



KEEPING TRADITION ALIVE WITH ATHENA CAULEY-YU

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DISCOVER HOW STATIONERY DESIGNER ATHENA CAULEY-YU SET UP HER OWN SHOP, COMPLETE WITH BEAUTIFUL ORIGINAL 60S PRINTERS

Athena Elizabeth Chuen Lan Cauley-Yu – or Athena to her friends – moved to Bath from north London 10 years ago to open her letterpress printing and stationery shop, Meticulous Ink, having no prior knowledge of the area, bar that it “had the optimum coupling of the right demographic and no competition”.

Running her own business had always been the dream, but it was only after university that stationery came to the forefront of her life, when she landed a job at a private stationer in Sloane Square and was subsequently head-hunted by another company in Mayfair: “I realised I must be really good at this!” she recalls. Athena negotiated with them and got them to teach her how to use the design software, enabling her to do a bit of everything – consultation, print finishing, and stationery design.

When the time came to leave the big smoke, with it was the opportune moment to make her dream a reality. Meticulous Ink offers it all – bespoke stationery, calligraphy and brush lettering workshops, and a unique letterpress printing process using two 1960s Heidelberg Windmill printers, complete with the finest oil-based inks you’ll find.

Upon entering the store, you’ll discover the most beautiful stationery and paper-related goods, while right behind the counter are the two huge iron printing presses. Somewhere at the back of it all we found Athena working away, jazz music flowing in the background, and she shared her creative journey with us.

What gave you the confidence to start your own stationery brand? Working at two other stationers that were relatively small, I got to see exactly how they ran their businesses. From there I could see the things that worked and things that could be different. I saw the lifestyle they’d made for themselves and thought even if I could do a fraction of it, I could make a life for myself. I’m ridiculously optimistic, which also helps a lot.

So how did you make your dream a reality? I did lots of research to keep my

The wall above Athena's desk is always full of sentimental prints and photographs, and creative inspiration.



feet on the ground and tried to be realistic in terms of what I could actually achieve as one human being with a finite amount of time. I calculated the average number of proofs and artwork I could complete, how many orders I'd need, how many sales I'd need to make, and how long we could survive without any orders. Having that solid numerical data gives such a big boost of reality – something that's really important in the beginning.

Tell us what you love most about your work. I love the space I've created here. It makes me so elated to come into work every day. I love being able to think of a design or item, then make and produce it in real life. I love doing the bookkeeping and clearing the reconciling when preparing my accounts. I love customers visiting full of excitement as they've been waiting to use us for their wedding invites.

How is Meticulous Ink different from other stationery brands? We're all-out geeky about tiny details. We like to live up to our name and take it upon ourselves to know the ins and out of everything we sell and make. We're small and I like it that way – small yet perfectly formed.

Why did you choose to do things the old-fashioned way? The debossing texture that letterpress creates can't be replicated. It's unique and analogue, and it gives me an outlet to be hands-on. I love having these two huge presses in the shop. It's such a juxtaposition to the delicate cards they produce.

Introduce us to your 1960s presses – they're such a unique feature in the shop. We have two Heidelberg Windmill printing presses, both dating from the 1960s. To get them, I placed an advert on a letterpress forum and within a month got a reply. Once the first press was in, I forgot all about the advert, so about a month later someone got in touch and asked if we still wanted one! The second press has been converted to do foiling instead – a heat process which also creates that debossed texture. The machines are beautiful to look at, and so very intricate. Every part can be tweaked, from the ink flow to the air pressure to the thickness of the card. They are truly fascinating things.

Describe your brand aesthetic. Our look is led by the limitations of the



- 01 Cleaning down the printing press between each colour – the beloved Heidelberg can only print one colour at a time.
- 02 A pile of their letterpress-printed shop postcards to be trimmed on the guillotine.
- 03 Each of Athena's stationery sets are packed and sealed with wax by hand.
- 04 Most design is done with pens, pencils and paper, then scanned in and perfected.
- 05 Calligraphy is a huge part of their business.

"I love the space I've created here. It makes me so elated to come into work every day."

letterpress print process. The restriction creates an aesthetic for us, with limited colours and line width variations. It sort of feels like Goldilocks, picking a combination of things not too big, not too small, but just right.

What inspires your designs? I try to think of specific people. I think about what they'd like, what kind of thing they'd appreciate or find funny. What I'd feel comfortable giving to them.

And how do they reflect you? I think many of the designs are a combination of thoughtful, romantic gestures mixed with hilarious and gregarious bright colours. That's probably a good summary of me.

Where do you create your designs in the shop? I have a moderately organised high desk, so I can stand or sit. It's at the back of the shop and printworks, where customers can come and visit. I

letterpress printing **METICULOUS INK** *fine stationery*

For Athena, "It's a true delight to have my tiny yet perfectly formed shop in Bath. I absolutely love being a shopkeeper".



☺ Though the shop is small, it's full of very lovely stationery items, including gift wrap and greeting cards.

☺ "I've got all the essentials on my desk and it's generally an organised mess. This is a tidy day!"

like working in the same space, as the sound of the machines is very calming and wooshy. I have lots of drawing tools to hand, including nibs, inks and various pens and pencils. I also have a few random sentimental items, like a tiny rubber duck, the innards of a dried-out paint pot, and a potato for preparing nibs.

Who's inspired you, both personally and professionally? I'm constantly inspired by my business friends. I feel really lucky to be good friends with Kate Smith of The Makery and Carmen Schmidt of A Yarn Story, both also based in Bath. Their businesses are quite different, and it's always exciting to speak with them about their upcoming projects. It keeps me excited about what's possible and how Meticulous Ink has grown.

How do you want your stationery to make people feel? Luxurious, excited, joyful and special. Like they've received a ticket to Hogwarts.

Do you have a creative space at home? Though I do find myself occasionally taking over the dining table or working in bed, I mostly try to keep work at work. I've learnt it's important for me to have that shut-off, otherwise I'd end up working around the clock. Having hobbies that have nothing to do with the business really helps with that too. I do lindy hop swing dancing and have just taken up jiu-jitsu.

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Is it hard to balance designing with running the business? For me, they go hand in hand. I thrive off the combination of the analytical, data side of the business, alongside the creative outlet of designing. Sometimes I won't draw for a week, and then feel the stress of having to illustrate. There's a moment of mild panic and me thinking I can't draw anymore. I'll then put pencil to paper and all will be well, and I'm relieved the magic comes back.

What creative advice would you have given your younger self? Make with every spare minute you have. Take advantage of free things while you can – lectures, equipment, resources.

Can you share what's coming up for Meticulous Ink? Hopefully lots of Bath-based paper-related workshops and events, depending on how things go over the next few months. Then, on Saturday 24th October we'll be celebrating our 10th birthday with a party at the shop! ☺

Visit www.meticulousink.com to shop their beautiful stationery and other paper goods, and follow them at @meticulousink on Insta for updates of upcoming events and workshops.