

Cinnamon Lee, winner of the 2025 Make Award

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[00:00:03] Cinnamon Lee: Everybody likes a secret.

[00:00:08] Cinnamon Lee: Jewellery is very personal and for me, jewellery has always been about the personal relationship between the object and its wearer or its owner.

[00:00:17] Cinnamon: It's about an intimate memory or a meaning for the wearer.

[00:00:23] Cinnamon: I started using different sorts of gemstones and I started hiding them, partially inside of rings, and some of them were completely hidden.

[00:00:35] Cinnamon: And surprisingly there's a lot of people who are quite happy to trust me to hide them a diamond or a sapphire inside of a ring, even though they'll never see that gem.

[00:00:47] Cinnamon: And I guess that that resonates with me as well. I like to keep to myself a little bit, so I suppose it's a bit of a reflection of my personality as well.

[00:00:58] Lisa Cahill: This is Object, a podcast about design and contemporary craft in Australia from the Australian Design Centre. In this episode, go behind the scenes of Australia's richest award for contemporary craft and design: the Make Award.

[00:01:15] Lisa: Hi, I'm Lisa Cahill, CEO and artistic director of Australian Design Centre. I'm also a judge of the Make Award.

[00:01:25] Lisa: The Make Award, biennial prize for innovation in Australian craft and design, has two prizes totalling \$45,000, and is an initiative by us at the Australian Design Centre. It's all about innovation in making and design.

[00:01:41] Lisa: We want this award and its prize to inspire designer makers to work with materials that are new to their practice or work in new and innovative ways. For 2025, 197 designer makers working in ceramics, glass, furniture, woodwork, metalwork, textiles and fibre, and contemporary jewellery from right across Australia entered their work.

[00:02:07] Lisa: The winner was Cinnamon Lee's Noctua, a handcrafted lamp inspired by the Bogong moth, which is both a light and a piece of jewellery.

[00:02:17] Lisa: In this episode, you'll meet the winner, Cinnamon Lee, and hear from the Make Award judges.

[00:02:23] Lisa: Why did her entry stand out? And what makes a prize-winning work?

[00:02:31] Lisa: You can see Lee's winning work as the episode image in your podcast app or on the Make Award website: makeaward.au. Let's meet Cinnamon Lee.

[00:02:44] Cinnamon: Hi.

[00:02:46] Lisa: It's great to have you here for this interview and I wanted to start by you telling us how you came to be an artist and metalsmith.

[00:02:54] Cinnamon: I was very fortunate to stumble across metalworking at quite a young age.

[00:03:02] Cinnamon: After I finished high school, I didn't really know what I was going to do because I pretty much learned in high school that I was no good at painting, which is what I did

at high school. I did art and I was very lucky that my mum, actually, at the time was working at Enmore Design Centre. She was teaching there and said, 'Why don't you just give that a go?'

[00:03:23] Cinnamon: And I thought, okay.

[00:03:25] Cinnamon: And, 'cause I was always somebody that made a lot of things. I've been making things ever since I can remember.

[00:03:32] Cinnamon: Once I was in that workshop it was like I'd found my calling, which I feel really fortunate about because it happened quite quickly.

[00:03:44] Cinnamon: So I was the youngest student there at the time, 17, and it was just like wonderland for me.

[00:03:50] Cinnamon: I really remember the experience of understanding that I could make anything, being in that workshop.

[00:03:58] Cinnamon: It was super exciting. But it was only two years, so it was only like a taster of all the possibilities I felt. So from there, I realised I needed to do more study and I ended up in Canberra.

[00:04:16] Cinnamon: And then I spent the next decade studying in Canberra, and I eventually also ended up teaching there.

[00:04:21] Lisa: At the Canberra School of Art?

[00:04:22] Cinnamon: At the Canberra School of Art in the Gold and Silversmithing workshop, which was, again, like coming home again. I feel really lucky to have had the experience that I had in that workshop.

[00:04:36] Lisa: With Johannes Kuhn?

