Award winning artist Helen Gleeson shares her tips and tricks with bear makers and collectors alike. Learn how to work with mink and the art of scissor sculpting along with how to care for your bear.

When creating a bear from mink or any recycled fur, there are a few things you should know. The same basic bear making skills are required when creating any bear, however a few extra things to know when working with mink will help. Understanding stitch length, turning the leather and of course creating a face with scissor sculpting. All these skills are valuable and can be used with working on dense alpaca or mohair.
You will need to purchase a suitable garment or opt for the safer option and purchase a complete kit. Mink fur kits are full lined, traced and ready for you to cut. When cutting the fur be careful to cut only the backing not the fur pile. Stitch length can be a little longer when working with this medium. Making tiny little stitches perforates the leather and can make the fur prone to tearing. When turning the pieces through take great care. This should not be difficult. Mink (if purchased correctly and lined with a super fine muslin) is very thin and not like other furs such as rabbit that can be a lot thicker. When turning the pieces, take your time and relax. I see so many students in workshops and they tense up and you can see their hands squeezing the piece while they try to push with the other. Relax and hold the piece lightly between your thumb and index finger. Wiggle the piece back and forward gently pushing the toe or hand through to the opening. I like to use the “slit method” where by you sew your limb completely shut, then make a slit where the joint will go. This moves the opening closer to the middle and you will find this makes it a little easier. Also your ladder stitch close will be hidden and not along the back of your arms and legs.

When creating the face, again try to limit the holes in the leather. I like to insert my eyes using a “Button method” where you insert the eyes into buttons that will be left inside the head when closing the neck. This allows for gentle eye sculpting and removes the need to knot off at the back amongst the mink fur. I also like to create my noses using clay baked on a wire shank. Again using the button method only one hole is needed right at the gusset to sink the shank.

Scissor sculpting.-My favourite pastime. I am sure I make bears just to create the face. You will need two tools, curved forceps and craft scissors.
Do not overlook the foundations of bear making. I do not like the term “stuffing” I say stuffing is a product not an action. I like to sculpt my bear with stuffing, not “stuff it” Using the curved forceps gently slide stuffing up along the side of the fabric and put in place in the cheeks. Make sure your creating a strong foundation for your scissor sculpting. While the head should be firm it should not be hard.

I use super shape fine tipped craft scissors. They are not overly expensive you can pick them up for about $5. They will need to be sharp when trimming the face. I do not trim much of the fur off. I prefer to leave it on creating fluffy cheeks. This technique is the same when working with any dense fabric. Start by deciding on your eye placement, using test eyes. I will start at the nose and trim away the fur on the gusset piece. Up towards the eye area. Trim any fur that is sticking up and always trim with the fur not across it or you will create “hack marks” Separate the cheeks by trimming down the septum seam. Then using the eye placement trim down on a slight curve around the back of the cheeks towards the mouth. Using this as a guide for the cheeks take off the guard hairs and make the cheeks round by trimming the tips of the fur.
Caring for your collection.
Mink as with fur garments should be stored in a cool dry place. Do not have your mink cub sitting in the sunny window, as the heat will weaken the leather. Of course do not allow your bear to get wet. If you are making a bear from real fur, store in a little box while sewing it, never in plastic. If the fur is dirty you can take to a specialist drycleaner who can clean the coat before you cut it. Always work with clean hands and your bear will be beautiful for another 100 years.
Visit www.barecubdesigns.com to view the free step by step guide to make your own clay noses. If you would like to learn the other techniques mentioned such as jointing using the “Slit method” inserting eyes using the “button method”, “scissor sculpting” and many more bear making skills, you can join the Bare Designs Club. You will receive 12 bear patterns, 12 step by step photo guides, including the bumper mink issue that includes 150 photos showing every step to make your mink bear fabulous. These guides are a wonderful resource and a “must have” for any bear maker. It’s like having a workshop in your own home. All 12 patterns and guides are available for $80 Aud