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Ronel Jordaan

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textiles

I fell in love with the medium, the way you could coax fine threads of wool into robust felted forms,' says Ronel. She'd been a textile designer for 26 years when she did an art therapy course which included a project in felt. She'd found her direction – at the age of 50 – so she

trained a handful of women to help her and started a small home industry in 2004. 'My motivation was to create employment for women with limited skills,' she says.

Today, Ronel's work force ranges between 17 and 60. 'I've spent many hours training the women and they are of utmost importance to me. Their happiness gives us the competitive edge.'

Their input is also very important, says Ronel: 'Two heads think better than one and they would get very bored if they could not add to the end product.' However, she has very strictly controlled systems for designs – 'quality is non-negotiable'.

Ronel's product range is inspired by nature and is continually expanding. It includes accessories (scarves, shawls and wraps) and household objets (porcupine, dreadlock, floral and seedpod cushions; carpets; lamps; and throws).

But her remarkably realistic rock cushions are her signature design. They're also her most popular product,

much loved by designers – and no wonder. It's in the smoothness of their lines, as if they've been eroded over aeons by rushing water. It's in the tonal variations, as if they're limestone threaded with seams of quartz. They're a composite piece of dyed wool, felted by hand.

'I enjoy doing both functional pieces and more abstract work – there are challenges in both and I love to be challenged. The design process is a constant evolution – I work on new design concepts all the time. Not all go to market. I've learned to trust my instinct, and that I have to constantly reinvent how I design and what I design. I keep the inspiration flowing by looking at the trends and the needs of our clients, and working from there.' At the same time, though, she says, 'It would be fatal for me as a business owner to design in the hope of selling!'

But selling hasn't been a problem. The originality of her designs meant that they found an immediate market.

Her label is eco-friendly: waste grey water is recycled; soap, a crucial part of the felting process, is biodegradable; dyes are lead free; and the wool, which is locally sourced, isn't carbonised (chemical washing that strips the wool, rendering it itchy to the touch). And Ronel feels that this has absolutely given her the competitive edge – consumers increasingly seek out products that do no harm, environmentally and socially.

The kudos came thick and fast: she received a Canadian interior design award for excellence from Le Salon International de Design de Montréal, in 2006; *VISI* magazine selected her as one of their top 10 best designers in 2007, at Design Indaba her designs were among South Africa's Most Beautiful Objects for three consecutive years.

Ronel's proudly South African label is found in Canada, the US, UK, France, Germany, Netherlands and Italy.

The success of her business is 'a by-product of hard work and commitment,' she says, 'and it needs to be maintained by hard work and commitment'. ❖

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANEL VAN DER MERWE, JO SPIES. ????????????