[00:04:37] Cinnamon: With Johannes and Ragnar. It completely changed my life, that workshop.

[00:04:42] Lisa: For listeners who are unfamiliar with your work, Cinnamon, what kind of work do you make?

[00:04:47] Cinnamon: So I'm trained as a gold and silversmith, but I mostly make wearable objects and I also make non-wearable objects. So the wearable objects take the form of jewellery.

[00:04:59] Cinnamon: I make a range of jewellery, some of it using very precious materials, mostly, and the non-wearable objects have so far taken the form of lighting objects.

[00:05:12] Lisa: Which brings us to congratulations on being the winner of the Make Award, biennial prize for innovation in Australian craft and design.

[00:05:20] Cinnamon: Thank you.

[00:05:21] Lisa: It's great to acknowledge your decades of practice with this award and how does it feel?

[00:05:28] Cinnamon: It's been very overwhelming, but it feels, obviously, it feels fantastic to have won this award.

[00:05:36] Cinnamon: It feels especially meaningful given that I am now marking the 30th year of being a practising artist.

[00:05:45] Cinnamon: So to have this recognition by the craft and design community is very special.

[00:05:54] Lisa: Many years ago you were also the winner of a student prize that Australian Design Centre, formerly known as Object Design Centre, that you entered?

[00:06:04] Cinnamon: I feel like I've had quite a long relationship with the Australian Design Centre, formally Object, formally the Crafts Council.

[00:06:12] Cinnamon: Because I can say that my very first, the very first time I exhibited work was as a student in 1995 as part of Enmore, and that was at the Crafts Council of New South Wales Space in the Rocks.

[00:06:27] Cinnamon: Winning this award this year has really made me reflect on the past 30 years and how I've got to this point and all the things that have contributed to that, and especially the people that have shaped who I have become.

[00:06:44] Lisa: The work Noctua, that's the winning work for the Make Award. What does Noctua mean?

[00:06:50] Cinnamon: So Noctua is actually the genus name for a cutworm, which is a type of nocturnal moth.

[00:06:59] Cinnamon: The direct Latin translation is Little Owl.

[00:07:02] Lisa: And you mentioned that your object-based works have focused on lighting and Noctua has a lighting element to it. Tell us about the work and what we see in the finalist exhibition.

[00:07:16] Cinnamon: The object is a hybrid object. So when you first look at it, it's a standing lamp.

[00:07:22] Cinnamon: It's quite a slender form made of stainless steel, about a little bit taller than me, just over one and a half metres tall. And it has a cylindrical head, which contains the light source. But this lamp has a few secrets.

[00:07:39] Cinnamon: So, as well as being a lamp, it also contains a wearable brooch. So the wearable brooch sits into the lamp and is able to project a shadow onto the wall or any other surface, depending on where the lamp is situated. So it's a lamp and a sculpture and a piece of jewellery.

[00:08:08] Lisa: And as a piece of jewellery, what's it made from?

[00:08:12] Cinnamon: So the brooch itself is made from titanium and silver. It's made in two layers. And each of those discs – it's circular, about the size of your palm – and each of the discs has been hand-drilled with a lot of holes.

[00:08:30] Cinnamon: I'm pretty sure it's at least 900.

[00:08:34] Cinnamon: So I love my drill press and it's just a crappy old drill press, but wow, it's drilled a lot of holes.

[00:08:41] Cinnamon: They're 1.2 millimetre holes. I think there's actually about 1,000 holes, and twice, because there's two layers.

[00:08:48] Cinnamon: And so that creates a grid of holes, so if light is shone through those holes, it will make a spotlight. Instead of it being a spotlight, I've filled a number of those holes with tiny, tiny sapphires, and those sapphires actually stop the light from passing. So the shadow that is projected onto the wall is created by a whole lot of sapphires that form the silhouette of a moth.

[00:09:18] Lisa: And a special moth too.

[00:09:20] Cinnamon: Yes, yes, it's a Bogong moth.

