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Design Inspired

Vermonters and designer April Cornell, inspired by nature and diverse culture, colors our world.

AS I ARRIVE AT designer April Cornell's eye-catching flagship store and design studio on busy Battery Street in the waterfront section of Burlington, the wintry morning sky is overcast and gray. Predictably, Lake Champlain is lacking its usual deep blue color today and reflects the sky and the distant Adirondacks as another shade of gray, dark and foreboding. April's store and studio, a nicely converted brick industrial building, however, seems to change the whole scene from drab and dreary to bright and welcoming.

The colors the building has been painted, a riot of pastel shades of yellow, pink, and bits of green and blue, uplifts my mood for the day and gives me a hint that something wonderful is about to happen just inside the front doors. I'm not disappointed. Stepping into the studio section of April's building is like stepping into a warm, inviting dream. The vibrancy of April's creations is found not just in layers of colorful fabrics but also in what this Vermonter has given back to the world, and this has in turn shaped the designs of her life. For one thing, it has transformed this building, once a workaday auto parts store, into a showcase of April's artistic talents.

As I enter and April greets me, I'm amazed by the studio's décor: coffee-colored bamboo flooring, its rich color and texture contrasting with the distinct patterns on the fabrics, clothing, and furniture that surround us. It's a tad



April Cornell stands outside the studio entrance of her flagship store on Battery Street in Burlington. Her eye for color and flair for design transformed this brick building, once a workaday auto parts store, into a wonderland of colorful patterns, both inside and out.

whimsical, but purposeful; the treatment of the studio gives the colors in her collections the foremost attention they deserve—their bold colors and details are what make April Cornell's designs easy to embrace. There is even a small tree in the studio, its branches wrapped in fabric swatches formed into dainty shapes of lovely little birds and butterflies. They seem enchanting and magical to the eye,

hanging alongside twinkling lights entwined in the branches. Beyond are two walls lined with white carved bookcases, a library of sorts that serves as home to many large binders, each brimming with April's designs and patterns. These reflect nearly 40 years of design history, designs that continue to enchant each viewer and grow in number by the year. In addition to offerings from the seasonal collections displayed in different areas of the studio, I come upon a decorated bed filled with bedding and pillows, a chair with floral fabric set in an ivory painted frame, and along the bookcases, pieces of April's home décor, among them an eclectic-looking teapot.

This wonderland is corporate headquarters, where online, walk-in retail, wholesale, and design licensing business is conducted, all under one roof and with all of these components flowing easily in a relaxed, serene atmosphere with open workstations. It makes one immediately feel as if he or she is being welcomed to a finely furnished home, a welcome relief from a

corporate world of corridors and cubicles for any visitor, client, or customer.

While April's company employs 55 people, her company does the bulk of its business online, rather than at a cash register. Besides this flagship store and studio, decorated in colors and patterns festive enough for any season or reason, there are April Cornell stores in North Conway, New Hampshire, Ocean Grove,



April's studio offers up a dazzling array of styles, colors, and patterns in linens, housewares, furniture, and bedding. The lavish use of floral designs brings smiles to the faces of visitors, who may know one of April's mantras, "Live Colorfully," from seeing it in her sales and product listings.

New Jersey, and two stores in Quebec, Canada, both known as La Cache. April Cornell clothing and designs in fabric, housewares, and furniture are also wholesaled to fine stores throughout the United States and Canada, with ancillary sales from licensing for designs and patterns adding to the revenue stream.

