

# If you can't beat the high street, rethink it

**Lynzi Leroy** founded the Scottish Design Exchange in Leith in 2015, providing a high street presence for artists and craftspeople. With a new store open in Glasgow, she explains the philosophy behind the social enterprise

**This is your second outlet. Why do you think the Scottish Design Exchange (SDX) has been so successful?**

Retail is dying. Our high streets are full of mass produced imports. This is true, not just in the UK but across Europe – in any city you will find the same products. I believe customers are looking for something different – something unique and there's a corresponding drive to support local economies. SDX is doing both. Our model was designed specifically to compete on the high street and to make it easier for customers to buy direct from local artists. In contrast with private galleries, 100 per cent of our sales revenue goes directly to the artists.

**What did you learn in France that you were able to implement in Scotland? Do the French treat their artists and makers differently?**

What I love about France is that, no matter what region

you go to, you find local artists' works on sale. There is certainly more support given to artists to sell their work and it's also made easily accessible for customers to purchase. These are often in little artisan shops located among larger high street brands.

**Is there an artist or maker that you have discovered that you are especially pleased about?**

One of our great success stories is Whisky Frames, which began as a hobby for artist Kirsten Hunter who had made a few picture frames from whisky barrels at her home in Midlothian. It has grown to an annual turnover of over £350,000 and its products are stocked in more than 80 outlets. We can't take credit for all its success, but I remember Kristen coming to us with an idea to try out at our launch store at Ocean Terminal, in Leith. By the end of her first week we had to ask her to come and restock – she was almost

sold out. She became one of our top selling artists very quickly which gave her the confidence to take her products to other distributors. Within a year she was running her new business full-time, employing five staff. That's the beauty of SDX – we give people opportunities to test the market in a busy high street store and support these small businesses to grow and succeed.

**The new space stocks everything from sculpture to wallets. In your experience from the Edinburgh shop, what is likely to sell well?**

We do have a wide range of sales, from clothes to original art work. Many people come to us for gifts and we see ourselves as a product shop – not an art gallery. The majority of sales are gifts or items to decorate the house. We sell a lot of prints and cards and we sell a lot of jewellery as gifts. We know Glasgow will be different from Leith – its

**↑ Lynzi Leroy set up Scottish Design Exchange to help bring the work of artists and craftspeople to the public**

PICTURE: MARK K. JACKSON

people are unique with their own ideas and values so some things that work in Leith may not work in Glasgow and vice versa. I think we'll need to wait and see.

**How does a new artist/maker get involved? What's the process?**

We try to keep our joining process and contract as simple as possible and to give everyone who wants to work with us a chance. Ultimately, it's the customer who decides whether or not the artists' products sell. Our sales staff play a role in promoting our artists but ultimately, it's a business driven by customer demand. We ensure we don't have products that are too similar, and we work to ensure we have a good range of products on display. We also help artists with their pricing. Our contracts are month-to-month, except over the busy Christmas period where we ask our artists to commit from

November to March. What we don't want to do is take money from artists who are not selling and we allow them to leave with a month's notice.

**You are passionate about making art available to the public. What is it that drives you?**

I know we have amazingly talented artists in Scotland but many of them are told they're not good enough and that their work doesn't fit with the gallery 'model'. I want to help artists to make money from their work and not have to get themselves a second job to support their art. If you look around any high street store, most things have been designed by an artist or product designer but only those that become household names get public recognition or an income that they can live on. I wanted to turn the retail model on its head and create a business where the artists and designers get the lion's share of the profit and that brings

them into direct contact with their customers. Artists are not always good at business or marketing and so I wanted to take that headache away to allow them to focus on what they are good at, which is being creative. We treat all our artists as businesses, supporting them as much as we can on marketing and sales.

**What's your favourite art work and how do you stop yourself from buying everything that comes in that you like the look of?**

It's very hard not to buy everything in the shop! If I need something, of course it is the first place I buy from. I have lots of clothes from the fashion designers and I buy lots of gifts for family and friends from the shop. When we go to France at Christmas to visit my husband's family I have a field day in the shop. I have also started a small collection of original artwork for my daughter, Neve, who's

11. She loves coming into the shop and meeting with the artists. Because we don't add commission to the products, it's very affordable. Neve's room has more artwork than the rest of my house and I love the fact that she can have original pieces on her wall from local artists, for not much more than what it would cost to buy a mass-produced print from one of the major retailers.

**Do you have any favourites among your artists and makers?**

Yes, I do but it would be unfair to say who my favourites are.

