

May 15, 2017 - Ellen Van Dusen is the independent designer behind Dusen Dusen, a women's clothing and home goods brand known for its bright, colorful prints. Van Dusen didn't go to art school but studied the psychology of color from a neurological perspective. We learn about her business's beginnings and the practicalities of mixing art and commerce: "You're not going to be doing creative stuff most of the time. Mostly you're going to be e-mailing people."



As told to Maura M. Lynch, 1765 words.

Tags: Fashion, Design, Beginnings, Process, Production, Inspiration, Independence, Multi-tasking, Business.

Ellen Van Dusen on running your own business

In college, you studied "The Psychology of Design"—can you explain that a little bit?

I knew that I wanted to go into fashion and that I wanted to go into design, but I didn't want to go into art school or fashion school. It didn't really feel like my vibe. I also already knew how to sew and was already making clothes—not that that would be a deterrent, but I wanted to be around different kinds of people doing different kinds of stuff.

I decided that what I was interested in the most was color—the way we perceive color in the brain and art that uses color as its primary medium. I was like, "How do I study that from all angles?" I had taken a couple neuroscience classes and cognitive science classes that were kind of like "brain as computer" class, and I was like, "Why are we drawn to certain images and colors and combinations of colors?" I decided to try to get to the bottom of that. I spent my senior year writing a paper on color field painters—Mark Rothko, Ellsworth Kelly, Morris Louis. I wrote about those painters and specific paintings from a neurological perspective.

Basically, it's all about the way we evolved to see color and what certain colors mean to the brain on a very subconscious level. And really it's mostly about red and what red means because that is the most volatile color. It means food, because of apples, and also danger because of blood.

Was there someone whose research you studied in particular?

Josef Albers wrote one of the big things about the juxtaposition of color, and I really liked this one professor that I had called Dan Dennett. He's the one who kind of started the "brain as computer" theory. There was just a big New Yorker profile on him.

When did you decide you wanted to become a designer "for real"?

I worked for a designer named Mary Meyer for a year and worked at a vintage store, too. I got laid off at the vintage store and I was like, "How can I make some extra money?" I had made all of these clothes for myself and was like, "I'm going to try to sell them." I brought three dresses to Duo [a boutique in the East Village] and was like, "Do you want to buy some of these?" And they did. It was so shocking. I didn't know anything about sizing or finishing. I had a serger, which does the edging, but I didn't know how to thread it. I put an ad on Craigslist to get somebody to come over to thread my serger.

After things picked up steam, I decided to try to take it full-time. For graduation I got \$5,000 from my grandfather and I was like, "I'm going to put this into developing a real collection." That's when I started designing prints, basically out of necessity. I just winged it. I got myself [Adobe] Illustrator. In the beginning I did a terrible job, but it was fine.

For my first collection I did a trade show in Las Vegas and got orders from about 10 stores, which was so cool. It was immediately sustainable somehow, which was crazy.

How were you managing the business side?

That part was hard; there was a learning curve. My uncle is an accountant and he was handling my taxes. I learned Quickbooks while I was working for Mary Meyer. I also have a lot of spreadsheets.

I think if you're running a creative business you have to be aware of the fact that you're not going to be doing creative stuff most of the time. Mostly you're going to be e-mailing people. One thing that I did—and I don't think is necessarily the right way to do things, but it worked for me—was to be conservative with money and not spend a penny more than [I needed] to.

What did you allow yourself to spend money on?

Materials, I would spend money on. But I never had a PR company that I paid for. I didn't have a showroom. A lot of young designers think you need all of that stuff—it's so expensive. Having a PR company costs thousands of dollars a month. I did trade shows, which do cost money, but there are a lot of special booths for young designers that I took advantage of.

Your prints are also infused with a sense of humor—how intentional is that?

It's definitely intentional because I don't like anything to be too serious. I don't think clothes should be serious—they should be fun. I'm also not a serious person, so I guess it just wouldn't feel "me" to make something very serious or dark or whatever.

