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Summer Daze

Good design runs in the family at one buzzed-about Chicago firm By Amalie Drury | Photography by Maia Harms



Walking into Summer Thornton's Lincoln Park studio is like stepping into a high-design version of the opening scene in *Legally Blonde*. All is girly and bright, the main wall is covered in flowers, upbeat music fills the room, and two pretty, shiny-maned blondes hold court, perched in their respective office chairs while perkily debating paint colors and fabric swatches.

At 28 and 27 respectively, Thornton and Whitney Mersman—her cousin, best friend and now design partner, hired to help manage the ever-heavier workload—still look like sorority sisters, but in three short years Summer Thornton Design has landed enough big-time jobs that at this point, no one could mistake the firm for being anything less than a major force on Chicago's interiors scene.

The two designers each have some street cred on their résumé: Thornton studied

studio art and entrepreneurship at North Central College in Naperville, and later, she “learned everything” about how to transform a room during a stint as a design assistant with Melanie Elston. Mersman holds a degree in interior design from Olivet Nazarene University in Bourbonnais, and her first job was at Smartrooms in the Merchandise Mart. But that’s not what brings clients in the door. Color is. The eye-popping, fearless, sometimes reckless, always fun use of color.

“Summer doesn’t hold back, and I think that’s what sets her apart from other designers,” says Mersman, shooting a grin across the table at her cousin. “She’s very free. I’m the technical one, always telling her she can’t fit a big cabinet into a small space or whatever.”

“Whitney usually wins,” Thornton laughs. In general, she says, the clients CONTINUED...



MELDING POT Clockwise from top left: A vignette in Summer Thornton's office; Whitney Mersman and Thornton in the newly renovated office where Designer's Guild Orangerie wallpaper blooms big; a ceramic elephant side table.



THEN AND WOW
Above: Mersman and Thornton work away at their matching desks.
Below: The Thornton-designed boutique interiors of Cerato.

...CONTINUED her firm attracts are “the bigger risk-takers.” One woman, whose sprawling home has been a project in the works with Summer Thornton Design for two years, lets the pair go wild, which they love. “She’ll do things people in their right minds wouldn’t do,” says Thornton with a hint of glee in her voice. “In some of her bedrooms we wallpapered the walls in one paper, used a different paper on the ceiling, and installed

patterned carpet, too. And she wants the garage to be a garage-slash-ballroom!”

It’s that sense of adventure and risk-taking that makes working with Thornton so exhilarating—and not just for clients. “Summer often has ideas for furniture pieces that don’t exist, so she sends me ideas that I custom build for her clients,” says furniture designer Bladon Conner, who appreciates how challenging and rewarding that kind of work can be.

“I get the sense that she never had to ‘learn’ design. She is a natural,” he says. “It’s a talent that allows her to make quick, solid decisions without a lot of back and forth. She’s not afraid of design and has a sophisticated, unique aesthetic—mixing colors, fabrics, materials and even styles in ways that don’t fit neatly into a specific category. I think her clients appreciate her ability to be luxurious while also designing out-of-the-box.”

Some of those clients prefer to take baby steps into Thornton’s aqua-blue design pool. At a recently completed full-floor unit in The Palmolive Building, for instance, the owners, a more conservative couple who live mostly in Atlanta, let Thornton and Mersman push their sensibilities in subtler ways. “We did a lacquered dining room, an almost-black bathroom and a lot of vintage, which they were new to but excited about,” Thornton says. The resulting look is definitely elegant enough to work in one of the stateliest buildings in the Gold Coast, but not so safe as to be lacking in personality.

Hanging out in The Palmolive on Michigan Avenue in Chicago is a far leap from the designers’ down-to-earth childhoods in central Illinois. CONTINUED...

“I started thinking it would be fun to reference our childhood in the ’80s.” -Summer Thornton





“Summer doesn’t hold back, and I think that’s what sets her apart from other designers.” —Whitney Mersman

...CONTINUED “I grew up in the country, surrounded by cornfields,” Thornton says.

“I grew up ‘in town,’” adds Mersman with a smile and air quotes. The pair admits that a certain sense of grandma-chic creeps into their designs, and looking around the office, the legacy is obvious. Maybe it’s the wallpaper. “But look closely—there’s a kind of digitized, chopped-up effect to the flowers,” Thornton points out. “It has some edge.” Initially, Thornton says, she envisioned the office as a flashy, all-white homage to the ’80s. “But then it turned out she wasn’t going to be happy until she covered the wall in floral,” Mersman explains.

“I started thinking it would be fun to reference our childhood in the ’80s. We have all these pictures of us as kids wearing

matching floral dresses, and I wanted to bring in that retro feel. I wanted to celebrate us as besties,” Thornton says.

With plenty of projects to keep things crackling at her young but booming firm, Thornton is caught a little off

guard by a question about what the future of Summer Thornton Design might look like. “Hmm. I think we’d definitely like to do more commercial projects,” she says after a thoughtful pause. “I’d love to do a hotel or restaurant, and eventually, a book would be a really big dream of mine.” (Design books stacked around the office include one of Tim Walker pictures and a hefty Kelly Wearstler tome.) And as for the idea of more employees, the cousins seem too content in their cozy partnership to consider it just yet. “If our firm expands we’ll hire more help, but there are times when we think we’d have to change our personas to have anyone else in the office,” Thornton says. “Right now we’re having fun, just the two of us.” ■

DETAILS, DETAILS *Clockwise from top left:* In Thornton’s office, a close-up of her inspiration board; Thornton pinning up new inspiration fodder, which ranges from fashion to patterns to architecture; pattern-popping wallpaper at Cerato boutique; an elegant bedroom in the home Thornton designed in The Palmolive.