**Are there any artists or makers in particular that you feel Glasgow customers will go mad for?**

There are some fantastic west coast artists signed up for the new shop in Glasgow and I am sure the local customers are going to be delighted with what they can buy in the store. One artist that is coming

from Edinburgh who I think is a perfect fit for Glasgow's discerning customer is Dodo, her work is just so unique and quirky I think it will do really well.

**What's next for you?**

At the moment, we're concentrating on the store in Glasgow and we know that the run-up to Christmas will be the busiest time of the year. We're then looking at opening our third store in Dundee by the end of next year. We will also be starting our art and design workshops for primary age kids in Edinburgh, before the end of this year and, later in Glasgow. It is so important to nurture the creativity and confidence of the younger generation – this educational element of our business is an important part of our ethos. All in all, these are very exciting times for us at SDX.

● For more see [www.scottishdesignexchange.com](http://www.scottishdesignexchange.com)

## 'It's a compulsive thriller which asks some difficult questions'

Michaela Coel and Hugo Blick talk to Georgia Humphreys about legal drama *Black Earth Rising*

**H**ow much do you know about the prosecution of international war crimes?

If the answer is "very little", you're not alone – it's a topic many of us are unfamiliar with.

Take actress Michaela Coel: before reading the script for *Black Earth Rising*, a new BBC2 thriller which deals with the complicated legal ramifications of the Rwandan genocide, she had no idea about the history the show covers.

"I felt outraged, shocked at my own ignorance," says the 30-year-old, known for writing and starring in E4 sitcom *Chewing Gum*. "When did this happen? I was asking my Mum. 'Why didn't you tell me?'"

Here, Coel, and the drama's creator, Bafta-winner Hugo Blick, tell us more about the explosive six-parter.

**Shaping the story**

Coel plays Kate Ashby, adopted from Rwanda as a child during the genocide, and raised in Britain by Eve Ashby (The Crown's Harriet Walter), a prosecutor in international criminal law.

Now in her 20s, Kate has followed in her mother's footsteps and works as a legal investigator in the law chambers of Michael Ennis (played by Roseanne star John Goodman).

"She's absolutely incredible," Coel says of her character. "I understand that she is not real but she is my hero. Her perseverance, her resilience, her strength, her ability to defy alone is admirable."

The story takes a turn when Eve embarks on a case at the International Criminal Court, prosecuting an African militia leader, and Michael and Kate end up on a journey that will alter their lives forever.

"I found the more I read, the more tangled everything became," Coel says. "It was almost like a rabbit hole that I felt I didn't have the IQ to master."

Welshman Blick, whose previous successes include political thriller *The Honourable Woman*,



↑ Michaela Coel and John Goodman in *Black Earth Rising*

understandably did a lot of research.

"In order to feel authentic and knowledgeable about these things, it took about six months of research through Rwanda and into the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and a number of people whose experiences are, in some ways, shown to influence the story," says the 53-year-old writer. "But they're not personifications."

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**Subject matter**

After completing *The Honourable Woman*, about a baroness trying to forge new ties between Israelis and Palestinians, Blick recognised he was "interested in the reconciliation of trauma".

"So I thought, 'How does that work institutionally?' "Looking at war crimes, that's a pretty big traumatic event and how are we helping to reconcile people to that? And why are we doing it as a Western environment? Should we be doing it? Why are we doing it?"

Issues of justice, guilt and self-determination are touched on across the episodes.

"Our knowledge of modern Africa reminds you that during the genocide it was a period when OJ Simpson was arrested."

"What do we remember? We remember OJ Simpson's arrest, the tragic death of two people, but in fact, at the same time, up to a million people were killed in Rwanda."

**Potential reaction**

Blick hopes that after seeing the drama, people have a better understanding of "our relationship between our institutions, justice and Africa". But he also says it's a "two-way street".

"It doesn't mean that we cannot be critical of African environments," he says.

"This is a story that is built to be a compulsive thriller, and it's asking some difficult questions."

**Personal connection**

Coel's parents were born in Ghana, where filming of *Black Earth Rising* took place.

"It was my first time going home and it was absolutely overwhelming," she says.

Does she see similarities between her and her character?

"Definitely, when we went to Ghana, it's [my character's] first time going back to Rwanda, it was my first time going back to Ghana. Being brought up in the West, I was born here and her only memories begin here."

As for whether she thinks more people will investigate Rwanda's history thanks to the show, she says: "I believe in curiosity. I believe it is something that I was denied growing up, going to a pretty s\*\*\* school."

"Only now have I learnt curiosity. I would love for everybody to have the desire to be curious beyond comfort."

● *Black Earth Rising* starts on BBC2 today, 9pm