead, the importance lies in the combination of technical skill, clever observations and the possibility of new interpretation being added to appropriated objects.

Since 2003 his designs and jewels have become increasingly popular throughout the world. His work is held in the collections of the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, the Museum August Kestner in Hannover and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. His work has not only been featured in many contemporary jewellery exhibitions but also in several publications. He has received several awards, including the Herbert Hofmann Prize in Munich in 2012.

The roots of mima's contemporary jewellery collection

From 1952 Lady Crathorne, née Nancy Tennant was president of the Friends of Middlesbrough Art Gallery, leading this small group of highly active individuals both to establish a permanent art gallery for Middlesbrough and build an art collection that would provide a legacy for future generations. Their dream was realised in 1957 when the Council bought a former doctors surgery in Linthorpe. This became the Middlesbrough Art Gallery and was later joined by the Cleveland Art Gallery and the Cleveland Craft Centre in the town. The collections and exhibitions in the Cleveland Craft Centre were primarily based on the ceramic heritage of the town in reference to the infamous Linthorpe Art Pottery (1879–1889), based in Middlesbrough. Ralph Turner, then Head of Exhibitions at the Crafts Council visited Middlesbrough whilst looking for towns and cities outside of London to initiate a new collection of Contemporary Jewellery to rival that of the Crafts Council and V&A, both cited in London. Middlesbrough and the craft centre were chosen for this new venture and today the resulting collection charts the development of jewellery design internationally from the inception of the New Jewellery Movement of the 1980s through to the contemporary jewellery of today, comprising work by Otto Künzli, Caroline Broadhead, Emmy van Leersum, Felieke van der Leest, Karl Fritsch, Ruudt Peters, Paul Derrez, Giovanni Corvaja and Ted Noten. When mima opened in 2007, we inherited the collections of fine art, ceramics and jewellery from our predecessors. mima continues to grow these collections today.

Cover & Inside: Alexander Blank, *Smiley*, 2007, Iron road sign, paint. Acquired through the Northern Rock Foundation Craft Acquisition Scheme. Inside photo: © eve photography

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