



The house that JESS BUILT

*Diamond jeweller Jessica McCormack has created another world
in her new Mayfair store. Beanie Major gets transported*



ABOVE The Jewellery Gallery looking onto the garden
BELOW Daisy ring in white diamonds, grey central diamond and sapphires

Waiting comfortably at an antique writing desk beside a collection of 1930s safety deposit boxes and a bay window overlooking London's Connaught hotel, I feel transported to another moment in time. Above me hangs an intriguing piece by David Wiseman, half-chandelier, half-work of art, and outside in the hall is a modern candelabra by highly sought-after design duo the Haas Brothers. Here in this impressive five-storey Victorian mansion in Mayfair, old and new glamour exist side by side in perfect harmony.

I am in the reception room of 'The House', an innovative new retail space created by jewellery designer Jessica McCormack, where customers can browse her collections in an environment that resembles something between an art gallery and a private home. Two years of planning and a restoration project that saw blue carpeted floors and yellow walls stripped back to expose many of the original features, has transformed a 5,000-plus square foot space into a showroom, living room, design studio and private pied-à-terre – a huge step forward for the established fine jewellery brand which until now has operated from an appointment-only studio in Clerkenwell.

Jessica, the mastermind behind the enterprise, enters the room. She is elegant and composed: her long, dark, wavy hair, high-waisted A-line skirt and white silk shirt are complemented by a single chain – set with diamonds – draped twice around her neck. Radiating energy she wastes no time in

showing me the ground floor, a calm space with several marble and brass jewellery cabinets and a series of large paintings leading out to a beautiful garden. Animated by her surroundings, her conversation drifts effortlessly between her jewellery, the interior and the art.

Upstairs is the living room, one end an impressive library and the other dedicated to romance, where a dazzling array of engagement rings lines one cabinet and a series of metallic bowls containing different coloured gemstones another. This is the 'Love Letters' collection, part of Jessica's bespoke service, which allows customers to become part of the creative process and spell out a secret message or a loved-one's name in gemstones with the help of a specially designed app and interactive screen.

Listening to a self-playing piano commissioned from the design collective Based Upon, I can see why Jessica invites customers to indulge in her meticulously curated world. Through her own passion and knowledge she offers a deeper intimacy with the jewellery and the brand, which would be impossible to experience second hand. 'I had very clear visualisation.

I have always worked on my gut instinct – from a business perspective that is how I have got to where I am. Today's jewellery houses feel corporate and intimidating. I want people to be able to come here, try things on and feel comfortable and at home.'

One of Jessica's missions is to encourage her customers to see 'jewellery as art'. She carefully explains that it is all about how you build a piece and the layers it takes to create it. 'I want to educate people on the beauty of diamonds and why they have been cut or set in a particular way.' The 'Daisy' ring (which is so striking I can hardly bear to take it off my finger) was designed and built around the central stone; an



impressive 1.8ct grey diamond set off perfectly by the surrounding sapphires and white diamonds. Her 'Jewels of The Urban Night' collection features rings inspired by the New York skyline and London's Trellick Tower, carefully drafted on paper before the stones were sourced and cut.

Inspired by Lalique, 1920s Cartier and the Russian Crown Jewels among countless other things, diamonds are the foundation of everything Jessica creates. Through her design she makes reference to the past using time-honoured techniques in a fresh and modern way. By her own admission she 'breaks down traditional boundaries and does exactly as she pleases', setting diamonds upside down and mounting high carat diamonds in silver. 'It is important that I put my stamp on the jewellery. In 100 years' time I want someone to pick up one of my jewels at auction, and for it to be immediately recognisable.'

Inspecting a pair of clip-on earrings inspired by the swirling tattoos of New Zealand's native Maori people I am delighted by Jessica's attention to detail. Featuring irregular sized pavé set diamonds, each stone has been carefully selected and fitted together like a puzzle, making the piece seem almost alive. She tells me to pull back the clip that fastens the earring to the ear; behind it is a single glistening diamond which, although it can't be seen when worn, would surely delight the wearer to know it is there. I observe that, like her house, it seems that no surface of her jewellery is left untouched. 'It's true. I love that the closer you look, the more you find.'

It is perhaps no surprise then that her mantra is 'seek and you shall discover', and by opening up her house she invites her customers to do just that. People can wander around, look at the art and the collections or enjoy a cup of tea in the garden. Sitting opposite a beautifully carved Victorian fireplace, a tray laden with biscuits to one side, the serene atmosphere offers refuge from the hectic pace outside. 'People are obsessed with opening up shops all over the world. I looked at that as an option but it didn't feel right, so I decided to take a step back and slow everything down.'

Jessica's dedicated workshop creates only 100 pieces a year – all handcrafted in London – with some pieces taking up to six months just to hand select and source all the stones. 'My customers are happy to wait for a bespoke piece as they know it takes time. Unlike the fast pace of fashion we are creating jewellery that will slide over seasons and last for generations to come.'

In a world where people have gone crazy for social media, instant access and sharing every aspect of their lives online, Jessica's approach is refreshing and empowering. 'We don't have Twitter or sell our jewellery online. I love the idea that you have to come here to find one of my pieces. It brings back a little bit of that old school glamour that has been lost to an otherwise commercial world.'

It is precisely that 'old school glamour' which has formed the backbone of Jessica's business, and which takes it far beyond being just a brand. Drawing on inspiration from the family-run jewellery houses of the past, she offers her clients unwavering service, advice and expertise. 'I work closely with my clients to help them find the perfect piece or build their personal collection. As their jeweller, I help them if

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Swallow earrings in emerald and diamond; a shelf by Joseph Walsh in the Library; Diamond Tattoo earrings; detail from the Jewellery Gallery



they need to create a bespoke piece, update a family heirloom or source a particular stone.'

Jessica acknowledges that some may find it frustrating that they cannot simply browse the collections from the comfort of their home but she has good reason for going against the grain. 'Everything here adds context to the jewellery.' From the possum fur throws sent to her by her mother in New Zealand to the eclectic array of books she has collected over the years, covering everything from sailing to the Crown Jewels, these are the things that inspire her work.

Her enthusiasm is infectious. Rushing over to a collection of antique darts, Jessica tells me she could take any object in the room as a starting point for her work. The 'Perfect Storm' collection derived from growing up by the ocean and days spent sailing with her family. From there she also developed a fascination with sailors and their swallow tattoos (believed to carry their souls to heaven should they drown at sea), and the 'Perfect Storm' collection was born. In a continuous stream of consciousness, her association of mermaids and seaweed with the bottom of the ocean inspired the use of emeralds throughout the collection.

As talk changes to piano parties, silk pyjama movie nights and the Christmas Jessica has planned, I ask her what it feels like when the lights are off and she is left here on her own. 'It is as if it has been here forever. Everything in this house has a history and a heritage and is part of the jewellery and who I am.' ■



A selection of 'Love Letters' rings