

“ Making lights out of these beautiful seamless textures seemed

jenny pinto

Jenny Pinto has come full circle — from being ad copywriter in a consumer-driven world to making hand-made paper (and awesome lamps) from natural fibres, conserving heritage and helping rural artisans. **Madhuri Velegar K** meets the Bangalore-based designer

“S he’s gone to Hampi,” you tell the photographer who calls to ask about shooting Jenny Pinto, the petite designer of paper lights. “Aha, must have gone to check on her banana plantations because she’s probably run out of banana fibre!” he jokes.

Jenny makes a fascinating range of translucent and textured paper from agricultural and craft waste fibres like banana, sisal, mulberry, various river grasses, and pineapple, and then designs an attractive range of wall and table lights, home accessories and stationery from it.

THE AD BUG

You finally find Jenny in her brick and stone studio, located amidst a jungle of concrete, with two cats, Tapur and Tupur — their names are a giveaway. The twin models still walk the Mumbai catwalk that Jenny quit.

“I was firmly entrenched in the world of advertising commercials in the ’80s, working with Shilpi advertising as a copywriter.” She pours out some coffee from a ceramic kettle, and

recounts how she got into it. “It was one of those days when there was a shoot being done for us by the flamboyant Prahlad Kakkar. I wanted to go, and I remember my boss telling me that if I wanted to go, I would have to take leave. I did, and landed up at Aarey Milk Colony, Goregaon, the favourite location of more than a hundred ad shoots. And let me tell you, it was love at first sight. I watched a fiercely committed and colourful filmmaker creating a film, and I wanted to be a part of it. I just sat there, soaking in every little bit of sound and movement that was happening around me.”

It was definitely her first Eureka moment. “Three days later, I went to Prahlad’s office and told him I wanted to work for him. Prahlad, being Prahlad, dissuaded me, saying it wasn’t my cup of tea, he couldn’t pay me any money, I wouldn’t like it

and so on. So I said fine, don’t pay me, just hire me.” This was exactly what Prahlad wanted: Someone with commitment, damn the money. “You won’t find this quality — not wanting money — today among youngsters though,” remarks Jenny, who went about loving every ad film that she worked on — selling instant noodles and chocolates to frozen desserts with jingles and special effects that kept her awake till 1.00 am very often. “Prahlad still tells everyone I was his best assistant... When it was time for me to move on, I set up my own production house called Think Big. I was 24.” There was plenty of work available — sponsored television had happened — and Jenny was shooting ad films 24x7.

THE TURNING POINT

It was probably during this time or a little after that Jenny married. “It didn’t

last very long though,” she says quickly, “and I walked out with my daughter Diya, quite shaken and hurt. The stigma attached to a woman who has separated still exists in our social mindset. I found that even my own younger siblings were not very accepting of my separated status, but I had to be true to myself, and what I believed in.”

Jenny continued to work late nights, sit through all-night post production and be home to give her three-year-old breakfast and send her to play school. “When you’re doing well, it’s physically hard not to take that call, not to send your quotation, and not to get started on yet another project — I did more than 250 or 300 ad films round-the-clock during that time. But it was getting to me.”

It was the early ’90s and Jenny says, “Maybe I was growing older, I was a mother. I began doubting the value system that I was

the most natural thing to do ”

promoting, I was telling Diya that chocolates were bad for health, but at work, I was promoting these very brands. I was in the business of creating needs where none existed. There are many who can separate their work from their personal lives, but somehow I couldn't do it."

Late 1992, the Mumbai bomb blasts happened. "I suddenly realised that Mumbai was a pressure cooker, waiting to burst; there was little space for anything. I wanted my child to grow up in a large, open space, like J Krishnamurti's Rishi Valley School. I thought of moving out of Mumbai... I found Valley School in Bangalore which was the perfect place for Diya."

In retrospect, she believes her move happened at the right time and the right place. It was her second momentous decision.

THE WORLD OF PAPER

"I had made enough money to last me for some time. Many can't say when enough is enough when it



comes to money, but I did. And just doing that freed me to explore something new and expand my horizons. So I went out and bought myself a pottery wheel, and sat around waiting on what was a long waiting list — to learn pottery and ceramics from the famed Ray Meeker of the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry. I was also constantly on the Net, searching for options on creative things that I could do, and I chanced upon paper. It was fantastic, yet another Eureka moment. I realised no one in India was doing anything creative or artistic with paper, there was just commercial stuff (and you got readymade arty paper from the paper manufacturing industry). Once I cracked the code of how to make handmade paper — which took a gruelling two years — making lights out of these beautiful seamless textures seemed the most natural thing to do!”

