

PASSENGER

# MOVEMENT IN MANILA

Melbourne retailers Barbara and John Hermon have long championed the work of Movement 8, a contemporary Filipino design collective. *Belle* travelled with the Hermons to the source of a very individual aesthetic in the Philippine capital.

PHOTOGRAPHS STEVEN MURRAY WORDS NEALE WHITAKER



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The streets of downtown Manila's Makati district; a pensive Barbara Hermon surveys a sculpture; striking designs by Milo Naval at the Manila F.A.M.E. International expo; handmade paper by designer Wataru Satuma at the Manila F.A.M.E. International exhibition. OPPOSITE PAGE A steamy dawn breaks over the city.



PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES (DOWNTOWN MANILA)

The longer I stare at the resin sculpture the weirder it gets. The shoal of fish I saw originally has become a nest of writhing serpents or, far worse, a mouth of slithering tongues. It's quite demonic. I'm intrigued to know what Barbara Hermon thinks. "Is it a flaming sun or are those horns?" she quizzes the designer. "It's really quite disturbing, but I love it." As a quiet aside to me she confirms that it's definitely an 'ooh-ahh'.

Barbara and John Hermon's iconic Melbourne store, Hermon & Hermon, is full of what they describe as 'ooh-ahh' pieces. The first time I visited the store, a vast, dome-like lampshade made from crushed shell and paper pulp, by designer Tes Pasola, was suspended dramatically – some might say perilously – above our heads. Barbara has an eye for the show-stopper – the 'ooh-ahh' that guarantees a gut reaction, violent or otherwise – and when it comes to the Philippines, it's an eye trained by almost two decades of travelling to Manila and Cebu, during which time she has developed a close relationship with the country's most progressive designers. Philippine design accounts for more than 40 per cent of Hermon & Hermon's sales, and its Richmond-located store is arguably Australia's best-known showcase of the distinctive work of the group of Filipino creatives known collectively as Movement 8. The Hermons have long championed a design aesthetic which is often misunderstood. Little wonder the Movement 8 designers (who promote Philippine design at both local and international levels) see the Hermons – Barbara in particular – as important ambassadors for their craft in Australia.

Keeping pace with Barbara Hermon in the packed halls of F.A.M.E. International, Manila's twice-yearly exhibition of furniture and homewares, isn't easy. She has the stamina of a woman half her age. She talks animatedly and knowledgeably with the designers about their craft and the bewildering (to the novice) range of materials they employ – banana, tobacco and coconut fibres, sinamay, rattan, abaca, buri, capiz shell. Barbara has a knack for recalling names and faces and there are plenty of anecdotes. She points out the successful designer who was once a humble basket pedlar, then the manufacturer whose range of coconut-fibre products supports two entire villages. Filipino designer Ann Pamintuan, who creates extraordinary metal sculptures, is greeted like an old friend, as are other Movement 8 designers – Tony Gonzales, Tes Pasola, Milo Naval and Reimon Gutierrez. Away from the exhibition, we also meet artist Ivan Acuña (who shares his large industrial studio with more than 600 carved 'bululs', or rice gods). And, in the Philippine design capital, Cebu, acclaimed designers Kenneth Cobonpue and Luisa Robinson.

"Philippine design has really come of age in recent years," explains Barbara. "It's developed dramatically with the emergence of such great designers. There's often a misconception around design from the Philippines. Our customers are sometimes quite surprised to hear that our designs are from there as the expectation is always the tourist handicrafts and the hand-embroidered sinamay objects you find everywhere."

It was the vast range of simple, modern designs in natural fibres and the potential for development that originally drew the Hermons to the Philippines. Designer Tes Pasola describes the contemporary Philippine aesthetic as "the marriage of the natural to the clean and industrial" and Barbara Hermon agrees. "Tes is right. Philippine design has a modernity; it has the edge on other countries in the region. And with sustainability such an important concern, the use of natural fibres and traditional techniques make these designs very appropriate for now." **15**



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM John and Barbara Hermon discuss Ivan Acuña's work in the artist's studio; Ivan Acuña (left); a sketch and a laugh at the Manila F.A.M.E. International expo; a dramatic metal work by Ann Pamintuan at the show.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Tony Gonzales; his display at the Manila F.A.M.E. International expo; an outsized day bed by Locsin International; Tes Pasola; her display at the Manila F.A.M.E. International expo; a steel lamp from her latest collection.



