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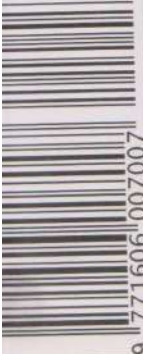
GOOD TASTE

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GOOD TASTE

BEST FABRICS



BY HILARY PRENDINI TOFFOLI

PHOTOGRAPHY C&D HEIERLI

"It's been a treacherous year," says Shine Shine's Tracy Rushmere, "but we're keeping a sense of humour. We'd be a lot further if we hadn't had so many industry hiccups. Still, we're surviving and keeping it local."

With a worldwide cotton shortage, and more and more local mills that supply the base cloth going out

of business, it has become increasingly difficult for the designers and producers of fabric ranges to operate sustainable businesses. Especially small artisanal outfits like those of the five women who make up the loosely-knit Cape Town group called the **THREADCOUNT COLLECTIVE**.

They held their first crisis meeting shortly after the Collective came into being about two years ago. Under discussion was the closure of yet another textile mill hit by competition

from the East. More shutdowns were on the cards.

Fortunately, one of the strengths of the group is the fact that the designs they produce are as dissimilar as the markets they target, which means they're not intrinsically competitive. In a crisis, they are happy to pool ideas and share advice, knowledge and experience—in this case their contacts at textile mills. Along with suggesting new fabric sources, they even share meterage. For these resourceful women who've

Read how five independent fabric designers, who make up the Threadcount Collective, are succeeding in an embattled industry

The Obama cushions of Tracy Rushmere of Shine Shine are in the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo



all bumped their heads in a tricky industry it's a generous collaboration.

"Sometimes you need a certain weave and can't get it because you're too small. That's when a group effort like this works," says Tracy, a vivacious blond dynamo originally from Port Elizabeth, with a degree in politics and economics but no training in the visual arts. Yet it hasn't prevented her achieving success with **SHINE SHINE**, both locally and abroad. Her Obama cushions are in the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo, and she sells her vibrant Africa-inspired prints to a wide range of overseas outlets such as the Carrol Boyes shop in New York and Galerie Sentou in Paris.

Along with the vivid colours and sheer pop art sassiness of the prints, it's their sense of fun that appeals to people. Tracy and her equally off-the-wall illustrator, Heidi Chisholm, are inspired by the everyday visual life of the continent. Handmade signage, street pamphlets and street fashion, tribal decoration, coffins, movie posters. They add their own wacky vibe.

"This is 'Look At Me' stuff, so my colours need to be punchy," says Tracy. "I work only with cotton because it absorbs the ink and you get saturated colours."

The Shine Shine showroom is in an old Bo-Kaap house not far from where Tracy has lived for 16 years with her husband, Peter Maltbie, an American photographer she met while working at a folk art gallery in Boston.

The founder of the Collective, and the creative brain behind the **SKINNY**



Heather Moore's Skinny laMinx ranges are stocked in design boutiques all over the world

BEAUTIFUL MUTES

LAMINX fabric range, is Heather Moore. With a master's degree in education, she had no training in textiles or design either, but she had a gift for drawing and had a successful career illustrating schoolbooks and textbooks before she decided to go into fabric design.

"My husband is an artist, and when I was starting out and showing him things, he said, 'You have good instincts. Often your best is the first thing you draw.' That made me trust myself.

"For me the development of Skinny laMinx was a series of escalating decisions with no business plan. I've learned things as I go, flying by the seat of my pants."

She prints her simple Scandinavian-

looking fabrics in beautiful muted colours and sells them for furnishings and as readymade home accessories. She's stocked by a selection of small design boutiques both here and overseas, from San Francisco and Stockholm to Singapore and Sydney. Mega design blog Design*Sponge (www.designspongeonline.com) recently named her one of the world's top 20 fabric resources. Her *I Wish We Had IKEA* tea towel was exhibited at a museum in Hamburg on an IKEA exhibition.