[00:09:23] Cinnamon: The reason I chose that particular moth for this piece was really because it was a moth that I saw directly in my environment. It was a moth that very quietly appeared around my home.

[00:09:38] Cinnamon: I have done a previous series of similar works for a solo show that I did in 2023 where I made the first iteration of this concept, where I made some brooches that had little flashlights which projected moths onto a wall.

[00:09:56] Cinnamon: And for those works, I really looked at a different sort of nocturnal moth and I looked at Australian sphinx moths or hawk moths. And I have to admit that I was actually attracted to these particular moths because of their size and their beautiful patterned wings, and these moths also had coloured under wings, which were hidden, and so they had, for me, they had little hidden jewels.

[00:10:20] Cinnamon: Anyway, fast forward to making a piece for this award. I ended up choosing the Bogong because it wasn't even as exciting as those hawk moths. It was such a humble, unassuming creature, but it represented something that was more than meets the eye in terms of its importance, because all insects are so important, but it also became an emblem of hidden beauty, which is really important in my work.

[00:10:57] Cinnamon: So on one level there's the gems which are hidden in the brooch, which are not visible immediately. The brooch is hidden in the lamp, which is not necessarily visible immediately either.

[00:11:10] Cinnamon: Those were the main two secrets.

[00:11:13] Cinnamon: And also for me, it's all the secret ways in which the object was made.

[00:11:18] Cinnamon: It may look like I've used machines to create some of the pieces, but over the last little while, my workshop has shrunk considerably. When I say shrunk, I mean the equipment that I have access to has become reduced.

[00:11:32] Cinnamon: So pretty much everything I do is at my bench, but using hand tools. But I say I grew up on machines. I was trained with access to a whole range of machines.

[00:11:45] Cinnamon: This is partly Johannes's fault, which I love, which gave me machine aesthetic. So I used to have a lathe. I no longer have a metal lathe, which means you can turn perfect circles till the cows come home.

[00:12:01] Cinnamon: And so in my mind, when you don't have access to that machinery, you have to rely on your hand skills.

[00:12:07] Cinnamon: So the black cylindrical housing where the brooch fits into, of course, any normal person would just turn all of those components on a machine, but if you don't have one, you have to cut them all by hand with a piercing saw and file them all round.

[00:12:22] Cinnamon: So that was slightly challenging because they all had to fit together and they all had to be perfect circles. So I guess that's one little secret.

[00:12:32] Cinnamon: The brooch – so the little washer that holds the brooch onto the lamp has got magnets inside it, which allow it to fit onto the front of the lamp easily so that you can take the brooch off, put it on, put it back with relative ease.

[00:12:48] Cinnamon: So there's hidden magnets in there.

[00:12:50] Cinnamon: Oh, there's a whole bunch of screws and hand-cut threads that are hidden in there. There's an LED in there with a beautiful sterling silver heat sink that no one would ever know about, because materials are really important as well.

[00:13:06] Cinnamon: One more is that the lamp structure, which is made of solid stainless steel, also conducts the current to the lamp source. So there's no wires.

[00:13:16] Cinnamon: Completely hard-wired. It plugs into mains power. But the frame itself is – are the wires. That whole sort of stand is based on like an electrical circuit with no wires.

[00:13:32] Lisa: I think too often we associate meticulousness with a machine-made work and the handmade, where it has its imperfections, we forgive because they're made by the hand, but you've actually taken this work in particular to another level and hidden the handmade.

[00:13:54] Cinnamon: I think for me that is my own little physical challenge. Like, I like to challenge myself to be able to do that, to make it look like it could have been made by a machine, but it actually wasn't.

[00:14:09] Lisa: Tell us about what's innovative about it.

[00:14:13] Cinnamon: That's one of the reasons why I was so excited to enter this particular exhibition because it is so important, I think, to acknowledge innovation in our discipline or in our area.

[00:14:25] Cinnamon: I did take a little bit of time to listen to the previous podcast with Johannes Kuhn. The reason I'm bringing this up is because he mentioned his professor, Friedrich Becker – he said he didn't allow anything through that wasn't innovative.

