

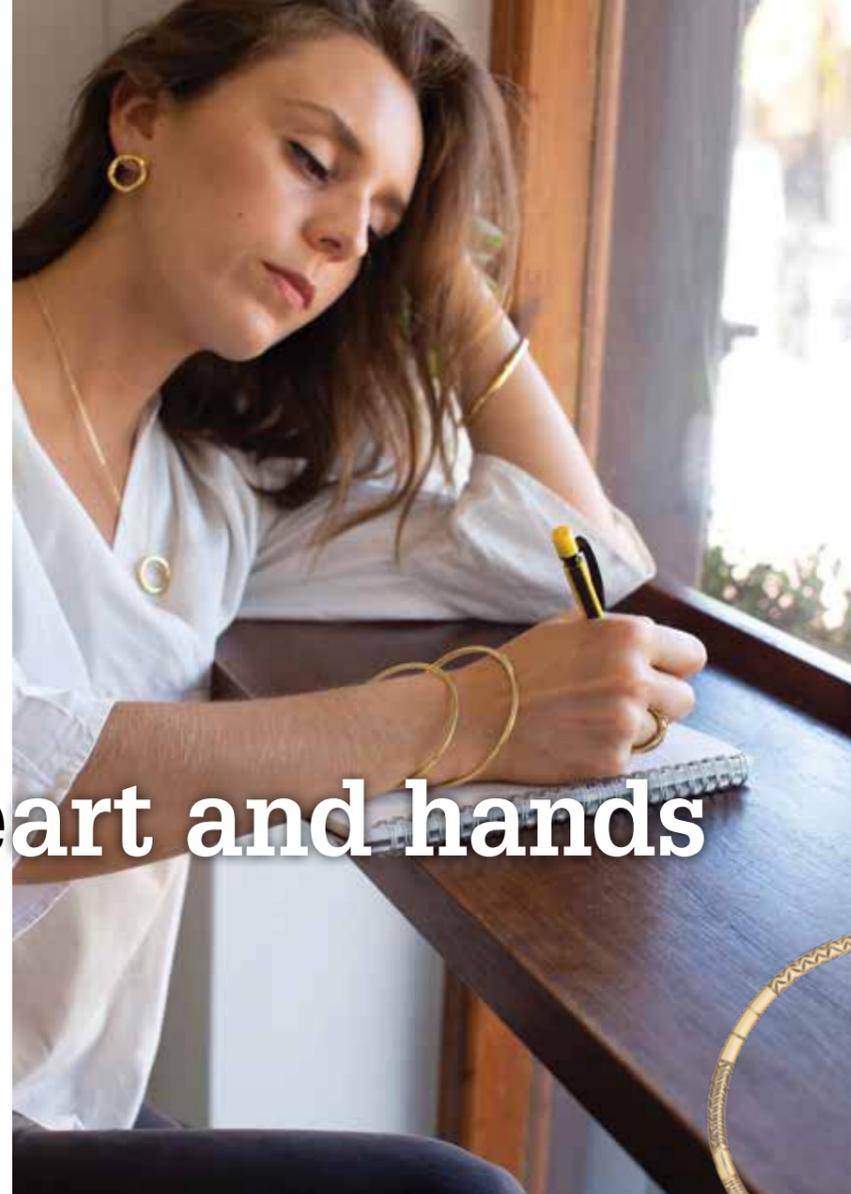
Natasha Collins, founder of Natasha-G Jewellery, is a contemporary jewellery designer based in Cape Town with her sights set on the globe. Her visions are bold, but enigmatic; sometimes powerful, sometimes playful, always elegant – and within these dualities, she finds a balance which is uniquely her own

Head, heart and hands

Tell us about yourself.

I was born in London and came to South Africa when I was 14. I was raised by my mom. Her partner was a welder and he could fix and make anything. He also used to collect stones and polish them. I was in awe of that, as I also loved making things, building, beading and creating.

I used to love visiting my gran. Her home is like an art gallery. My great-grandfather was very involved in the Arts and Crafts movement: he collected a lot of arts and crafts jewellery and silver and was very interested in design. He had many first editions from various private presses and he was Chief Architect of Allied Breweries. He had a very keen eye for detail, the architectural aspect of jewellery and its movement and fluidity, which have influenced my designs to this day. Whenever I went to visit



my gran, I would leave with an exquisite piece of jewellery – something antique.

I'd always wanted to be a shoe designer, as I have an obsession with shoes (in fact, my first word was "shoe"!). However, from the moment I first started making jewellery, I couldn't stop and that became my passion.

Who is your biggest mentor and what was the best advice they have ever given you?

I've had many mentors for different facets of my business, though some have been more prevalent at different times. My first jewellery design teacher, Marcus Mercer, taught me the core elements and has been my biggest mentor when it comes to design and making jewellery.

Some of the best advice I've been given comes from other sources, such as "Think like the consumer", "Obsess the customer" and "Don't do business with anyone you wouldn't have lunch with".



