

Tutti & Paul Bennett

HANDBAG DESIGNERS, 2T DESIGNS

While we relish the opportunity to put our own two cents in and eagerly forecast everything from the weather to the future, our conviction often falters when it comes to putting our predictions in cold, hard print. So you may be surprised to see it written here in black and white that 2T Designs is the next big thing hovering on Australia's handbags and fashion accessories horizon. Who would have thought that rubber – the material usually relegated to car tyres and sports shoes – could look so stylish or be so well suited to the fastidious world of fashion accessories? Tutti and Paul Bennett cottoned on to the fact more than two decades ago and are now converting the rest of us to this industrial material through 2T Designs' eye-catching new handbags.

It all started more than 20 years ago as Paul walked the numbered avenues of New York and stumbled across a handbag for his wife Tutti. Made from black ethyl vinyl acetate (EVA), the material we also know as rubber, this bag shows few signs of the wear and tear it has been subjected to over the past two decades and you can still see it swinging from Tutti's arm today. Twenty years later and after Tutti and Paul had worked together on many a creative project, this very bag inspired the couple to develop their own playful collection of handbags using the same material.

"We know we have created a product that fires the imagination and has great buyer appeal," Paul says. 2T Designs' collection boasts a quirky frivolity with the bags designed in the shape of animals, and you would be happily surprised at how lightweight they are considering their extreme strength.

Upon seeing the creations from 2T Designs, your instinctive reaction is to reach out and touch them. The contrast between the polished silver rivets and the black, foam-like EVA is tangible and striking.

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Bizarre but not without grace, eccentric yet distinctively pragmatic, you cannot ignore the curious mix of uncharacteristic elegance that is neatly packed into each design.

"We explored the idea of developing the range around October last year," Tutti explains. "This was at the height of the economic downturn, work was very slow and we were certainly in the frame of mind to consider our options. We literally sketched ideas at the kitchen table and the first rough prototype was made in the garage with some bright green EVA we found at Reverse Garbage in Marrickville, Sydney." Less than one year later, 2T Designs exhibited its inaugural collection of handbags at the Fashion Exposed trade fair in Sydney's Darling Harbour, where curious buyers were engrossed by the innovative craftsmanship.

It is their shared dedication to artistic innovation that fuels Tutti and Paul's creative venture, though how have they found making business with pleasure? "Sometimes rewarding and sometimes crap," Paul affectionately teases. "I'd be lying if I said combining the two didn't have its challenges. All things considered, including the fact that we've been in business together for almost 30 years, I'd say we've kept the balance fairly well. The secret has been a clear definition of roles. Tutti has been a terrific business manager, which enables me to concentrate on the design side of the business, for which I'm eternally grateful." While some companies slavishly follow trends, others create them and 2T Designs is already setting the latter category abuzz. "The great problem of course is that designers must sell their products in order to stay in business, so there is great temptation to design for the masses and leave the really innovative ideas in the bottom drawer," Paul explains. However, the masses are already rushing out to get hold of 2T Designs' handbags. Although people can sometimes err on fashion's more conservative side, they are not blind to creativity and are smart enough to snap it up when it comes their way. For more information visit www.2tdesigns.com.au