

Interiors

Lockdown was the perfect time to launch our homeware brands

With everyone stuck at home scrolling through Instagram and Etsy, four young designers spied a captive audience and decided to go all in. By Olivia Lidbury

Amid the depressing statistics around unemployment rates and the contraction of the economy post-Covid there is a ray of positivity: the Centre for Entrepreneurs reports that 50 per cent more businesses were registered in June 2020 than in July 2019. The more aesthetically focused ones may have already infiltrated your Instagram algorithm, perhaps via a

funky candle here or a pretty cushion there.

Now is arguably the moment to be a fledgling interiors brand, as spending whatever disposable income we have on beautifying our homes seems much more logical than adding clothes to wardrobes that no one else in real life will see us wearing.

For those who spent the first lock-

Now is the moment to be an interiors brand

down spinning previously unthinkable plates such as teaching algebra while logging in to virtual meetings, then this article isn't meant to make you feel like you should have been achieving more. But for those who needed to carve out a living or fill their otherwise empty days, it's inspiring to discover what creative minds can achieve during the strangest of times.

'I'M HAVING THE TIME OF MY LIFE'

Drawing on her roots, footwear designer Léa Zana, 36, created tableware brand Vaisselle Boutique from her London home, via Spain

Originally from the south of France, footwear designer Léa Zana arrived in England eight years ago via jobs in Paris and Spain. When she was made redundant from Asos in December 2019 it wasn't the end of the world – she had secured a new role and had a three-month sabbatical planned for in-between. But along came the pandemic and she found herself without any future job prospects at all. “From March to May I had literally no idea what I was going to do... but then I thought, let's give tableware a go.” Zana had inherited an affection for crockery and ceramics from her grandmother, who took her to endless *brocantes* (second-hand shops) as a child. Using her Spanish, she sourced a supplier in Spain to bring her designs to life and when lockdown was lifted she spent a month there developing prototypes. Although tableware was a new discipline, the process wasn't dissimilar from footwear. “I've worked in product development for 15 years so I was in my comfort zone.”

Zana committed to 15 different pieces and had five of style each made. Vaisselle – French for crockery – was launched on Instagram in September and Zana's unusual and distinctive colour combinations instantly popped on the social media platform. “I visit my father regularly in India and find the way they use colours there so inspiring.” “Oily Baby”, a red-and-pink checked oil dispenser, has proved to be her most popular design so far. “I think people are also using it as a vase and a candle holder.”

Despite Vaisselle being met with approval, Zana isn't yet turning a profit and if anything, the investment has ramped up, what with courier costs, the website build and accountancy fees. “It was giving me sleepless nights,” she says. But taking part in South London Makers Market in December (a local event that has enjoyed nationwide success since it was adapted for Instagram @southlondonmakersmarket) was “a game-changer. I took more sales in one day than I'd had in two months and it's enabled me to make back a large chunk of my outlay as well as plan the spring collection.”

Zana has gone from being “frustrated creatively” to “having the time of my life”. She would encourage anyone creative to take a leap. “But I'd say think small and do it for yourself first. I thought that if I created styles that I loved, then in the worst-case scenario if nothing sold at least I'd have a lovely set of crockery for me.”

vaisselleboutique.com



Zana worked in France, and 'vaisselle' is French for crockery



Chin started by creating a print for her mother to brighten a wall

'I'D LOVE TO MAKE THIS A FULL-TIME JOB'

Emily Chin, 28, accidentally started Chin Chin Prints by creating brightly coloured graphic prints depicting otherwise ordinary areas of London

Londoner Emily Chin wasn't furloughed during the first lockdown, but she was able to devote more time to drawing for fun once she'd clocked off her nine-to-five as a UX designer for BT Sports. When her mother mentioned that she'd like a large artwork to brighten up a blank wall in her new utility room, Chin set about surprising her with something personal and unique: a graphic illustration of the Tube station at Harrow on the Hill, where her mother grew up. “It made her so happy that she welled up,” recalls Chin. Requests from friends and family for their own copies swiftly followed and, realising the wider appeal of her work, Chin Chin Prints was born at the end of May 2020.

“When designing, the end result has to make me feel happy and the colours need to reflect a good mood,” says Chin of her bold palette. She sketches designs

in a notepad before drawing each one digitally and polls her Instagram followers to decide which area she should immortalise next. Her offering now includes landmarks south of the Thames such as Battersea Power Station and Brixton Academy.

She sells on the marketplace Etsy and the affordable prices – between £11 and £25 depending on size – made for perfect Christmas gifts, something that proved quite the juggling act alongside working full-time. “Fulfilling the volume of orders over Christmas was near

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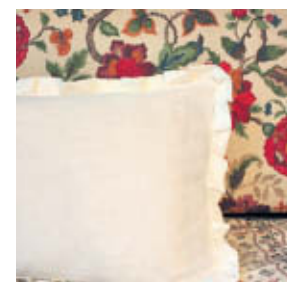
impossible. Soon I hope to be able to take a leap of faith and quit my day job.” While Chin's affection for her patch of the capital is strong, it's the orders from outside London that have really piqued her interest and made her see the business opportunity. “A lot of orders are from people who have moved out and are buying prints of an area that they used to live or study in. They want that slice of nostalgia for that time of their life.” Private commissions have included a spinning mill near Manchester and the unusually positioned Soviet tank in Bermondsey.

