FUNCTION & FANTASY

Strange and wonderful objects—a transparent medical bag, wildly patterned frying pans, a mutant stethoscope—abound in the east London studio of Nipa Doshi and Jonathan Levien. They’re all part of an idiosyncratic approach to design which marries rigorous utilitarianism with the exuberant style of Doshi’s native India. Text: Albert Hill. Photography: Rachael Smith
In among the sketches, models and mounds that litter any thriving design studio, a selection of strange and wonderful objects can be found scattered across the east London office of Doshi Levien. Up in the window sits a crystal-studded doctor’s bag, while an eerie imitation lampshade dangles from the far wall. A delicate paper-dress, patched up with embroidered plaiters, hangs above a desk.

Meticulously hand-crafted in Britain and India, each of these curious items was designed by Nipa Doshi and Jonathan Levien as part of a striking window display that recently occupied the windows of the Wellcome Trust on London’s Euston Road. Now dismantled, the display (which depicted a fictional doctor’s surgery) was the first in a series of three that the couple will install over the course of a year. Intended, as Levien says, ‘to present to passers-by the missions, objectives and history’ of what is the world’s largest private biomedical charity, the engaging displays have not only brought some much-needed life to one of London’s dreariest thoroughfares but has also firmly established the reputation of the Bedding Doshi Levien design office.

Doshi and Levien, who live together above their studio, first met at the Royal College of Art. Levien was born in Scotland, leaving school at 16 to train as a cabinetmaker, while Doshi was born in Bombay, gaining her first degree from the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. After graduating from the RCA in 1997, the pair pursued separate careers—Doshi with architect David Chipperfield and Levien with product designer Ross Lovegrove—before joining forces three years later. The union was made with little fanfare; one day we just answered the phone with “Doshi Levien” rather than our usual “hello”! Laughs Levien.

Doshi and Levien’s differing approaches to design dovetail astonishingly well. ‘Nipa prefers to sit and dream and produce paintings, explains Levien, while I try to translate them into real life. Levien’s very British background also seems to sit snugly with Doshi’s typically Indian upbringing. A quick glance around their studio space proves just how seamlessly the two cultures have been intertwined in the life of the couple. Sipping spiced chai tea at a table designed by Terence Woodgate, the pair point out that while they are great admirers of the sort of utilitarian design frequently encountered on the streets of east London, they also revel in the “myth and magic” that abounds in Indian culture.

Doshi Levien’s infatuation with function and fantasy emerge strongly in their work. The tajines, karhais and wall tiki they created for “Rita!” for instance, look the very definition of rigorous design. Hang them up, however, and you see elaborate Eastern patterns swirling across their bases. “We think a lot about what makes you enjoy something you own,” says Levien. “In India,” adds Doshi, “objects are seen as your companions, so a lot of love is invested in them.” Bus drivers routinely decorate their vehicles and, every day, women make a pattern from rice flour on the ground outside their houses.

Doshi is always amused that it took her move away from India to prompt a true appreciation of the visual culture...
A sculptural ‘Vibrascope’ from the first Whitworth Trust installation is displayed in the centre of the exposed 19th-century basement. The 1960s school desk came from Notting Hill market.
with which she grew up. "When I was studying in Ahmed-
abad, my designs were very strict, very Bushra," she says, "but coming to London made me realise just what I had."

Today Doshi keeps numerous reminders of her homeland in their east London studio. Brass rice paddles hang alongside richly coloured fabric swatches and thick, gleam-
ing strings of bangles. Two Indian posters depicting elec-
trical appliances and kitchen articles also display a rather
more emotive approach to graphic design than that seen
in the anonymous pages of British catalogues.

Providing a backdrop for Doshi's selection of Indian
ephemera are the austere walls of this ex-industrial space
built in the 1890s. Levien discovered it was once a print
works, when a shower of letters fell on him as he stripped the
celing. Keen to retain the industrial feel of the space, Levien
has left many of the walls bare and covered others in subdued RIBA paints. Adding to the air of pragmatism, their
Miele washing machine has been given pride of place ("It has
so few buttons," Doshi enthuses, and "is so heavy it doesn't
shake"), while a hospital trolley holds their tea-making appa-
ratus. Making most of their proximity to Spitalfields
market, they have also acquired numerous useful-looking
sets of drawers and a sturdy 1950s school desk (which they
had to spend hours ridding of decades-old chewing gum).

Despite owning such a seeming mix of objects, the
overall appearance of their studio space is commendably
cohesive. Such talent for presentation, clearly, prompted the
Wellcome Trust to ask Doshi Levien to do their window dis-
plays. "Story-telling," Doshi says, "is a big part of our design."
The story to be told about the Wellcome Trust is one that
many have struggled to comprehend. Established in 1936,
the charity does not accept donations, surviving on the abun-
dant legacy left by the pharmacist Henry Wellcome. Neither
does the trust, as people seem to assume, produce drugs. Its
field of research is also confusingly non-specific. The general
aim is to further the understanding of human and animal
health, a mission on which the trust spends upwards of £1
million a day. "Curiosity funding" is how Doshi Levien have
described the trust's remit, spelling this phrase out in a
large, elegant typeface across the façade of the charity's
HQ as part of their second installation.

Doshi and Levien now declare themselves hungry to
create proper theatre sets. They have already sent a pleading
letter to the Old Vic but have yet to get a reply. In the mean-
time, they have been working on luggage, a range of cutlery
and graceful, lightly boxed glasses for Habitat plus a
collection of motorbike accessories for a firm based in India.

Indeed, Doshi Levien are seeking more collaborations
with Indian companies and eventually hope to maintain off-
cices in both Britain and India. The couple certainly make
a convincing case for this cross-pollination of cultures. But
Bemmbly, they do, as Doshi and Levien continue to concen-
trate on brightening up the everyday lives of Londoners.

Ring Doshi Levien on 020 7375 1327. Their displays can be seen at
the Wellcome Trust, 215 Euston Rd, London NW1 until 23 Sept

This page, from top: stationary is made from old Indian packaging;
gold-plated cutlery lies beneath a presentation board for
Doshi Levien's 'Mesh' glasses; the trumpet-shaped lampshade
was used in the fake doctor's surgery set. Opposite: a crystal-
studded acrylic medical bag, from the same installation, stands
alongside a Tefal tajine and models for a new range of sınıenthal

109