



Irish designer Úna Burke uses vegetable-tanned leather to create eye-catching sculptures and accessories that have earned her an army of celebrity fans.

Power play

When singer Taylor Swift asked some of the world's biggest supermodels and actresses to be involved in the music video for *Bad Blood*, the publicity was guaranteed, and with 700 million hits became one of the most viewed on YouTube in 2015. For leathergoods designer Úna Burke, whose designs clad former supermodel Cindy Crawford and actress Ellen Pompeo in the clip, the recognition was invaluable. "I pinch myself when I realise that that many people have seen my work," she admits.

The Irish designer graduated from London College of Fashion in 2009, exhibiting at one of *World Leather's* Beast to Beauty conferences in the early part of her career. Her architectural corsets and body pieces began as concepts and art pieces, but the business has grown to include commercial collections such as bags, jewellery and belts. She has been shortlisted for numerous awards, counts Madonna, Rihanna and Lady Gaga among celebrity fans, and her work was chosen to complement the futuristic attire for Jennifer Lawrence's character in film trilogy *The Hunger Games*.

Do you think it's useful for graduates to attend Beast to Beauty, and similar events?

Yes, it was nice to meet other leather people and discuss contemporary issues, the state of the industry, the positives and negatives. It's good to intermingle, and a good opportunity to meet potential employers.

Going back to the beginning, what made you want to work with leather?

I began working with leather when I was doing my diploma in Ireland in 2001, but I was working with lamb, pig and goat skin, which were all chrome tanned. I really enjoyed working with leather and wanted to know more about it so I did an internship in Chesneau Leathers in Kilkenny, working on the factory floor for nine months making leather handbags. When I went back to my degree and used more leathers I knew more about what I was working with, whereas before I was trying to use them like normal fabrics. I moved from Ireland in 2006 to specialise in working with leather, and accessories design was the most obvious place to

BEAST to Beauty

Striking leatherwork in Úna's collection.
CREDITS: STYLING: ADIA TRISCHLER, LAUREN COOKE
PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREAS WALDSCHUETZ





Úna's collection for her Master's was based on themes of restriction.

CREDITS: STYLING: ÚNA BURKE, PHOTOGRAPHY: REBECCA PARKES

start. I decided to do a master's at London College of Fashion and discovered vegetable tanned leather, and that's what I've used ever since.

What is it about veg tanned that suits your work?

I love that it's a more environmentally friendly product and the handle is another really important thing. I can achieve the sculptural type shapes that I was trying to make from goat and pig skin at an early stage. I wasn't doing the leathers justice by trying to force them to do things didn't want to do, so when I started working with veg tanned leather, it held a form much better, and it ages so beautifully.

Do you work with specific suppliers?

I work with Metropolitan Leather, which supplies English leathers. I also use Italian leathers. I used to go Lineappelle but I haven't been for the last two or three years, because I always end up using the same thing. It's good for sourcing fittings, but I can also source them online. I'd love to go again though, time permitting.

Have you had a couple of big breaks or has it been slow and steady progress?

It's been a hard slog. When I graduated from London College of Fashion it was six months after the recession hit so there was no

hope of finding an accessories design job. I took on a retail job, and in the evenings I would spend my time researching competitions, grants and shows to apply for, and uploading my work on to different websites to get exposure. I started to get amazing publicity from the collections and from exhibitions. I was invited by *Vogue Italia* to be part of a show in Milan Fashion Week and I won an award from the Craft Council of Ireland which allowed me to take up the opportunity. Off the back of Milan I had stylists pick up on my work – I was getting emails from Lady Gaga's stylist asking me for commission for her tour.

At that stage I didn't intend to set up a business, I just intended to get as much exposure as possible and publicity for the work I'd created at university, in order to build up a good CV and get a job eventually. But it didn't happen that way, the recession carried on and one thing led to another. I was invited to take part in London Fashion Week and create a commercial collection, of handbags, belts and jewellery, based on the construction of my graduate work, carrying through the theme and the story. The sales I made meant I was able to leave the retail job.

Did the Hunger Games and Bad Blood tie-ups come about because they'd seen your work at Fashion Week?

Based on publicity and the growing awareness of my brand, I was approached by the Hunger Games and Taylor Swift. Her stylists borrowed several pieces for the music video. It was all hush hush, we didn't even know who would be wearing them until the preview shots came out. The public loved it, it helped sales and to work with these people was great.



Turned necklace and tabbed cuff.

CREDITS: STYLING: KAY KORSH, PHOTOGRAPHY: ELENA PIROGOVA

You have a theme of restriction that runs through the collections; do you change the concept each season?

The themes are very much psychological based, I've an interest in human behaviour so it might be just humorous observations about why people behave in the way they do. One of the collections was about why we need religion, looking at burial rituals. For instance, in Egypt there was a weighing of the heart ceremony so I made a handbag that was the anatomical shape of the heart, rather than the cliché heart shape that we know. There's always tough things in the collection but also very feminine and beautiful, accentuating the form, and the restriction theme is brought through the fashion collections. The first collection was conceptual, about people being trapped within emotional barriers they create ironically to protect themselves. In more recent collections I've made pieces that are corsetry based, so it is about restricting the body somewhat, but in order to make the woman stand tall and push her shoulders back and straighten her spine and therefore have an aura of control and of power. It's about empowering the wearer.

What kind of women wear the designs?

Customers are stores. A lot of boutiques would be interested in the more avant-garde products but we are also hoping to move towards some slightly more mainstream pieces that would sit

comfortably in department stores: bracelets and small pieces. Some pieces will still be in-house produced for the more couture part of the brand while we might move towards having some pieces factory made, so we can offer them at price points that more people can afford.

So you're making everything in London at the moment?

Yes, I just feel at the early stages of a business it's important to retain control as there's so many companies you can work with. If they have control over your delivery deadline they can mess up your relationships with your buyers. And these relationships are so crucial, you work so hard to build them so if you can retain control at the start it helps. Although at certain points you have to hand over and trust people. I went to the Meet the Manufacturer trade fair [in London, June 2015] and that was a good place to meet producers in the UK.

We spoke to a few leathersgoods manufacturers at that event and they said there seems to be a resurgence in demand for Made in England.

Yes, and it means relinquishing some control, but you could still pop in and check up on production and any issues that might arise. At some point we will work with factories outside of the UK as well, but when there are good factories here that produce the goods at a really high quality and you've got the unique selling point of Made in Britain, then that's really important.

Úna is offering the opportunity to train with her directly, learning basic leatherworking skills, through a series of workshops (more information via www.unaburke.com). Upcoming exhibitions include Rome (January 30 to February 1) and Dubai (March), and she is speaking at Dublin-based conference Offset (April 8 to 10) and in Dubai (April 29).



Flat shoulder bag.

CREDIT: ÚNA BURKE / GLINT VISUALS