

Thabisa Mjo, Creative Director of Mash T. Design Studio always wanted to tell stories. And so she majored in production design at AFDA film school. “After working as a set designer in the TV and film industry, I decided I wanted to create spaces that people in the real world could interact with, and that’s when I started working as a furniture designer,” Thabisa says. “I choose to use design as the medium to tell the stories of my culture.”

Mpho Vackier, Creative Director of The Urbanative, made an even more drastic career switch. She’d always felt that she was a designer at heart and, 10 years ago, took a leap of faith to quit her job as a metallurgist to study interior design at Inscape Design College in Pretoria. “Being creative or living a creative life has always been my goal and is all I want to do,” she says. “My aim is to create amazing products and spaces that make lives better and connect people through design.”

HARD WORK

On a typical workday, Thabisa does a lot of hard, manual labour: running around buying material, visiting suppliers, doing deliveries, following up on emails and handling admin. “It’s nothing glamorous at all,” she exclaims. “But I love the fact that it makes people happy. When a customer sees their light or bench or server or whatever it is they’ve purchased from us and it looks better than it did in pictures, the joy they have when it completes their space and adds a whole other depth of feeling, is my favourite part.”

Mpho agrees that it’s not all glamorous but is mostly a lot of hard work and sweat, requiring critical and technical thinking and problem solving skills. “It’s lonely, scary, stressful, and hands-on, from assembling a piece of furniture to working on marketing strategies, lead generation, testing materials, deliveries and installations, all while trying to



Thabisa Mjo,
Creative Director of
Mash T. Design Studio

THE BOLD & BEAUTIFUL

AT THIS YEAR’S 100% DESIGN SOUTH AFRICA AWARDS, THABISA MJO AND MPHVO VACKIER WERE CHOSEN AS CO-WINNERS OF DESIGNER OF THE YEAR. **EUGENE YIGA** SPOKE TO THEM ABOUT THEIR WORK.



Mpho Vackier,
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run a profitable business,” she says. “But I love connecting different people through the design and manufacture of products and furniture. I also love when a concept becomes reality, discovering new materials and technology, as well as working and meeting with amazing people.”

AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE

Inspired by her childhood and South African culture, heritage, and people, Thabisa consciously includes an element of craft in her work, be it beading, weaving, or hand painting. It adds depth to her work and ensures the continued survival of precious skills.

“I’ve only just started so have not had the need to reinvent myself quite yet.” Although she started her business in 2015, Thabisa only started working as a designer after winning the Nando’s Hot Young Designer Talent Search in 2016.

“I’m part of a group of people shaping a contemporary South African design aesthetic, which is cool. My work is authentic to my lived experience and my approach is to empathise with others. I think about who else I’m representing with each design. It’s nice when people see a part of themselves or their childhood represented in a piece.”

BUSINESS OF DESIGN

Thabisa admits that it was great to be acknowledged by her peers as co-winner of Designer of the Year, although winning was never her ultimate goal. Instead, she wants to build a scalable, profitable business and make a case for the business of design, showing that we can turn creativity into income generating opportunities.

Mpho feels the same way. “There’s always been pressure from myself to continuously up my game,” she says. “That’s just how I am. It was humbling, amazing, and an honour to win. It was also a great acknowledgment of all the hard work we’ve put in. But we cannot be driven by accolades only. Otherwise what will we do if they never come?”

SOLVING CHALLENGES

A big challenge for both is the same as for every entrepreneur: building a scalable, profitable business that solves their clients’ challenges. They both believe it’s important to be able to adopt new strategies, to solve problems, and to think outside the box.

“I’m constantly guided by practicality, functionality, and purpose when I design,” Mpho says. “I’m looking forward to more collaboration in the future, more exploration of innovative materials, more networking across and into other industries, more applied design thinking and the continuation of creating products that tell our stories to the world, and more creation of products that connect people.” ●