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Q&A

FIRING UP

Pilingpalang starts with a bang

BY HART HUGUET HAGERTY



Bing Bing Deng and Judy Kim in Pilingpalang's showroom

One-year-old contemporary Chinese design brand Pilingpalang is already stocked in boutiques and hotels from here to far-flung Lima picking up the prestigious Elle Decor International Design Award along the way. We caught up with the left and right brains behind the burgeoning brand, Korean businesswoman Judy Kim and Chinese artist Bing Bing Deng to talk cultural differences in design and the changing notions of 'made in China.'



How did Pilingpalang come about?

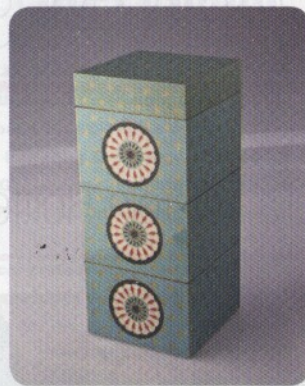
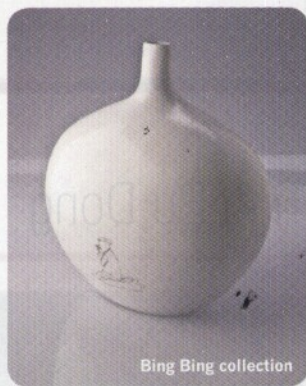
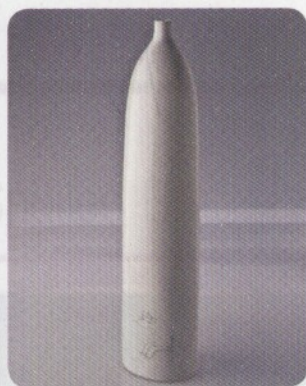
Judy: In 2008 I quit working to slow down and take care of my kids. That year I met Bing. I was so intrigued, because he's very down to earth and yet very creative. And he's Chinese but he's not really Chinese, so we clicked that way socially. In September 2009, Bing and I went to our mutual friend's surprise birthday party for his wife in Paris. While there, we went to the Maison & Objet design fair and were amazed by the range of quality products that looked like they were made in Italy but were manufactured in China. It was shocking. Normally in China we don't see design. We see quality, but only in traditional art forms.

Bing said to me, 'We could do something like that.' So straight after we went to the Canton Fair to go fishing for factories. That's how it all started.

Bing: Looking at a lot of different products, we decided that, whatever we do, we wanted to concentrate on very traditional Chinese skills. We were thinking about doing glass at that time, even fabrics.

So why ceramics, lacquer and cloisonne?

Judy: Bing's graphic design is all about being very contemporary, very bold. When we looked at where we could apply his style, lacquer and cloisonne were immediate



What we are really trying to do here is make art in a usable, daily way. Art is not only meant to be hung on a wall or put on a pedestal.

target of drawing ten figures a day. I drew thousands.

Judy: He's too shy to mention it but we have the Bing Bing collection [see photo]. These drawings were done by Bing when he was nine years old and his dad has kept all his sketches. Some of my favorites are a man picking his nose and his classmate sleeping.

Practice paid off. You worked as a graphic designer in the 90s in Australia. How did your art change while abroad?

Bing: In Australia I realized

that people's fundamental understanding of design is very different. Western design focuses on a good concept. It's not necessary to have the perfect skill; rather, the artist's idea has to be presented nicely. Chinese are more focused on technique. So if you have an idea, that's fine, but your skill has to be perfect to make that idea look nice.

Do you marry the Chinese emphasis on technique with the Western emphasis on concepts?

Bing: Yes of course. I have to

say my traditional Chinese art training – where I did everything in a sketchbook – has really helped me. When I worked for foreign design companies, I realized that creating graphic design on a very high-tech computer just limited my creativity. So I am grateful for my traditional training. But I learned a lot from Australia on how to create. I really combined both cultures together.

You're already winning awards and enjoying commercial success. What's Pilingpalang's ultimate mission?

Judy: What we are really trying to do here is make art in a usable, daily way. Art is not only meant to be hung on a wall or put on a pedestal. We'd like to think that the reason we're doing this is because it is noble.

// Visit www.pilingpalang.com for detailed company information. Pilingpalang products can be bought in Shanghai at Zen Life Store. 118 Xingye Lu, by Madang Lu 兴业路118号 近马当路 (5382 2070, www.zenlifestore.cn)

givens. None of the subtle pastel motifs of traditional Chinese ceramics suited Bing. There weren't very many contemporary Chinese ceramic designs, so we thought we could fill a niche market. Bing also tweaks traditional Chinese shapes, exaggerating them into something very different. We take what already exists in traditional Chinese art and apply the design factor to create a new form of art.

Are any buyers skeptical of Pilingpalang's 'made in China' label?

Judy: I don't think anyone has questioned us on whether if we made this elsewhere, it would be better. The big question now is about rising costs. The cost of labor is going up very fast. From our first order to the most recent fifth order, there's probably a 30 percent increase. The reason we started our brand was for it to be both made and designed in China. I hate to think that we might have to outsource it to Cambodia. Everybody keeps telling us, 'If you just did it in Vietnam...' But for now we're still holding on to producing it in China.

Bing, you're the right brain of this operation. Where did you get your start in art?

Bing: My artist father always wanted me to be an artist, so he designed a training course for me. He believed that if I only traced things, it would restrict me. So he always sent me out to just draw anything from outside – a human, a dog, a bike or a moving bus. I used to hate it. I would go out to play and come back empty-handed. So he gave me this



What is the meaning of Pilingpalang? Email your answer to win@urbanatomy.com with the subject "piling" to win this plate from PILINGPALANG's Shanghai 1930's collection!