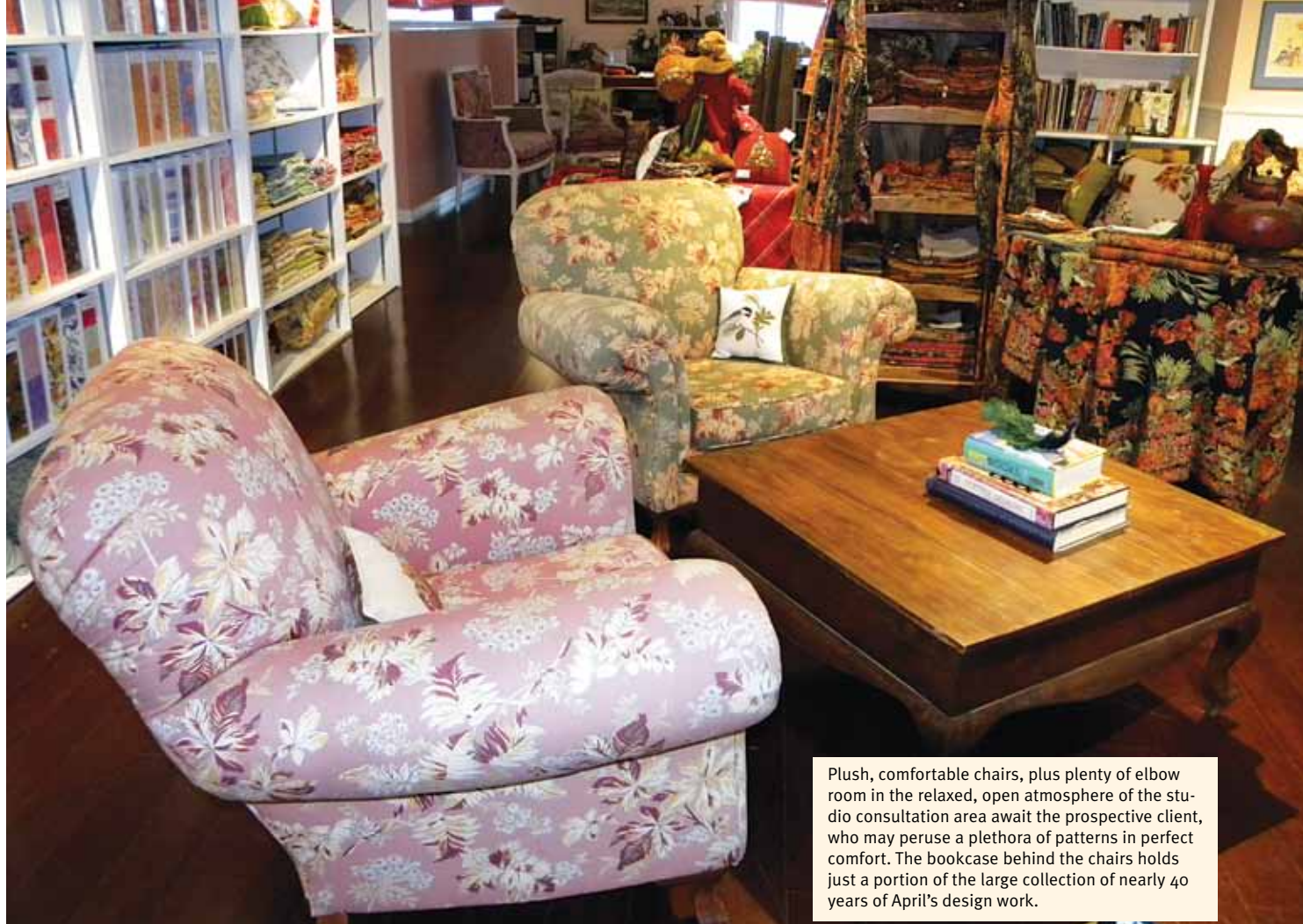
Unlike the studio flooring, the floor in the retail side of the building on Battery Street is made from weathered wood salvaged from an old Vermont barn that was taken down. It adds a rustic touch and an earthy contrast to the colorful delights to be found that are jam-packed into every corner, nook, and cranny—a cornucopia of bedding, furniture, and clothing. Downstairs in the basement, there's a funky discount department (April's Beautiful Bargains) that has the feel and flair of a Bohemian marketplace, offering up a plethora of deals just too good to pass by.

April Cornell, a native of Montreal, Canada, studied fine arts in college and began collecting items in her travels with her first husband. They would bring home wonderful finds: carpets, saddlebags, and nomadic dresses purchased in

trips abroad, bought from individuals and in bazaars in cities such as Kabul and Mazar I Sharif in northern Afghanistan, and sell them in markets back home. With those humble beginnings they established Cornell Trading in 1973, eventually opening stores in Canada, the United States, and Europe, selling and incorporating April's designs in clothing, home décor, furniture, and textiles.

As the business grew in the 1990s, their ties to Vermont became stronger and they made Burlington their home base. The colors of Vermont's lush countryside can accordingly be found in many of April's seasonal designs. From this veritable artist's palette comes "the peace you find in nature, the ambience you find in the atmosphere—people creating a wonderful, rich spirit that inspires and affects the creativity that goes into our apparel" April tells me, as we sit to chat and talk about her connection to Vermont as an artist, a businesswoman, and a philanthropist.

She is petite, with a huge smile and an elegant demeanor; she speaks softly with just the hint of a Canadian accent, which somehow makes her all the more lovely



Plush, comfortable chairs, plus plenty of elbow room in the relaxed, open atmosphere of the studio consultation area await the prospective client, who may peruse a plethora of patterns in perfect comfort. The bookcase behind the chairs holds just a portion of the large collection of nearly 40 years of April's design work.

and puts one at ease in her presence. April's extensive ties to India, based on her travels and manufacturing base there, have established a strong commitment to charitable giving, both overseas and in Vermont. In the 1990s, she created The Giving World Foundation, a nonprofit that is committed to providing educational-vocational programs and projects for mothers and children who are at risk, among them orphaned, abandoned, and underprivileged children, including children of prison inmates, in India.