What do you do when you're creatively stuck?

I will look through my art books, of which I have many. I can get in an internet black hole looking up artists and then finding out about their contemporaries. You can buy so many books on Amazon for a penny, so if I find anybody I'm remotely interested in, I'll buy their book.

When you're in the middle of a project do you ever have a crisis of confidence? Or even after it's finished?

Yes! You just have no choice but to deal with it. Every time I do a trade show or an event, I'm like, "Why would anyone want to come to this? Why does anyone want to see my stuff? Everyone's better than me at this thing." I usually get over that in like an hour—but there's a dark hour every time. I've done so much of putting myself out there that I'm used to that crippling feeling. It's not as bad anymore; it used to be worse.

You've had a few run-ins with big companies ripping off your prints. What do you do when that happens?

It used to really bother me, and I used to pursue it. But I think I have a new mentality, which is that once you put something out in the world it doesn't belong to you anymore. And so if somebody does something that looks similar, you just have to make new stuff and not worry about it.

It happened so much that it's not worth it to get wrapped up with it. And who knows where ideas come from, too. Sometimes you could think something came from you but it came from a completely different place.

Speaking of bigger companies, I know you created an interactive book with with Microsoft last year and you've created designs for West Elm and Anthropologie. Do you have a different approach for those types of collaborations?

Well, you have to be more comfortable doing stuff that's going to be mass market. Kind of simplifying stuff and toning it down a bit. The Microsoft thing in particular, they wanted me to do something crazy, so I did, which was great.

Do you have different feelings now than from when you were starting out about working with bigger companies, or like "selling out"?

I think that for me personally I have to work with bigger companies to keep the other stuff alive. And I also think it's fun; I like the idea of appealing to a wider demographic.

Does that come into mind even with your own collections? Are you ever like, "This idea is too weird?"

Whenever I'm designing a new collection I'll go through old stuff that I abandoned and see if I can pick it up with fresh eyes. I did that with my Fall 2017 collection; there's this print that I did for Spring that wasn't quite working. I abandoned it and I brought it back for Fall. I moved everything around and changed the colors and was like, "This is great!"

You're your own boss and basically the only employee, which means you have a lot of freedom, but at the same time you don't have the structure or mentorship you can get from working at a larger brand. How do you measure growth for yourself, how do you push yourself?

I always try to add something new to my collection. When I first started I was like, "I'm going to add pants to my collection," because pants were a challenge for me. And then I was, like, "I'm going to try sunglasses," because why not? I always try to do something a little different from the season before.

How do you personally define success?

Feeling proud of the things that I've made and put out into the world because, you know, not each one is a hit in my mind. I like some things more than others, so when I make something I feel particularly proud of I'm like, "Nice job, Ellen." Also whenever I go through a production period and there aren't that many errors, that feels like a great success.

Do you feel creatively fulfilled by your job?

I do. It's because I can do stuff like this [points to a bunch of huge panels painted with her patterns], like, "Oh, I'm going to paint some panels and call it my job!"

You created this career for yourself; you kind of just “winged it” along the way. What’s your advice for someone who wants to do their own thing but doesn’t know how to go forward?

I would say just do it, even if you don’t think you’re doing it the right way. That makes it better because then you’ll have a unique perspective. You’re making something different from what anybody else is doing because you don’t know how anybody else is doing it, so there’s no way it can be the same. Just having your own way of doing things makes it more special.

I also think that restrictions can be great for creativity, like trying to figure out how to work around something. It’s like problem solving. Something like not knowing how to use Illustrator but also designing prints in Illustrator made it so that I could only do what I could figure out how to do.

It’s kind of like learning how to play guitar by not knowing how to play guitar.

Like the Shaggs—one of my favorites.

Ellen Van Dusen recommends:

Listening to The Daily on the way to work

Yellow

Mississippi Records box set of African Guitar music

Studio slippers

Sun-In

Name

Ellen Van Dusen

Vocation

Textile Designer

Fact

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