



'On a permanent learning curve'

Independent designers need more than just innovative ideas and flair to become household names. By **Bridget Stott**

Young designers with dreams of becoming the next Robin Day, Ron Arad or Philippe Starck should be aware of the perils of going it alone. The glamorous life of the globe-trotting independent designer is a rarity.

This is because the vast majority of Britain's design graduates fall into three categories. They either take up apprenticeships with big international manufacturers, where the pay is low, the hours long and the design standards may be less than riveting. Or they give up design within two years of graduating because they can't find any work here or abroad that utilises their particular talents. The final category includes a group of daring devil-may-cares who choose to go out on their own.

Despite the kudos of having an outstandingly original idea converted into handsome cheques, life is tough. Years of heartache often accompany the independent designer, despite the rise of a loft-living generation which is supposedly suffused with design awareness. The demands of this latter group are fuelled by glossy home-focus magazines and TV make-overs keen to spot and exploit new talent, yet many of the UK's most talented and innovative designers still struggle to make a living.

Hector Serrano, a 26-year-old graduate of the Royal College of Art, is trying to make it as an independent, and has had some notable early successes which he puts down to commitment, drive and incessant networking. "If you're in the right place at the right time and manage to create something that really works, you can reap the rewards," he says. "The flipside is knowing that others are doing just the same - but they might struggle for years to get a piece of work recognised by a big-name manufacturer or supplier."

Serrano spent four years at the Esdi Caeu San Palo college in Spain studying for a design degree, before applying to the RCA to study product design. "The degree course taught me valuable technical skills, while the RCA course gives you the freedom to experiment with those skills in new and exciting ways."

He graduated from the RCA last July and promptly won the Peugeot Design Award 2000 for his Super Patata lamp, covered in a shroud of fabric that looks like an expensive acrylic membrane but is actually made from sea salt. Serrano used the £16,000 cash prize to pay off student loans and invest in his work.

Since then, Serrano has spent much of his time working on new ideas, entering design competitions and exhibiting his work at design, trade and consumer fairs across Europe. He advises anyone wanting to become an independent designer to produce some powerful work and show

it to as many people as possible. He is currently experimenting with everyday materials such as salt and polyfilm to create affordable and desirable objects. "It's more challenging to make something interesting out of cheap materials than to use expensive stuff," he says. "You also need to let the people who matter know what you're really capable of. If they notice, you know you are making a difference and that really helps."

Luck is also a factor. Last year, a director of the Norwegian design company Droog was invited by the RCA to present a series of lectures. During a tutorial, he noticed Serrano's work and invited him to exhibit a piece at the Milan Design Fair 2000. Even so, Serrano finds it impossible to make a living from design alone. He supplements his income by working as a technician at the University of North London and as a part-time workshop tutor at Ravensbourne College.

But Serrano believes that London is as good a place as any to launch a career in design. "People from industry come here from all over the world looking for innovative and avant-garde

designers that they couldn't find anywhere else." The only drawback is that once they've been discovered, lucrative contracts take them away from the UK - often for good. The problem is the UK's small manufacturing base and the London market, which mainly consists of boutique-style shops wanting only exclusive lines.

Serrano has one item in mass production, a water bottle called La Siesta, which he made in collaboration with Alberto Martinez and Irky Martinez. They sent a prototype of the bottle to leading Spanish ceramic and glass manufacturer La Mediterranea, which now produces, markets and sells the bottle in Spain and Germany. Serrano's Super Patata lamp is at the development stage with Dutch-based manufacturers DMD. Not a bad track record, so far.

Another creator who has forced his way into contention is 33-year-old furniture designer Jonathan Baring, who started his bespoke furniture business six years ago after completing a degree in furniture design at Ryecote College in Oxfordshire. Today, Baring & Co operates from a converted stable rented from the National Trust in the Cotswolds village of Coleshill, producing bespoke furniture with a contemporary twist. He seeks to match high-quality design with the best-quality timbers and finishes he can find for each commission.

Baring admits that some of his success to date is down to fortuitous timing. "There's a growing market for bespoke furniture and that, coupled with a nationwide obsession with interior style, means that people are more interested in their homes than ever before and are looking for an alternative to antique or shop-bought pieces.



Hector Serrano's water bottle is now in mass production

Mykel Nicolaou

They want furniture made with integrity that will last a lifetime."

But it's been an uphill struggle to keep his business going. Every penny earned has been spent on adding to and improving his collection of tools and machinery. Finding and negotiating good deals with decent suppliers also takes up much of his time. "I'm in it for the long haul and that means learning and developing new processes and techniques, and discovering the distinct qualities of different timbers. That takes time to master," he says.

Baring still finds it hard to price each piece and complete the work quickly enough to sustain the business without compromising on quality. "I'm on a permanent learning curve," he readily admits. "Most of what I've achieved is

directly related to my sheer bloody-mindedness and determination."

Influenced by the simple rusticity of the Arts and Crafts movement, Baring is currently creating a 12-seater dining table for the new owner of the former home of a leading exponent of this style, Gordon Russell. He has also considered creating pieces for mass production, but has yet to find a manufacturer who is as fanatical about quality as he is. "Integrity is vital," he says.

Baring warns that "it's easy to undervalue your work in the early stages of a career - and tough to find people who want one-off pieces when you don't have a track record. You have to be very focused. But loving what you do makes it so much easier to carry on. It's a real joy and, let's face it, how many of us can say that about our jobs?"