How did you first get interested in jewellery design?

It was the practical aspect that first interested me. I started metalwork in Grade 10 and then took design as a subject in Grades 11 and 12.

What makes your designs unique?

Any designer who creates from inspiration and doesn't copy anyone else's work has unique designs. As humans, we're all unique and design is a translation of one's personal perception.

Art, beauty and design excite me. I draw inspiration from the things that ignite a fire in me.

As a designer, I'm extremely versatile and can quickly and easily adapt to my surrounding culture and translate it into my designs.

With commissioned work, I'm very responsive to mood and emotion. I'm particularly skilled at drawing out of the client what they want and translating that into a perfect

piece of jewellery for them, so I'm driven as much by intuition as by inspiration. It might be something that they didn't even realise they desired. I enjoy translating people's personalities through jewellery to create the perfect "fit" for an individual, so that they feel the item's been made just for them.

Can you talk us through the process of design and making?

It depends on whether it's a custom-made, once-off jewellery piece (like an engagement ring) or a new collection. There are also a few different processes that can be used, depending on the piece.

However, there's always a design process, which starts with getting together concepts, various images of other jewellery, colours, textures and imagery that feels right. From there, I start to design the piece or collection. That's definitely my favourite part of the process. I usually draw up at least five rough designs – sometimes many more – and then pick one as a starting point.

From there, I do a three-dimensional digital image rendering of the piece and then keep altering it until it's perfect.

Once we're satisfied with it, we do a wax print of it. Sometimes this needs to be done a few times, until we're happy with the print. We then proceed to make a mould so that many can be made or cast straight away, if it's not a custom piece.

The casting is then cleaned up by hand. If the piece has stones, they're set and, finally, the piece is polished.

This is just one of the (more modern) methods used. When I learn to make jewellery, we didn't use technology to design or print. Everything I did was by hand. I would hand-carve from wax or from the material itself. I used to work with resin, African blackwood and verdite, which I used for inlays. Nowadays I work primarily with silver, gold and brass.

In terms of the actual crafting process, my hands guide me. I never force the metal to become anything: instead, I let it guide me. It's really a dance between me and the metal, where neither of us knows exactly what the choreography is until we're both in motion. I prefer to start a piece not knowing exactly what will happen. Spontaneity and imaginative licence are as important to my aesthetic as technical excellence.

Whatever the design demands will determine the process I choose to use. Most of my designs are still made by hand from start to

finish, as I far prefer to immerse myself in the tactile experience of crafting.

Where do you find inspiration?

As a designer, I need to lead a life that excites me. I can find inspiration from something as simple as going for a walk in the mountains or on the beach, or sitting in a coffee shop. The key for me to be inspired is to simply do little things every day that bring me joy. If I do that, my inspiration is limitless. I think that's what makes my designs versatile.

What do you enjoy most about your work?

I love the fact that there so many components to what I do. I'm absolutely in love with the design process and seeing my visions come



to life. As a business-owner, there are also always many different things I have to do. I love learning and I enjoy being busy.

I love working on my own, where I'm unconstrained. However, I also enjoy collaborating in projects, when the opportunity arises.

What are the pros and cons of being a jewellery designer in SA?

Being a designer in SA seems to immediately brand you as "exotic" around the rest of the globe, especially to the commercial tourist market. Thankfully, there are now burgeoning international markets wanting items that are more on-trend and unpredictable, so that's a pro. When I began my journey as a jewellery designer, the market in SA was far less saturated than other parts of the world, but we're now catching up!

A con would certainly be our currency, bearing in mind that the price of precious metals, gems and diamonds is linked to the US dollar and changes every day.

Do you have a favourite piece of jewellery from your collection?

My Skinny Bangles were what started the ORA Collection. "Ora" means "now" in Italian. I wanted to create a custom, once-off piece that was affordable and accessible to everyone. The bangle is made from a 3 mm round brass rod and each bangle has its own unique pattern on it. The inspiration for this bangle originally came from the skin of a snake and African patterns. I would hand-pattern each section of the bangle using a saw, hammer, ball burr, diamond disc and various other tools.

I loved making these bangles because I could design them as I went along and I found a sense of freedom and volatility in that.

The ORA Collection started with only bangles – the Skinny, the Classic, the Twisting and the Knot. I wholesaled these to shops and they did really well. Slowly I added rings, pendants and earrings. The collection grew organically, without a plan, I must confess. And as the demand grew, ORA grew.

If you could pick anyone to wear your jewellery, who would it be?

American entrepreneur Sara Blakely, as she's a female business icon and her global brand represents everything I aspire to having my own brand become.

Who or what couldn't you live without?

My morning routine, which consists of meditation, journaling, a gratitude list and plenty of coffee!

What does the future hold?

I've always dreamed of having a global brand and a line of exquisite jewellery that's accessible to everyone who wants it. In the immediate future, I'd like to extend awareness and visibility of my work through strategic marketing relationships with stockists and retailers. ■