TONY GONZALES

### TONY GONZALES

One of the founding members of Movement 8, Tony Gonzales is known as Paper Man. His core business is paper, with two mills in the province of Legaspi producing both handmade and machine-made paper, but this Renaissance man has also worked in advertising, printmaking and photography. He is an established artist and also designs outdoor furniture and lamps. As a passionate advocate of the Philippine design industry, Tony has also curated the Movement 8 stand at overseas trade fairs in Milan, New York, Frankfurt, Düsseldorf, Cologne, Paris and Dubai. Despite his almost ubiquitous presence at Manila F.A.M.E. International across many design disciplines, you won't find Tony selling his art. "Deep inside we're all artists," he says, "but I believe we have to keep a line between selling our art and selling our souls."



### TES PASOLA

If Tony Gonzales is Paper Man, then Tes Pasola could justifiably be described as Paper Woman. Tes's work is informed by her lifelong relationship with paper. "Paper is light and flexible and easy to work with, I'm challenged by the fact it's flat. I try to make it three-dimensional," she says. In addition to her work at Mind Masters, the paper art company for which she is president and product designer, Tes is a consultant to numerous companies, a founding member of Movement 8, and the creative director of Manila F.A.M.E. International. "I see myself as a designer and an artist," she explains, "and I'm fortunate to be able to design for many people across different mediums." Tes has recently experimented with a variety of mediums, including the wire work she exhibited at Manila F.A.M.E. International (above). She is passionate about Philippine design and proud of her heritage. "We are Filipinos but we are Asians, and we are creating design with a mix of influences. Ultimately, I would like to see a show for Asia, not just the Philippines, to rival the European shows."





### LUISA ROBINSON

Luisa de los Santos Robison founded her company *Accessoria* in 1998. Trained in both interior and industrial design, she designs furniture and accessories in an intriguing and exotic mix of materials, such as tobacco leaf, eggshell, snakeskin, bamboo, vines and fossilised stones. More than 100 new designs are added each year to the range, which is available in Australia, USA, Portugal, France, Italy and the UK. Luisa's industrial-style warehouse and showroom are in a surprisingly rural location, around 17 kilometres from the central Philippine province of Cebu. Cebu is the traditional centre of the Philippine furniture-making industry, being closer than Manila to many of the islands where the furniture is manufactured, as well as closer to the source of many of the materials. The synthesis of form and function is important to Luisa and many of her designs have a sensual femininity.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Luisa Robison; Luisa's Cebu showroom is 17km from the city; the designer's sensual, organic shapes use an exotic mix of materials; Barbara and Luisa discuss pieces that will be exclusive to Hermon & Hermon.



## KENNETH COBONPUE

Kenneth Cobonpue's sleek Cebu showroom displays the curvaceous furniture with kitsch names, such as Yoda, Chiquita and Suzy Wong, that have brought their young creator to the attention of a growing international audience. The acclaimed and much-awarded designer has featured in the prestigious *International Design Yearbook* and his company manufactures products for such design luminaries as Marcel Wanders at Moooi, Tom Dixon and Ross Lovegrove. *Time* magazine credited Kenneth as being rattan's "first great virtuoso". He recently designed a set for the movie *Ocean's Thirteen* and has created an installation for the interior of the forthcoming restaurant Nobu Dubai. It's all good news for Kenneth Cobonpue, but it's also great for Philippine design. Kenneth, also a founding member of the Movement 8 collective, considers the Philippines to be "a leader in terms of creativity" and is often invited to speak on South-East-Asian design overseas. He is arguably its most visible current ambassador. "The starting point of all our designs is the materials. All the pieces are organic and handmade [Kenneth employs 250 people at his Cebu factory and numerous contractors around the Philippines], and are made using innovative, unique production techniques," he says.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT  
Kenneth Cobonpue sits on  
one of his own designs – the  
Yoda chair; his Voyage bed;  
Kenneth's designs are made  
by hand at his factory in  
Cebu; Barbara examining the  
designer's rattan Biba lamp.

