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PAIR WARMS UP TO PILLOWS

It's easy to get excited about nice pillows. They've been so heartily sponsored by interior designers as the ultimate finishing staple that one might even be tempted to forgo a shiny new espresso maker for a couple of really quality cushions—if the pillows were the gently Canadiana, reclaimed-fur or -textile ones by Ouno Design, that is.

Each luxurious, 20-by-20 cushion is meticulously hand-crafted by two emerging local artists who also happen to be best friends. "We sit around sewing these pillows having these nerdy conversations about conceptual art, so it's a very chatty cottage industry," says Lindsay Brown, who with codesigner Sarah Gee launched the fledgling business in the spring of 2004. Inside the small, Chinese Anglican church that serves as Ouno's studio (and also Brown's living room), where this interview took place, it's easy to imagine the twosome settling in amongst the forest of furs, restored pews, and other organic touches and enjoying profound conversation.

Brown has collected vintage fabrics for years; so has Gee, who moved from Victoria in 2003 and ended up living a stone's throw from Brown in the Strathcona area. One day Brown says she "marched across the park and said, 'Do you want to go into business with me?'" and Sarah said "Yes, come on in."

With that, Ouno (pronounced "oo-no", it's an uncommon name in several languages) was in motion. Beautifully crafted pillows were the first item on the menu because the women wanted to make what they couldn't find.

The fabric pillows came together easily enough, but the pair soon started looking for ways to recycle the furs that sat neglected on second-hand-store racks. Each

coat, which they used to salvage from Value Village (they now have a private source, but still use 100 percent recycled fur), is sewn together from dozens upon dozens of little pieces, the biggest part being the sleeve. Their pillows would have to be constructed in a similar way.

"You see a lot of long fur pillows with satin on the back on eBay. That's cheating, because it's easy to get a strip," protests Brown. "Ours are always squares, and always have fabric on the front and back."

To make the coveted squares, they had to learn a furrier method, which took a while to master by hand. Fortunately, it was a good time for catching up. The two had known of each other since they were children, but had never officially met until Gee moved to the city.

In the years leading up to their first acquaintance, Brown received a bachelor's degree from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, then a master's in commun'n from SFU. In 2002 she purchased the small church just east of Chinatown and was looking to make a few extra dollars on the side while converting it into a home studio and writing her first book. Gee, who got her bachelor's and master's of fine arts from UVic, had spent recent years as an editor for the prestigious Malahat Review and had enjoyed a successful visual-arts career represented by a Victoria gallery for her large, realistic fabric murals. In Vancouver, however, she was looking to start a new chapter in her artistic life.

Then there are the complex influences—from Dr. Zhivago to Japanese minimalism to the '70s—that the pair fuses so seamlessly. "There's definitely something Scandinavian and harem-y about them [the pillows]. Our tastes are modern, but soft modern," says Brown.

Asked whether they'd encountered any resistance to their choice material, Brown responds, "We were prepared for ketchup, but people are more interested that we're recycling."

Former Gucci designer Tom Ford once said that every room needs fire and fur. The Ouno studio is full of both, with flickering candles as well as the line's trademark wares throughout the airy space. The deep texture and tactile nature of the pillows warms the room, but a bleached-white rabbit or beaver throw would be just as lovely beside spring flowers come next May. Also on the books for next season are suede, leather, and fur totes. And if you want to convert your Grandpa's old 'coon coat into a chic bolster, they'll do that too.

But for now it is fur pillows with floral motifs (the pair use different pelts to create the petals and pistil) that are the line's standout numbers, while versions with coat pockets still intact are quirky bestsellers. (The Ouno line's prices range from about \$85 for a retro vintage-print textile version up to about \$280 to \$325 for a reclaimed-fur cushion and \$850 for a throw in the same material.)

"We've got one friend who puts her hands in there when she watches a movie," says Gee.

It's almost hard to imagine the pretty pillows having a practical purpose, which is not to say they wouldn't meet the challenge. "Pillow fights are totally not allowed," instructs Brown. "But it has happened and they stand up." ♦

Ouno Design's holiday sale is December 10 from noon to 4 p.m., at Keefer Street, or visit www.ounodesign.com/.