SELF-TAUGHT

Jenny found a designer named Helen Heibert in Portland, USA, via the Net, who used natural fibres to make paper lights. She went to the US for two months, stayed with Helen,

and learned whatever she could, “which wasn’t much,” she avers, “because in the US, they get all the basic equipment — from tools to raw paper pulp — from papermaking stores!”

Back home, Jenny started from scratch. “I had to order a paper making pulp machine, which was one-fifth the size of the original, find natural agricultural waste, like banana and sisal fibres, learn how to process them to create paper. But when I created that first sliver — a thin sheet of translucent paper — and wrapped it, sculpture-like, around a lit bulb, I had a rush of adrenalin.”

Jenny enjoys exploring various natural fibres. The interplay of light and paper, making paper three-dimensional through texturing, sculpting or layering... “is like play,” for her. “I have a lot of fun when I make my lights, and I think that comes across in my work.”

SCULPTURAL PIECES OF ART

Four years later, Jenny’s paper lights are to be found in contemporary homes all over India, including designer Ritu Kumar’s. Her lamps are also retailed at Fabindia, and at Amethyst



in Chennai, and at Bungalow 8 in Mumbai. They can be found in restaurants like Pizza Hut, Take 5 and fashion store Grasshopper in Bangalore, plus the Park Hotel in Visakhapatnam. Today, she doesn’t make all the lights herself; a team helps translate her designs from prototypes she has made. “I only work on new designs, and with architects who’d like to design a space with paper.”

Despite the uniqueness of her product, she gets comments like “Oh, it’s only paper after all. It’s not

fire-resistant, and how durable can it be?” But there are others who recognise that they are design elements, and are willing to pay upto Rs 20,000 a piece.

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

The creative element apart, there is a developmental aspect too to what Jenny does. It was during her search for raw materials that she contacted a few NGOs, mainly in the rural areas of South India, which were involved with rural women’s issues, income-

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BELIEVE

LOCATION: BASIC INTERIORS



cause of women's empowerment and that's what I'm seriously involved in right now," says Jenny. There are three projects she has lent her expertise to. In Kanakapura, Bangalore, after conducting a paper-making workshop at an NGO, Beluku, Kirana was born. Women have learned to make paper from household waste paper and agricultural waste fibres and produce an interesting range of embossed paper bags, cards and gift bags which have a small, but loyal, customer base in the

it involves community empowerment. One of its projects is a large workshop and paper unit where women make bags, mats, tableware and bins with the beautiful natural fibres and grasses found in Hampi.

"My advertising and marketing background come in handy as I'm in the process of trying to find new domestic markets for these handmade products," says Jenny. "Everyone seems to be going crazy over home products, made from natural fibres from China and Thailand, but they don't know you get such beautiful stuff in Hampi!"

AT HOME WITH DESIGN

Jenny has come full circle. She now wants to explore design in its entirety, how it pervades life and can still serve practical purposes; how, for instance, Shama's range of products fits in with saving heritage. "The women put their heart into what they're making with their hands, and how I can look at a holistic solution to design all aspects of the project, beyond just the product or accessory."

She is full of ideas all the time. Sandwiching paper between two sheets of glass, weaving paper on a loom — which won the Elle EDIDA (Elle Décor International Designer Award) — using paper for home accessories, creating paper wall panels, framing paper or wrapping it with thread. "But I am looking at using design on a broader canvas," she reveals, "like in cinema." ■

“ I had always planned to give part of my resources and time as a paper-maker to the cause of women's empowerment and that's what I'm seriously involved in right now ”



generating schemes and fibre-craft. Paper-making seemed a logical extension of what they were doing, since there was so much waste fibre generated from their mat, bag or basket-making enterprises. "I had always planned to give part of my resources and time as a paper-maker to the

US, the UK and Australia.

The second project is based out of Ahmedabad, called Kasai ki Chhali, where Muslim girls, affected by the riots in Gujarat, are taught to make paper and paper products. Despite "many hurdles", the initiative is still alive, and the group leader, Sulekha, just completed a three-month training stint at Jenny's studio in Bangalore, and is back in Ahmedabad, hoping to set up a community craft centre. The third — and her favourite — is the project for Shama Pawar of the Kishkindha Trust at Anegundi, Hampi. Jenny travels to Hampi often to work on this heritage conservation project since