The underlying concept of GWF's mission statement is to educate and encourage change for the better with a handhold, not a handout. There is complete transparency so that donors may see where the money goes; April's shoppers are even given the option to make a GWF donation when shopping online. To date, April's Indian company and the GWF have raised more than \$1 million since it was founded and have donated generously to Doctors Without Borders. "My connection to DWB was through Dr. Chris Chen," says April, "an amazing woman who has put herself in the most dangerous

of locations, all across the globe...and is sometimes the only doctor on duty in refugee camps with hundreds and thousands of needy individuals." The organization offers impartial assistance in more than 60 countries to people whose survival is threatened by armed conflict, epidemic, or malnutrition. She is an inspiration to April, as is Vermonter Holly Miller. "I met Holly Miller through Champlain College," April explains. "She was a fellow board member...eventually, chair of the board...and is involved in many charitable acts in Vermont and overseas, including an educational NGO [non-government organization] based in Africa."

Vermont Refugee Resettlement is something April has been actively involved in as well. When her company headquarters moved to Vermont some 20 years ago, she met the first of many Tibetan refugees settling in Vermont. "In the past," says April, "we employed many Tibetans. Most Tibetans living in Vermont have either worked for me or have a family member who has. When they first arrived, we got them driving lessons, eyeglasses, and so on. Their first Christmases and Thanks-

givings were spent with us, since their families took another five years to arrive. We continue to have close ties with them in the community." April believes that everyone deserves a chance in a new country, especially in a new home state that is Vermont. In India, she and her employees at Cornell Overseas host and sponsor food distributions, hands-on operations that staff, locals, and expatriates get involved in and that deal with the brutal reality of the poverty so prevalent in India.

"The motivating factor to keep the business going, after restructuring in 2006, was that there were still great needs I saw in India. Why keep going? There is a need there that will continue well after our lifetime, after our children's lifetimes are gone, because there are so many outside the circle of opportunity and the opportunities I have been given in India," says April.

"Business is challenging...but this trade has an emotional connection to the heart. Then, to run it as a business also... it can be difficult to wear two hats, so it's good have a good partner, like Basil Stetson, my husband, and support in your



April and her husband, Basil Stetson (right), both have offices in the design studio. Workstations here are anything but boring cubicles; they are open, inviting, and colorful. April's decorative touch was even applied to her desk. She repainted it, finishing it with a coral-glazed desktop, white legs, and a pewter-rubbed finish on the drawers. Linens and pillows in jazzy patterns (above) abound, even displayed near the office space.

company. My son Kelly has joined the company and shares my commitment to giving back. India has given me an opportunity to build a business, my factory where the textiles are made. The handwork of the people who work there has allowed me to be creative, to be an artist more than anything else," April tells me with emotion, going on to emphasize she also attributes her success to being a "woman-friendly business." There is a woman in charge of her factory in India, and her senior management staff are mostly women. Donna Larrabee works hand in hand with April at Vermont Headquarters, designing two major collections annually. And, of course, women quite naturally comprise most of April Cornell's customer base.

April's travels bring most of the new ideas to her ever-growing collection. She tells me of a city in India, Jaipur, where buildings are made from pink sandstone. The stone's color has now inspired her to look for that same shade of pink to use



as a background in a textile color. She enjoys the challenge of finding the exact hues that will enable her to envision the right prints for her creations. As for patterns, one of them was inspired by Indian architecture, as April relates, "I will take the geometry of the Taj Mahal—her arches, pillars, and domes—and create patterns for colorful quilts, patterns that will combine my love for the Mughal architecture with the vibrant colors of Quebec in the springtime." This vision also extends beyond colors, deep into the fabric of the company itself: "What I want most for this company is to be meaningful. Yes, a company needs to turn a profit, but also

Just the facts

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For information on
The Giving World
Foundation, please
visit givingworld-foundation.org.



to be in business doing some of the core things, upholding the philosophy of the brand, the connection to women and artistic value of the designs, remaining true to the brand that's developed."

She offers a few words of advice: to use the gifts you have no matter what they are, and make a difference in the world. "Live beautifully," she advises, "because there is no action that is too small." **T**

Kimberly Onufrock-Bracco, an expatriate New Englander who has lived on the New Hampshire/Vermont border, lives in and writes from Blue Point, NY. She still considers herself a Yankee at heart and is counting the days 'til she moves back.