

# THE DON OF VON

AUCKLAND JEWELLER NICK VON K HAS TAUGHT HIMSELF THE ART OF JEWELLERY OVER THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS. WITH THE LAUNCH OF THE FIRST OFFICIAL NICK VON K RANGE, IT'S CLEAR HE HAS TAUGHT HIMSELF WELL...

*You have worked with Ricochet since 1998 and now release a line for them 'Nick von K for Ricochet' but you say that jewellery "has been in your blood since the mid-90's." What were your first pieces like and what were they inspired by?*

Before I started working with Ricochet in '98 my jewellery was entirely different. I was living out on the West Coast at Karekare beach and my jewellery was inspired by my hippy lifestyle. I used crystals and tumbled greenstone pieces and put them together with adhesive copper foil and lead solder, just the same as stain-glass work. You see, I never trained in jewellery making; I just started with this rudimentary method and gradually expanded from there. I remember the day I hooked up my first polishing wheel from an old washing machine motor, a small rubber belt and a wheel stand. I added a new skill or tool in one at a time over the years and that's how I learned the craft. Joining forces with Ricochet opened my eyes to many different style ideas and also gave me the impetus to increase my skill levels. I picked up silversmithing pretty soon after but a lot of what we did together I could make just with a bit of Kiwi ingenuity. Right through my childhood I loved to make things so really I just never stopped.

*You work in metals, bone and precious or semi-precious stones. Did you begin your career working mainly with silver?* On a holiday to Bali I found a small bone-carving village and began to design around the skills and materials of

those that I met there. This is really where the earliest twinklings of the Nick Von K range first began. For many years I incorporated carved designs into my Ricochet ranges and pushed it as far as I could within the tight Ricochet price point. Now, as there are no longer restraints on pricing, I can basically go wild and I'm thrilled with the results; because of this, the debut Nick Von K range has opened many new areas of design possibility such as detailed stone carving and setting everything in silver, and I'm already having a great time working on new ideas for my next season.

*The animal kingdom features strongly in your work and you are true to the shapes and proportions of a multitude of beasts.*

*What process do you follow to recreate say, a panther's head?* When designing animal motifs I often use pictures to explain the sort of animal and expression that I want; and these days I only go to the carvers that I know can really capture what I'm after. There have been a fair few carvers that haven't made the grade over the years.

*Another strength is 'the afterlife' particularly skulls both human and animal. Is this because of your early years as a Guns and Roses fan or due to a much broader fascination with these things in cultures and history – indigenous or otherwise?* I do love skulls, and as a teenager I loved the energy and angst of good rock music, but skulls for me are more than just pop culture fashion. Skulls can look a little scary, all teeth and empty eyes, but I love the way that many Latin

American nations celebrate The Day of the Dead where they paint skulls with flowers and bright colours. It's an acceptance of death, and a belief or understanding that death is not the end, it is just a transition to the next phase of existence. When death is embraced in this way it ceases to have power over us, the fear of death begins to dissolve and therefore the skull can represent power over fear.

*You also have a number of pieces that exhibit a healthy sense of humour – skulls with sunglasses, eye patches and crowns. This wouldn't be that common in the jewellery world, would it?* I think a sense of humour is essential for a good life and some of these pieces really crack me up, like the skull with the big meat cleaver in his head. I call him 'Chopped' and I wonder if that's the way he died, or perhaps that's just where he keeps it. Why not have some fun with it? It lifts the skull motif out of the heaviness of death.

*Detail is also one of your strengths and some of your best pieces are very small, whilst others are substantially larger. Is size important?* I've never been one to want to stick to norms or traditions. I find the general acceptable size of most jewellery limiting, so I just make things that I'd love to wear, and hope other people will to. I like to make rings so big they border on the ridiculous, and surprisingly, people want to buy these monstrosities much more than you'd think. In contrast, I also love making something so small and detailed that it makes you lean in and study





it, like a miniature universe. I loaned a life size steel cow skull I'd made to Dan Awha for the Salasai shoot in this issue, we put a chain on it so it could be worn as a massive pendant and I just think it's the coolest thing ever.

**'Spirit' is another word that seems to describe your work or the ethos behind it. How do you imbue an essence of spirituality into Nick von K jewellery.** Spirituality is important to me. I don't follow a religion but prefer instead to make up my own mind about everything. There seems to be common truths that most humans agree on and the rest we can speculate on all we like, only time will tell who is right and in the meantime I intend to enjoy myself. I think any artistic creation carries the essence of the artist so I like to think my jewellery carries a sense of open mindedness and happiness with life.

**You recently launched Nick von K as a brand just prior to fashion week which also realised a successful collaboration with Salasai's Kirsha Whitcher. Are there more jewellery partnerships with fashion brands on the horizon?** It was great to collaborate with Kirsha and Salasai. I was introduced to Kirsha by Dan Awha who styled her recent show at fashion week. It was his idea to use the jewellery and the mix was a good one. I was totally pumped watching the Salasai models wear my stuff down the runway, they looked awesome. Kirsha and I have talked about designing a few pieces for Salasai for next season, I like collaborating with clothing designers just as I have with Ricochet

for such a long time. I do have a few ideas for collaborations with other designer brands in the future; I'm always open to new opportunities.

**You have a strong collection of pendants and rings. Any plans to expand into bracelets, brooches etc with future ranges?** I do have plans to expand into bracelets, earrings and maybe even a brooch or two next season. The debut range is huge really, about seventy designs in all, so the next season will likely be a smaller, more refined collection, but definitely an expansion in design.

**Are you inspired by other jewellers? If so, who?** I'm always inspired by other jewellers if I like their creations, and not only jewellers but all artists and designers. If I see something beautiful or original or ultimately both, then I'm inspired.

One of my earliest memories of wanting to be a jeweller is of visiting William Griffiths when I was about sixteen. He had a store called Necromance in an arcade down the bottom of High St. The arcade no longer exists, but I did track William down a few years ago in Melbourne to tell him that he was always a bit of a hero of mine. He was stoked to hear it and we had a good time discussing jewellery ideas together.

**You are currently stocked at Deus Ex Machina, One Design and Little Black Crown as well as having your jewellery available online at www.nickvonk.com. Are there other stockists in the pipeline?** Showing at NZ fashion week was really successful for me and I made a number of great contacts. I picked up local retailers Black

Box in Grey Lynn and Walker and Hall in Queen St, and I'm talking to shops in Wellington and Dunedin. I met Nicole Miller and she bought some jewellery to sell in her stores back in the States. I'm talking to another retailer who has five shops in LA and five in New York, and also met an agent for 180 shops in Canada, so we'll see where those go. I think my design aesthetic is really suited to overseas markets so I'm keen to explore selling in different countries.

**What are your other current inspirations?** Currently I'm inspired by some of the more recent directions of the debut Nick Von K range. I feel like there are still many avenues to explore that I've just touched upon, and I've already set the wheels in motion for that. There are some new ideas percolating away as we speak.

**What are you planning for Nick von K jewellery in the next year or two?** The brand launch was a great event (just before fashion week) and I'm keen to do another one next year. We had all the jewellery laid out under scientific glass bell jars and there were face-painted skeleton performers wandering around. You can see some photos on the Nick Von K Facebook page. I like the idea of making the brand an experience; having events where the brand becomes more than just jewellery and where people can enter the world from which the jewellery comes from.

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