

Fun Time: Clock, flower vase and (below) coasters from mCube

Hot Tee: Hand-painted T-shirts from Cutlet Co



Opposites Attract: Fridge magnets, keychains, tins and more at Chumbak

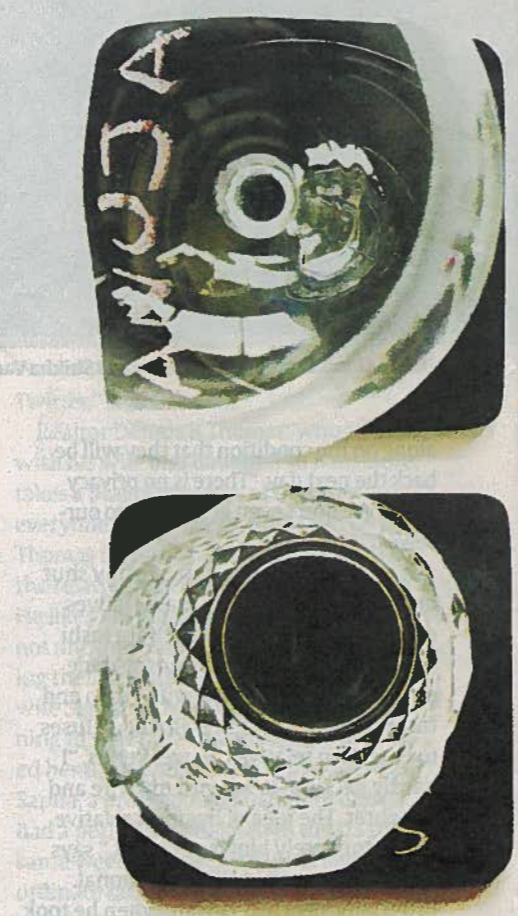
Cool and Kooky Inc.

How young entrepreneurs are redefining the old business of selling kitsch >>>

by SHARON FERNANDES

A CLOCK WHERE you can fight your forgetfulness with a scrawl in pink chalk, "take Milo out for a walk"; a Kamasutra coaster for your single malt to rest; a bus ride that winds its way on your white T-shirt; a magenta cushion cover on which Audrey Hepburn smoulders in her little black dress, an out-of-place "Soda" matchbox dangling from one end of her cigarette holder. The business of quirk is growing, going beyond the ground-breakers — Happily Unmarried with its Bhojpuri shot glasses, and Mukul Goyal's maverick metal men — trying to sell wares in Thane and Tinsukia, Kochi and Kolkata. In this kitsch kingdom, a start-up where 20-somethings doodle on tees and spread the word on Facebook coexists with a 30-city chain that sells thousands of fun fridge magnets. Kaveri Medappa is a 30-year-old who left her job as a chartered accountant to sell cool. At her year-old Quirkoshop, an online store that delivers in 11 cities, including Kochi and Kolkata, she brings together quaint little things — like

Beatles clock and yoga bottle openers, at prices that range from Rs 120 to Rs 3,500. The ex-CA from Bangalore keeps a track of the bottom line. "We are seeing 150 per cent growth every quarter," she says. The city could well be the new capital of kitsch, with start-ups such as Cutlet Co, Soda, Magnuts, Chilly Billy, Psybaba and Chumbak. At Cutlet Co, friends Kripa Jaising, 23, and Sharanya Ramesh, 22, invest their talents on white tees hauled in from the banyan city of Tirupur in neighbouring Tamil Nadu. "We get our designs printed on the tee and then fill in the colours ourselves. Each T-shirt takes us around two hours. You can call it a small-scale industry," says Jaising. They are mass-communication graduates who tried their luck at filmmaking and are now just "enthu cutlets" about their little shop. They have sold 400 tees, priced at Rs 250-400, in eight months and are looking forward to a stall at flea markets in Goa. Like the hand-painted tees and the quirky YouTube video that Ramesh and Jaising made about young people



keeping it cool in Cutlet Co designs, their business too is marked by fun and insouciance. "We haven't even registered our company name. We take orders and deliver them, the payments can be made through money transfer or demand draft. Let's see how long this lasts," says Jaising. As Pavan Kumar of White Money Consultants, a firm that advises start-



ups, says, you don't need huge capital to be in kitsch business. All you need is inventiveness to set your products apart, and it helps that there is a growing clientele for quirkiness, one that is not yet tired of Bollywood cushions and purple bobble heads. Rajat Tuli, who started Happily Unmarried seven years ago with Rahul Anand, says: "We started with Rs 50,000. We now retail in 47

stores across 16 cities and have sold about 8 lakh products. This is a Rs 150 crore-plus industry and has a huge potential. Lots of players are coming in every few months." Like Shubhra Chadda, 30, who opened her company Chumbak in March and already retails in 30 cities, including Delhi, Mumbai, Chandigarh, Tinsukia, Thane and Varanasi. "Every time I travelled abroad, I bought back a memory of that place in the form of a fridge magnet," she says. "For some strange reason, I could never find fun magnets in India." So the marketing professional decided to make some. She got in touch with a designer, Allie D'Souza, in Australia, and Chumbak started off with fridge magnets priced at Rs 135. Seven months later, it now has about 115 products, including playing cards, key chains, mouse pads, even handmade soaps. "I started out selling 200 pieces a month, now it is in thousands," says Chadda, who sells them in retail stores and online at chumbak.in. "Well travelled youngsters are dying for products based on quirky themes. We cater to them and will be launching new designs in the coming weeks," she says. Has Chumbak broken even? "It is too early for us to make profits, but the sales are growing. We have seen a 20-30 per cent rise in sales over the last month," she says. It is all about playfulness, but you have to get the business right. The company should be registered and patents should be in place. You need a labour certificate, an import-export licence if you are selling or buying anything from abroad, a VAT certificate and a copyright and trademark certificate to ensure that your designs are not copied.

In Mumbai, the trio that make up mCube are having nightmares about a competitor filching their big design: the Chalkboard Clock. A branding firm that branched out into funky lifestyle accessories in August, mCube's hot product is the clock on which you can doodle with a piece of chalk. They extended the idea to vases, table mats and coasters, and the products, costing Rs 150-900, have flown off the shelves. "The response has been good. We sell about 50 pieces a month," says Neha Mehta, a graphic design graduate from Chicago, who established the company with Rachana Shah and Mehul Mehta. She says "the fun-design market" is having a bullish run in India and the time is right to push the envelop. In the city, Item Number, Poppoheart, Jhola, Clean Planet, 037, Fireflies and Neil Dantas too are peddling their designs to converts who queue up at retail stores like Tappu ki Dukaan. Sneha Raisonni, the 28-year-old owner of Tappu ki Dukaan in south Mumbai, which stocks products ranging from Rs 30 to Rs 10,000, says, "Customers are looking for new ideas. If they see the same old wall clock, they are put off. These brands have to come up with something new and interesting." And they whimsically turn a blackboard into a clock and keep a box of coloured chalk next to it.