[00:14:41] Cinnamon: And I was lucky enough to have Johannes as one of my lecturers at the Canberra School of Art, and I also then went on to work with him because I lectured there with him afterwards.

[00:14:51] Cinnamon: And I think I have also had that passed on to me from him, that idea that you should always, as a craftsperson and a designer, be looking to innovate.

[00:15:04] Cinnamon: And for me, innovation isn't simply trying something new. For me, innovation is – it's a way of thinking and it's about changing your thinking to be able to create and come up with something completely different.

[00:15:22] Cinnamon: And it's about not just being innovative for my own self, but to be innovative in order to provoke other people to think differently as well.

[00:15:33] Cinnamon: For this piece, I have brought together the two sides of my practice to try to create something that I don't think existed before.

[00:15:45] Cinnamon: Which is not only a functional object, although its primary function is not to provide task lighting. It's still a sculptural object, but it works as a light, but it also brings in the precious side of my practice.

[00:16:02] Cinnamon: I've spent the last 10 years working with lots of precious gemstones, lots of sapphires and diamonds and gold, and so I wanted to bring that element into the piece in its own right. So the brooch is completely 100% wearable by itself. It's a piece of jewellery, but it has a secondary life when put into this purpose-built housing that gives that – together makes a new object.

[00:16:30] Lisa: So as one of the judges in the Make Award, I can certainly say that we saw that innovation in your piece. We saw the innovation in thinking, we saw the innovation in functionality of the piece, and we saw that what you were presenting in your entry was something different from what you have been known for as an artist.

[00:16:49] Lisa: As one of the judges – and we're going to hear from some of the other judges – we certainly did see that in your work.

[00:16:55] Brian: I'm Brian Parkes. I'm the CEO of the JamFactory based in Adelaide.

[00:16:59] Brian: I think many of us had been following Cinnamon Lee's practice for decades now, and she is one of the most accomplished makers in the country, but a little bit unsung in many respects. A lot of private commissions she's worked in – lighting design as well as jewellery for most of the last 20 years. And this work combines those two things in a really kind of extraordinary way.

[00:17:23] Brian: It's both a brooch and a lamp. It's kind of a sculpture and theatre. It's pixelated yet analogue.

[00:17:30] Brian: There's so many interesting contrasts that are represented. But if you look at it really closely and inspect all the details, you'll see that every single thing, whether it's the fixings, the finishes – it's all been deeply considered.

[00:17:44] Brian: And that's the sign of an absolute perfectionist maker.

[00:17:49] Brian: This combination of technical proficiency, but poetic sensibility – there's a kind of narrative that informs virtually every decision that's been made, whether it's material or aesthetic.

[00:17:59] Brian: There's also these really interesting things about what's revealed and what's made obvious. And the moth is actually made up of precious stones set in these layers of titanium and silver. We turned the light on and off to look at it in different conditions, and it works beautifully.

[00:18:15] Brian: To see the precious stones sparkle in the off position was a true delight during the judging process.

[00:18:23] Lisa: So I think often with contemporary jewellery, we're putting it away somewhere.

[00:18:27] Lisa: Maybe more often we're putting it on a wall. And your work, you know, enables that natural, beautiful way of displaying a piece of jewellery through a light source, while you're not wearing it.

[00:18:38] Cinnamon: Yes, exactly. And that was definitely part of the thinking was to, because you don't, with a brooch, you don't, you can't always wear it.

[00:18:45] Cinnamon: It's not like a wedding ring where you never take it off. It needs a house, it needs somewhere to live. So rather than putting it in a drawer or a box, or even just on a plinth, turning it into, well, allowing it to have another life was part of the thinking.

[00:19:03] Lisa: I wanted to ask you also about the colours in the brooch.

[00:19:07] Lisa: Because when you see the brooch as a light, you don't see colour, you just see the light projected onto a white or black or whatever wall. And it's that monotone, but is the brooch colourful in itself?

