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NEST PROFILE:

Under the radar

Shareen Joel has had success with almost all aspects of design – and she’s done it without a high profile.

BY HELEN KAISER

In this era of the star designer – Marc Newson for Qantas, Stella McCartney for Target, Philippe Starck for everybody else – it is refreshing to meet a creative powerhouse without the big ego shamelessly pursuing her own big-name branding.

Shareen Joel is as versatile as any of the aforementioned creative geniuses, turning her hand to everything from switches to swatches, but is happy to run a small practice from Melbourne while raising her two children. Sure, she has travelled the world and had her taste of the big time, so it’s not a lack of opportunity that keeps her grounded in Oz; she is confident in the knowledge that she can still make a dramatic impact simply with her design nous and doesn’t need a high profile to get her places.

Doors open for Joel thanks to a number of unique qualities rarely found in a

creative personality. She has the tenacity of a corporate aggressor and the initiative of a highly tuned market watchdog, which, in the crowded wannabe-designer marketplace, are invaluable assets. She attributes her business head to her Jewish heritage, but also to her parents. They were both successful in business – her father in manufacturing and her mother in fashion design – and have been vital role models.

Hence, Joel has no qualms approaching the CEOs of major corporations if she spots a market niche her designs could fill. "One of the things I often do is cold-call companies, and I’m not afraid to do that. Design is a passion. It’s part of my life," she explains.

Designers with such drive don’t generally contain their ideas to one field, even though their practice might appear to specialise. Interior designers invariably think about furniture and lighting

design, fashion designers dabble in accessories, architects consider landscape design, and so on. But it is rare for a design practice to work across all these spheres successfully. Joel is a rare breed in that there are few areas of design she hasn’t touched at some stage. Currently employing three staff, plus consultants, hers is one of the most diverse practices in the industry, incorporating retail and residential interior design, furniture and lighting, homewares, branding and now some architectural work.

"What we do is very broad," acknowledges Joel. "Since I started my own business, a lot of people have said to me that I should focus on one particular area; they think it’s too hard to categorise what I do. But my argument is that we learn so much from



Shareen Joel applies her creative talents across many different design fields, producing interiors, fashion, lighting, furniture, homewares, branding and architecture. Previous page, from left: Shareen Joel; Mesh lamp, 2005. This page, clockwise from left: ensuite design; for this kitchen design, Joel created custom-designed furniture including a large round Corian table incorporating a 'lazy Susan' feature; an ensuite design compliments the heritage of a 1920s home. Opposite page, from left: natural materials and a mixture of textures highlight this update of a 1950s home; Joel combined Art Deco and subtle French provincial themes for a modern home.

doing interior projects, for example, that we're then able to use that knowledge for product design projects."

Joel attributes her versatility in part to her work with the Ford Motor Company, her first job after graduating from the then rather blokey, engineering-focused industrial design course at RMIT.

The scope of work with the car manufacturer incorporated aspects of interiors and product design, as well as architectural considerations.

Although Joel didn't set out to be an automotive designer, this start to her professional life set her in good stead, providing challenges in a highly competitive market which she might not otherwise have encountered.

"It was just by chance that I was doing freelance work for Nylex in the automotive area [fabrics and vinyls], and they were a Ford supplier," she explains. "To be perfectly honest, I didn't really know what the job was about, but I spent a lot of time going to car dealerships and finding out about customer profiles, and I put together a big presentation folio, with four different

categories of car to represent the customer. It was competitive so I had to do something to blow them away."

She must have done something right as she was soon working in the area of design, colour and trim. Joel stayed with Ford Australia for about two years, before transferring to the UK and then onto head office in the US three years later. "In Detroit they put me in advanced technology. It was a very steep learning curve and, because it was more strategic design, it was about understanding markets, what lifestyle and design trends were happening, the youth market. I'd go to ski and snowboard shows to see what bindings they were using."

Eventually Joel ended up back in Melbourne, where she married Dean. They now have a daughter and a son. But the invaluable skills she picked up at Ford were soon adapted for broader use and continue to be applied to projects now.

"One example of things we do in the office is to look at classics and new materials, and how old ranges can be done in a contemporary way ... And

that's what we did at Ford. One of the big projects I had to do was the new Thunderbird, the T-Bird, which was based on the Retro. I explored the old, original Thunderbird and thought: how would we do that in a contemporary way with modern materials?"

A recent project she completed for Clipsal has also incorporated finishes, like chrome plating, that are seen in the automotive industry. The project began when Joel approached the company with an idea to fill a gap in its range.

"I identified the need to offer a light switch that was beautiful and easy to use. One of the problems with the C-Bus [home automation] range is that the switches themselves don't have any information on the screens. At the moment, whichever switch you flick you don't know whether it's room lights you're turning on or your blinds.

"I simply got on the phone and it took a long time, but I finally got through to the CEO, went to Adelaide and talked to them about touch-sensitive switches. Two years later, persistence got this project through.



"Our switches have a screen, so you can set them and see what you're programming. They all have their own little brain and they speak to one another. They don't exist elsewhere in the world, so they will give Clipsal an edge internationally."

The process isn't without its frustrations, and the most common one is a resistance by Australian companies to acknowledge and support Australian design.

"A lot of companies feel that if they copy what works internationally, then that will sell. But my approach is, why not design, develop and manufacture products in Australia and sell them internationally? It would be great if more companies would take the plunge, and invest in home grown design, which is unique."

"One of the biggest things I've tried to do is to open up Australian manufacturers' and companies' minds to the possibilities of design. The interior projects and retail just come to you, but the hard work is in the corporate product

development. There's no reason all design shouldn't be accessible to everybody. Whether it's a light switch or a car, everybody should have the opportunity to access good design."

Though her practice is ticking along nicely, attracting exciting, challenging new projects, and even turning work away, Joel is ambitious and it's hard not to wonder whether she has contained her ambition to stay in Australia, when the real hot beds of design are in Europe, Italy in particular.

"When I graduated, I was really keen to live in Italy and do work experience ... but then my life changed, I got married, I had children, and I wanted to be in Australia," she says.

"I did a design concept range for Foscarini [a lighting company]. We put a lot of time into that and they held onto it for a long time, but then they said they would take someone else's design. And there's a few Italian manufacturers that I've done that for, but it's very hard from Australia.

"So I thought, where am I best off investing my time? And it's probably better doing it with clients who are in

Australia, supporting Australian design, than to be doing things for international manufacturers – with long lead times – that may not even happen."

Now, with a children's furniture range for Freedom in the pipeline, another range for Clipsal, a sizeable new house on the drawing board, branding work for Becton, numerous interior projects and dreams of creating her own paint range, it is hard to imagine she is tempted to be elsewhere. Instead, Joel's ambition lies in expanding the business, within reason.

"I would like to explore new directions, support students and emerging designers, and to have a brainstorming environment as opposed to a corporate office. But if I take on too many projects I won't have that opportunity."

Happily, working three to four days a week and still being able to pick up her kids from school, Joel has the work-life balance well in check, and is quietly happy to be a 'star designer' in her own way. ●