

Coming full circle

Leeds-based artist Alarah Gee on why defining her process meant finding herself

Words
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Artist Alarah Gee is a Yorkshire lass through and through. She was born and raised in Leeds and, after lengthy stints in Manchester and London, it is to Leeds she has returned. We wander the city's art gallery together. It's a place that has long inspired her – its labyrinthine library a space she often comes to find solitude. She is, she explains, most at peace and most able to create, alone.

Gee's work is measured, even careful, but to the observer, rarely tentative. Abstractions in paper and ink, there's a sense that her marks have been placed with confidence. Used so sparingly, they must be.

"I map a composition out in my head," she says, "and then it's almost a case of continuously removing elements. It's a dangerous game though, as I might go too far. The brushstrokes lead what I'm constructing, but people respond to objects that they're used to."

Her Leeds vowels are still pronounced, unsoftened by her time in the capital. Unlike other young creatives lured by the Big Smoke, there was no process of personal reinvention; no period when her accent was forced into submission in favour of something more in-line with her peers. She talks about Yorkshire with a still fresh fervour. It's doesn't inform her work, per se, but it has shaped the artist she is.

In adolescence, Gee attended a comprehensive school. She recalls it fondly, but wasn't particularly well behaved or all that academically minded; although she excelled in art. Her teachers encouraged her to concentrate

her efforts, to "make a go of it." She would ultimately secure a place on the Fine Art Foundation at Leeds College of Art, now Leeds Arts University.

"It changed my world completely," she explains. "There have been some great artists through those doors: Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, even Damien Hirst. You can see the commonality in how we were taught, the use of the circle for example – something you still see in Hirst's work."

Upon advancing to a bachelors at Nottingham Trent, anxiety set in. She felt she had fallen into a pigeon hole, choosing a textiles degree like her female peers; while the boys invariably gravitated towards graphic design.

"It was years ago now, but I was at a point in my life when I didn't know what I wanted to do or where I wanted to be. Even worse was that voice from Leeds saying, 'you need to get a proper job'." She listened though, got various "proper jobs", and a period in the wilderness beckoned. It's not a time she's keen to linger on – after all, two years ago she course-corrected and began to apply her talents, on her own terms.

"If you're creative in nature, you'll never be able to turn away from it without feeling as though you've lost a part of yourself," she says. "No matter how hard I tried, I certainly couldn't."

Now represented by online art gallery Tappan Collective, Gee has refined her work and developed a solidly identifiable aesthetic. At

Facing page
After initially
facing creative
uncertainty, Gee
now designs on
her own terms





Tappan Collective

Facing page
Still Life 14 (2019)

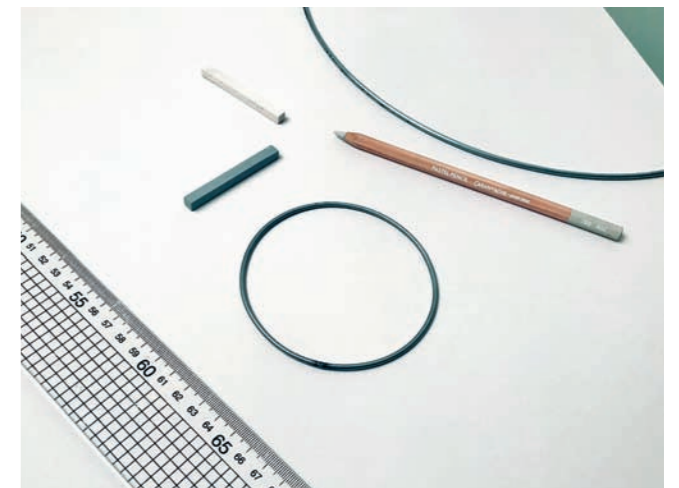
Right
Top to bottom: Brushstrokes bring a sense of authenticity and creativity that Gee believes technology often cannot muster; stemming from her days at Leeds College of Art, circles play a key role in her artworks

the simplest level, her pieces are an exercise in shape and structure; while at the most complex, a story of rebellion, catharsis and self-discovery – for artist and audience alike.

“I’m hyperactive, even childlike,” she explains. “Because my mind is so busy, my work helps me regain focus. It’s the balance to who I am as a person. The precision levels me.”

There’s something interesting in the juxtaposition between a buoyant, at times untethered personality, and austere, measured work – Gee and her pieces are two sides of the same coin, her creative outlet serving to create some intangible sense of equilibrium. It’s why the authenticity of her process is so important, each circle painted and every line etched with the sweep of a hand. She has nothing against digital processes but, as in life, has gradually fallen out of love with the encroaching nature of technology.

“Knowing which tool to apply on a computer is different from knowing how to apply a particular brushstroke to a piece of paper. It changes the creative process entirely. Working digitally takes a part of the magic away – it’s just not as soulful or personal. There’s nothing like applying a brush to paper and seeing what happens. I’ll never be able to create that stroke again and there’s a beauty in that. Generally, I’ve got no time for phones or emails either, I’ve just become less tolerant,” she says, with



a wide laugh, the words of a much more wizened character than the 37-year-old artist strolling alongside us.

For her next gambit, to be unveiled later this year, Gee has turned her hand to colour, inspired by the Bauhaus redesign of the humble Nivea tin in 1925. It took hours of alchemy to perfect the warm blue ink needed.

“I’m at an exciting juncture where I feel the possibilities are endless. There’s so much I still want to experiment with. Being back in Leeds reminds me that it’s the way you learn, not where you learn. As for me, I’m still learning and relearning, pushing myself a little further creatively every day.”

Following page
Clockwise,
from top left:
Tulips (2019);
YA LI Pear (2019);
My Girl (2018);
Mi Haus (2018);
Light Up My
Life (2018)