[00:19:20] Cinnamon: Yes. The sapphires in the brooch are a range of colours.

[00:19:25] Cinnamon: They're a strange mix of colours. And one of the other parts about making this piece was that I had to use what I had in my studio, and I had this parcel of sapphires.

[00:19:37] Cinnamon: I hadn't found a home for them.

[00:19:38] Cinnamon: They were kind of a peridot green and grading to dusty pink, a dark, dusty pink, and it's quite a strange palette to work with.

[00:19:52] Cinnamon: Everyone thinks that they would shine colours onto the wall, but the way that they're cut, they're brilliant-cut sapphires.

[00:19:59] Cinnamon: So the way that they're cut is in order to refract light back out. When you have a gem in a piece of jewellery, you want the light – you don't want it to suck the light. You want it to reflect it back out. But if you then try to shine light through that, it will stop the light. So that's why you don't get colour on the wall, but having the colour in the brooch –

[00:20:21] Cinnamon: I've also set them, or – I put 'set' in inverted commas because it's not a proper setting technique, but none of the way that I set stones is ever conventional. But I intentionally set them so that the crown of the gems, which is the bit that you normally would look into, faces inwards.

[00:20:43] Cinnamon: So from the inside of the brooch is the only time you will see the colours. From the outside of the brooch, you only see the culet, which are the points of the stones, which means you barely see the gems.

[00:20:59] Cinnamon: They just form like a very subtle sparkle. And again, this sort of feeds into my whole concept of more than meets the eye, things being hidden.

[00:21:14] Cinnamon: It was intentional that when you wore the brooch, you could barely tell what was hidden in there, but if you were the one wearing the brooch, taking it off and looking at the back, you would actually see the colours.

[00:21:26] Cinnamon: In my research I did also come across a published story, an Indigenous story, about the Bogong moth.

[00:21:32] Cinnamon: It tells the tale of the Bogong moth actually travelling to the snowy mountains to investigate what the white snow was. And she becomes stuck there and has to wait until the snow melts.

[00:21:46] Cinnamon: She had to stay there until the sun came and melted the snow, and all the colours melted off her wings. And that's how you get the beautiful, colourful flowers that grow on the mountain.

[00:21:57] Cinnamon: So I felt there was also a little nod to the possibility that the Bogong has got hidden colours in its wing somewhere. We just can't see them.

[00:22:09]

[00:22:12] Simone LeAmon: My name is Simone LeAmon, and I am the inaugural curator of Contemporary Design and Architecture at the National Gallery of Victoria.

Cinnamon Lee's work, Noctua, is extraordinary. It merges utility with poetry. It's a brooch, it's a lamp, it's a projector, but it is absolutely exquisitely realised in what I see as a product design.

[00:22:31] Simone LeAmon: It's exacting in its intentionality because it is so amazingly made. I absolutely love the intimacy of the product through the brooch.

[00:22:44] Simone LeAmon: So when we see a brooch, but in the lens of the light, that then projects the silhouette of the Bogong moth.

[00:22:54] Simone LeAmon: It has a vital role in our ecology, and it's heartbreaking to know that the numbers are so low that it is endangered. So I love the fact that this contemporary exquisite lamp, which is also kind of redefining jewellery in a sense, is also sharing a story, a very prescient story about an animal species which is so dear to us here in Australia.

[00:23:22] Simone LeAmon: It works on that design level. The poetry's embedded.

[00:23:27] Simone LeAmon: However, using design as a device for cultural storytelling is something that I see many designer practitioners doing today. And I love the fact that Cinnamon Lee, practitioner of nearly three decades, of course, absolute master of her craft, but producing utterly contemporary work.

[00:23:49] Lisa: What was the biggest technical challenge in making the work?

[00:23:53] Cinnamon: The biggest technical challenge was, well, there wasn't one, because the way I think, the way I work, is just one challenge after the other.