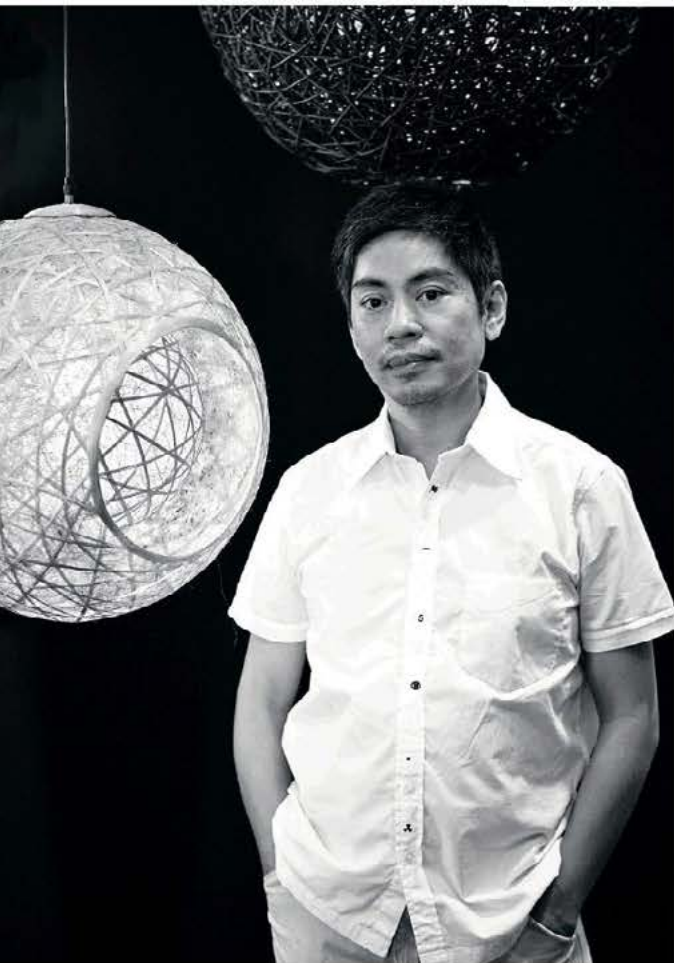




CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Day bed by Milo Naval; his designs at the Manila F.A.M.E. International expo; the designer himself; another aspect of Milo Naval's display at the expo; designer Reimon Gutierrez.

## MILO NAVAL

A student of both architecture and interior design, Milo Naval founded his design company Evolve Designs in 1997. His "clean, clear and free of fuss" furniture designs are exported all around the world. Milo was a co-founder of Movement 8 and explains the '8' was chosen not because there were eight designers, but because "it [symbolically] meant infinity in terms of ideas". He is committed to promoting Philippine design in overseas markets and recognises that reaching the broadest possible audience is vital for the industry's growth. "My work is contemporary in form and ideas," he explains, "but I still use natural and indigenous materials. There's an important nationalistic element in promoting Philippine products." Milo's work has been shown in Paris, New York and Milan, and he is on the creative committee of Manila F.A.M.E. International.



## REIMON GUTIERREZ

A native of the northern province of Pampanga, Reimon Gutierrez trained as an architect. He describes himself as the misfit of Movement 8 as he has "worked more with spaces than with products". Reimon spent seven years working with indigenous communities around the Philippines conducting "creativity workshops" to nurture traditional crafts. "I thought I was going to teach them, but they taught me," he laughs, adding that for rural communities in the Philippines, the design industry has serious repercussions. "Whole communities can live off just one of Tes's or Milo's designs." Reimon is now working as a freelance designer, working with sustainable materials. "There is so much potential in the Philippines, but design must sell. It must be relevant and useful; somebody must need it." He is convinced that in our society there is "a deep need for design. Design is the conversation between an individual trying to find himself and how the world perceives him. It's an important part of identity."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The Manila skyline at night; sun setting over Manila Bay, Makati; artwork at the Manila F.A.M.E. International expo; a jeepney, the window display of Firma, one of Barbara Hermon's favourite Philippine stores; locals in the old quarter.



## BARBARA HERMON'S PHILIPPINES ADDRESS BOOK

### **SLEEPING & RELAXATION**

**Sofitel Philippine Plaza Manila**, CCP Complex Roxas Boulevard, Pasay City, Metro Manila – “the Royal Foot Reflex Therapy is my must-do on arrival or after a long day at the Manila F.A.M.E. exhibition.” [www.sofitel.com](http://www.sofitel.com)

### **EATING**

**Bistro Remedios**, 1911 M. Adriatico Street, Manila – serves traditional Philippine food. **Sala**, Locsin Building, 6752 Ayala Avenue, Makati City, Metro Manila – serves modern fusion food. [www.salarestaurant.com](http://www.salarestaurant.com)

### **SHOPPING & SEEING**

**Firma**, 36 Juno Street, Bel-Air II, Makati City – has home accessories and jewellery. **Fino Leather**, Level 3, Edsa Shangri-La Shopping Centre, Makati City. **Budji Living**, 233 Nicanor Garcia Street, Bel-Air II, Makati City – stocks modern home furnishings. **Maria Closa**, Casa Tesoro, 1335 A. Mabini Street, Manila – has wood sculptures and traditional artefacts. **Galleria Duemila**, 210 Loring Street, Pasay City, Metro Manila – a contemporary art gallery.