The Internet has been her biggest marketing tool. "I blog about my work daily, sell online, and often have my things featured on other design blogs. Word about my work has travelled, winning Skinny laMinx fans and

COLOURS

customers all over the world. I recently had my first Romanian customer on the same day as someone from Alaska and someone from Hong Kong." Her online products are priced in dollars, and 99% of her customers are overseas. With PostNet, she's never had delivery problems.

It was this worldwide online encouragement that inspired her to found the Collective. "I'd had such a generous overseas response, I decided to contact my local colleagues. Their enthusiasm has been fantastic."

On another stretch of more indigenous turf altogether is the fabric range created by **FABRICNATION'S** Jane Solomon and Jann Cheifetz. As art students inspired by the African textile tradition, they began screen-printing



Jane Solomon's Fabrication range won recognition at the Spier Awards last year



AFRICAN IMAGERY IN LINEN

fabric in a garage. This turned into a partnership in which they created innovative prints that expressed the emerging post-apartheid aesthetic. It hit the spot with Cape Town's creative community.

In 2007, 13 years after that partnership ended, the two women got together again and launched Fabrication. "We wanted to bring fresh visual perspectives to the textile marketplace," says Jane, who studied graphic design at the University of Cape Town and did a course in textile design and screen-printing at the Ruth Prowse Art School.

Gentle humour prevails throughout Fabrication's designs, which combine

African imagery and traditional European patterns and are printed on natural fibres such as linen and hopsack. *Bokkie* is an Art Deco interpretation of the South African Railways springbok. *African Royale* is an African take on damask. *Toile du Jozi* depicts an African city in the style of a Toile du Jouy fabric. *Number 1* is a mix of South African household packaging imagery. *Aloes and Lace* playfully evokes frontier traditions.

Jane's work has been exhibited all over the world, including last year's Spier Contemporary Art Awards. She's also a skills trainer, inspiring people to use creativity not only to generate income and empower themselves but

also as a support tool for those living with HIV. She lives in Woodstock and has her workshop and showroom there. Jann Cheifetz is based in New York, where she has the Lucky Fish clothing label.

The Collective's most mainstream designer is Melissa Kerkhoff, another Ruth Prowse Art School textile design graduate. She worked in the decorating industry with top fabric houses like Mavromac before getting a loan from her brother and launching the fabric range she'd always dreamed of. Initially she sold at markets, and now has overseas agents selling her LULA fabrics.

The scale of her production is not small. She did 65 fabrics for Lula's



Melissa Kerkhoff did 65 Lula fabrics for her African Mischief collection for the World Cup

A RAW HAND-BLOCKED FEEL

African Mischief collection for the World Cup, and customises designs for hotels such as the Mount Nelson, and Eden Island and Denis Island in the Seychelles. Yet all her fabrics have an attractive raw hand-blocked feel which, along with the indigenous feel of the designs as well as the natural fibres they're printed on, puts them in the league of artisanal products.

Her colours are a sophisticated palette of bright pinks, chartreuses, aquas and scarlets as well as muted naturals like charcoal, biscuit, silver, and white printed on white.

"I like bright. I like romantic. I like fun," says Kerkhoff, a single mother who lives in Tamboerskloof. "I don't

do shining. I don't subscribe to the sisters Polly and Esther. The key is that I do what I like. I don't do what I think the industry wants. As Pierre Frey once told us on a seminar here, 'We don't design for trend. We design what we like and find someone who can do it.'"

The greenest designer in the Collective is **TWINE'S** Cara Rosa. She prints only on organic base fabrics and her designs are inspired by her surroundings. Florals, seedpods, scallops and stripes, simple but fresh in coolly contemporary muted tones. She turns her fabrics into home accessories like picnic blankets, aprons, quilts and table napkins, all of which have a clean very 'now' feel that strikes an

immediate chord.

A self-confessed computer nerd who'd studied web design and 3D animation, Rosa was "tired of little dark rooms and plastic factory life" when she launched Twine over dinner with her friend Chloe Townsend, who makes leather bags under the iconic Missibaba label. Initially the idea was simply to create bag linings. Three years on, Twine is testing the water with agents in Britain and Australia and has supplied Melissa's Food Shop with goods produced in her tiny studio at The Palms in Woodstock. **GT**

For more information visit www.threadcount.co.za.