[00:24:02] Cinnamon: It's like a mini marathon. You just are presented with one particular challenge. You solve it, and that leads to the next one and the next one and the next one. So it's just a continuous challenge.

[00:24:19] Lisa: When do you know when you're finished? When it works?

[00:24:22] Cinnamon: Mm-hmm. When it's standing there and everything works. And you stop – yeah. When it's done, it's when it's done. And then you have to make the crate for it to go in.

[00:24:34] Lisa: And your crate, I have to say, was brilliant.

[00:24:36] Cinnamon: That was the biggest challenge, but I –

[00:24:37] Lisa: It is brilliant.

[00:24:38] Cinnamon: But I have to thank my dad for that. He helped me with that.

[00:24:43] Lisa: Cinnamon, I wanted to ask you about awards like the Make Award and other awards that you've had through your career. How important do you think awards are for an artist's career?

[00:24:56] Cinnamon: I think they can be very important. I don't think that they should be the be-all and end-all of an artist's pursuits.

[00:25:08] Cinnamon: But of course they can definitely have a big impact on whether or not you are able to, for instance, if it's a monetary award, that can really have an impact on helping you develop new work or go somewhere that perhaps you couldn't travel to, or, you know, it can definitely have an impact on changing your practice or developing your practice.

[00:25:34] Cinnamon: In addition to that, I think the recognition also can lead to bigger and better things. It's a personal recognition, I think, any time you get an award, but it also leads to opportunities.

[00:25:49] Simone Leamon: What I find really affirming with the 2025 iteration of the award is that across the materials and the disciplines, the award reminds us that the finalists are experimenting, they're pushing their skills. However, they're deploying their imagination. And of course, that's the magic trifecta when it comes to any designer.

[00:26:11] Simone Leamon: It's demonstrating skill. However, it's also about experimentation, but importantly it's the deployment of imagination, because we know that design is the intention to deliver something into the world that does not yet exist.

[00:26:28] Simone Leamon: We cannot take for granted the role of awards such as the Make Awards. They play an absolutely critical role in our design ecology.

[00:26:45] Simone Leamon: In not only fostering practice, but providing opportunity to platform excellence in design and make production on a national and international level. And I have to commend the Australian Design Centre for initiating and delivering – making the Make Awards happen. Because I know from working behind the scenes that these awards don't happen without a lot of advocacy work.

[00:27:17] Brian: I feel very lucky to have been a judge for both the inaugural and this subsequent Make Award. It really is such an important award in our sector and really have to congratulate the ADC for kind of staying the course. We are looking forward to showing the exhibition of finalist works at JamFactory later in the year.

[00:27:36] Brian: The Make Award is just another great example of the kind of work that the ADC does and the importance that it has in the national sector. It's provided a platform for so many artists, designers, makers over more than 60 years.

[00:27:52] Brian: Promoting talent at the earlier stages right through to celebrating our living treasures through that extraordinary series that they continue to run.

[00:28:02] Lisa: So Cinnamon, how can I commission a piece of jewellery from you? Do you have a representing gallery or –

[00:28:07] Cinnamon: I do. I'm represented by Courtesy of the Artist in Sydney, in the Strand Arcade, and also e.g.etal in Melbourne. So people can get in contact with Courtesy of the Artist or e.g.etal to commission work from me.

[00:28:22] Cinnamon: Certainly can. Yeah. And they both stock my work. So you can also see examples of my work at both those galleries.

[00:28:30] Lisa: Wonderful. Thank you. So congratulations once again on winning the \$35,000 first prize in the Make Award, biennial prize for innovation in contemporary craft and design. And thanks for the time today.

[00:28:43] Cinnamon: Oh, thank you for having me. Thank you for the award again, and thank you for having me to speak.

[00:28:49] Lisa: That's artist Cinnamon Lee. You can see Cinnamon's work on our website along with all 36 finalists in the Make Award. Go to makeaward.au. If you enjoyed this conversation, please tell your friends and colleagues about the episode or let us know on Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn.

[00:29:09] Lisa: Thanks for listening.

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