

COCKPIT ARTS 3 YEARS

Candice Lau

- *Leatherwork – bags and accessories*



Candice Lau makes beautifully crafted leather accessories using traditional leather working skills. With a previous career in graphic design, her Kuku Big Bags brand features geometric shapes in beautiful bold colours, which she makes to commission in her Deptford studio. She also collaborates with high-end brands on branded merchandise, as well as offering leather making workshops.

Candice is originally from Sydney, Australia where she gained a BA in Design and Visual Communications before taking a Masters in Design. She learnt pattern making and traditional saddlery work at the Alri Workshop in Hong Kong, and followed this up with a summer course at the London School of Fashion. At the time she was working in advertising in London, and making leather accessories in her spare time. The business only really started to take off when she moved to Amsterdam for a year, and found she had time to create her designs while she was looking for freelance work. She secured a stockist and started selling her bags on a commission basis to individual clients.

When asked how she first heard of Cockpit Arts, Candice tells a lovely story of extraordinary good luck. "Visa, the credit card company, contacted me to do an interview for their luxury lifestyle magazine in Japan," she explains. "It was a feature on European leather workers. The interviewer happened to drop the business card of shoemaker Maria McClean. I Googled Maria and saw she'd won this award at Cockpit Arts." The award in question was The Cockpit Arts/Leathersellers' Award, which provides subsidised studio space for a year, plus access to a fully-equipped Leather Hub studio, at Cockpit's Deptford incubator. With one week to go before the closing date, Candice applied to Cockpit and was accepted for a studio space in April 2015.

Despite being at Cockpit Arts for less than a year, Candice feels she has already benefitted from all that it has to offer. "My previous studio was very creative," she says, "but here it's more about turning a creative business into something that's financially sustainable and making a name for yourself as a designer maker. Just the name Cockpit helps. A lot of people know about it, which helps to get you recognised."

She has found the one-to-one coaching with Cockpit's Business Development Manager, Madeleine Furness, particularly useful. "My business advisor Maddie has been really amazing," she says. "I tend to go to her with quite specific issues and she'll walk me through it. For example, she recently helped me to draught a letter which made me sound much more professional as a business." Candice says she has also enjoyed attending the workshops on offer, and found they've been really useful, as well as being a great way to get to know her fellow studio holders.

"Over the last year I have started to identify which parts of the business I want to work on and which I should be outsourcing," she says. "I want to keep the making in house and in the UK, but there may be other elements of the business that I can get help with, like marketing, PR, sales and so forth."



Candice has become the studio manager for the Leather Hub, a resource that she finds invaluable as it allows all the Leatherseller's awardees unlimited access to high-end machinery and tools. "The equipment on offer has enabled me to give my designs a much more refined and polished look," she says.

Just a few months after joining Cockpit, Candice was demonstrating at Design Junction at the London Design Festival when she was approached by the Chairman, and then the CEO, of Heal's. The result was a pop-up demo stand in Heal's over Christmas. "Hamish [Mansbridge, the CEO] has been so supportive. Heal's are great at championing young artists and designers," she enthuses.

"I had a lot of goals and ideas for my business before I moved to Cockpit, but being here has made me want more," she says. "I see all these people around me who have become very successful so my plans have become much grander."

These plans include further developing the two distinct strands of her business: the Kuku Big Bags brand, which she would like to narrow down into a core collection with customisable elements; and Studio Candice Lau where she collaborates with other brands to co-create products and run leather workshops. She already has a number of high-end clients for whom she has created branded merchandise for specific events, including &Smith, Purple Creative, Pilsner Urquell, Glenfiddich and Lacoste. She is currently making luggage tags for the launch of a new collection of shoes by Lacoste. At the launch event, Candice will be in store to emboss customers' initials on the tags, which will be given away as a complementary gift with every pair of shoes purchased. She also runs dedicated workshops for Heal's and the Hoxton Hotel Amsterdam teaching leather working skills. "I'm talking to Ace Hotel in Shoreditch about doing something similar with them," she says. "I'm hoping to do a lot more collaborating on this kind of pop up event."

Overall, Candice feels Cockpit Arts has taken her work to a whole new level. "As with many crafts people, my work started out as a hobby and ended up becoming a business, so the level of professionalism you find at Cockpit has really helped - not just from the Business Development Team but also from watching other people around me. Having a studio here is great; somewhere I can invite people in, to help them understand how I work. I have just applied to stay on for another year!"



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Photographs: Alun Callender.