Orders have clocked up into multiple hundreds and Chin is even considering expanding into tea towels and mugs. “I definitely don't want it to feel touristy, but I still want it to be a unique idea for a gift.”

etsy.com/uk/shop/ChinChinPrints

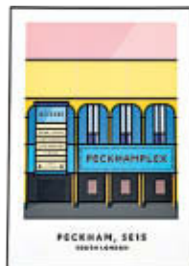
ARTISAN must-haves

The key pieces that launched the brands



PILLOWCASES, FROM £39.50, EASTLONDONCLOTH.COM

Gemma Drain, founder, says: “In lockdown I think everyone paid much more attention to their interiors because it was something we could have some control over while the outside world felt quite chaotic. Soft furnishings help to create a cocoon-like feel, so they provide comfort on some level. Our pillowcases have been extremely popular.”



PECKHAM PLEX PRINT, £15.10 FOR A5 SIZE, ETSY.COM/UK/SHOP/CHINCHINPRINTS

Emily Chin, founder, says: “The Peckham Plex print was one of the first locations I illustrated and it has been my bestseller since. I think its success comes down to its low profile but legendary status upon release at home and there provide the perfect centrepiece.”



LEA OILY BABY, £65, VAISSELLEBOUTIQUE.COM

Léa Zana, founder, says: “I never thought Oily Baby (an oil dispenser) would be a bestseller when I designed it as it's quite literal – the red gingham is French and the shape of the bottle has been the same since the 19th century, but people love it. I think it's because the poppy colour is an instant mood-lifter and there's something nostalgic about it.”



CANDLES, FROM £8 EACH, ETSY.COM/UK/SHOP/HEREANDNOWHOME

Claire Goodwin, co-founder, says: “All of our candles have sold well and our bestsellers are the glossy spirals and citrus fruit candles. There has been an explosion of tablescape on Instagram, with people celebrating special occasions at home and these provide the perfect centrepiece.”

'IT WAS DO OR DIE'

Curtain-maker Gemma Drain, 36, founded East London Cloth, a brand specialising in traditional household linens

Last spring Gemma Drain, a curtain-maker and mother of two, had been due to start a contract with a large retail company. But because of lockdown her fortunes changed literally overnight: “My work got cancelled and my partner, who works in aviation, had his wage cut dramatically.” The couple were due to get married in June 2020 and found themselves dipping into their savings fund to pay their bills. “It was do or die, I had to do something and try to make it work as quickly as physically possible. I'd been sourcing linens to make napkins and runners for our wedding, so I thought perhaps I could create soft furnishings alongside making curtains and blinds.”

Drain came up with the name East London Cloth – a nod to where she lives as well as playing on the traditional term for fabric – and started an Instagram account in July 2020 as her shop window. She thought that six months down the line she'd create a transactional website, however her gingham cushion covers and ticking place mats – all inspired by traditional furnishings – were a hit. Within two weeks the response was so positive, people were inquiring as to when her site would be

live. “I was forced to grow very quickly, and had to juggle creating the website in the evenings as I had no childcare.” It was only in 2015 that Drain retrained as a curtain-maker; previously she had worked for an antiques and reclamation business, running its showroom and website. But she learned to sew at a young age and had been inspired by both her grandmothers' practical approach to craft. “One of my nans was so fearless, you could ask her to make anything and she would just figure out a way. That's where my mentality comes from; there's always a logical way and the problem-solving aspect is what I enjoy the most.” Since setting up the business her workload has been “intense”; she has decked the homes of four clients entirely in curtains of her own creation as well as taking commissions for many café-style blinds and panels. Drain currently works solo from a small room at home, but next year she plans to hire a studio and expand her product offering. And the good news is that the couple's wedding fund has since been restored. “We've more than made up what we lost financially.”

eastlondoncloth.co.uk



Drain was inspired by her grandmothers' approach to craft

'I DON'T KNOW HOW FAR I WOULD HAVE GOT BY MYSELF'

Former colleagues Claire Goodwin, 34, and Georgie Chapman, 32, launched Here and Now Home as a place to create and sell small decorative pieces

As almost any millennial will tell you, once you finally get on the housing ladder you find yourself coveting rugs as opposed to yet another pair of shoes. And so despite their careers in fashion, when Claire Goodwin and Georgie Chapman found themselves at this juncture they mooted starting something to do with homewares, and lockdown provided the opportunity they needed to get going. Explains Goodwin: “Georgie had just been made redundant from womenswear brand Coast and I freelance in occasionwear, which has had a tough year, so we just thought: ‘Let's do it!’”

Under the name Here and Now Home they began making photogenic candles that are almost too good to burn: long spiral sticks in punchy colours; chunky knotted sculptural shapes and small oranges and limes that look deceptively like the real thing. Ruffled

“People have gone crazy for our spiral candles and we can't make enough of them”

tote bags and small spongeware clay dishes make up their small but covetable offering. “It was hard to get the technique right because neither of us had ever made candles before,” admits Chapman, who pours them at home. But they captured the zeitgeist with their designs: “People have gone crazy for our spiral candles and we can't make enough of them,” says Chapman. The duo communicate constantly via voice notes and to keep costs down they photograph products themselves and sell through Etsy. The money made so far has been reinvested into buying more equipment. Their long-term goal is to stock the work of specialist artisans



No, it's not fruit – these are candles by Here and Now Home



Claire Goodwin (left) and Georgie Chapman make a great business team

based in Europe and Asia and scale up. “It's important that it's all handmade and a craft piece,” says Goodwin. Their partnership feels natural: Chapman credits her friend with bringing the vision while she is known as the “organised one”. As Goodwin happily admits: “This gave us a sense of purpose. Having a friend to bounce ideas off who is in the same situation has been wonderful. I don't know how far I would have got by myself.”

etsy.com/uk/shop/HereAndNowHome