

Design a+ First Sight

BY AMY LEIBROCK



DESIGN HELP

The logo and graphics for Help Remedies, products for simple health issues, exemplify Little Fury's stripped-down style. "We push for the essentials in everything—the essential message, the essential colors, the essential patterns," says designer Tina Chang.

1+1 = Little Fury

The tale of this design partnership sounds like a love story, but Little Fury works hard on their happily-ever-after like a real couple, rather than a fairytale.

Two people go to the same college, then work for the same company (at different times), but don't meet until a friend innocently brings them together. They get together over coffee, connect instantly, talk for hours about their dreams, and at the end of the night ... vow to quit their jobs and start a product line. It's not how most love stories begin, but that's because it's the story of design soulmates, not lovers. Tina Chang and Esther Mun—two Korean-American New Yorkers who own the young product design company Start Here and design studio Little Fury—weren't looking for the perfect work partners when they met in 2005. But having spent most of their careers working for big firms like Pentagram and Duffy & Partners, they were both searching for the next step.

KINDRED SPIRITS

Mun was recommended to Chang by a friend for a design position she was hiring for at Martha Stewart Living. As they talked about the job, each sensed the other's desire to do something on her own. They met for coffee, and the first of many brainstorming sessions began. "We just started dreaming aloud," Chang says. "It was like, 'What would you do if you could do anything?'"

That night they quickly crystallized the idea of starting a line of modular notebooks inspired by Esther's practice of stitching notebooks together to create an archive. "We pretty much came up with the idea and the name, and decided that we were going to quit our jobs all in one night," Chang says. "It sounds a little crazy because we'd never worked together and we never were friends ... and it *ivas* crazy. But somehow, when it was all happening, it all made sense and it seemed very natural."

Over the next several months, they put their coffee shop plan into action by quitting their jobs and officially starting their partnership. But while they began perfecting their notebook design, researching materials and making prototypes, they still had to eat. "Being designers, it was just natural that we would also design together," Chang explains.

For the design studio side of the business, they chose the name Little Fury—a name Chang had used for her freelance work—inspired by a Breeders song. Luckily, it fit Mun's persona as well as Chang's—both are petite, soft-spoken women with big ideas and strong opinions about design.

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Initially, Little Fury picked up agency work through contacts the pair had from former jobs, but they soon realized it would be difficult to make a name for themselves if they were always working under another agency's umbrella. So they went after their own clients, looking especially for those who were starting from scratch with a new identity.

"We like to start from the identity," Chang says, "because the way we work is so much about an experience. We really need to wrap our heads around and form the bigger idea." Since then, they've done just that for clients like Help Remedies, which sells bandages and headache pills, and Sulloc Cha, a Korean tea product.

As they were establishing a design brand, Chang and Mun also were immersing themselves in their notebook development. The name they gave their product line—Start flere—reflects a core mission to give people a platform for creativity. Their original line of notebooks features covers made of YUPO synthetic paper—a white, wipeable material that you can draw on, wipe clean and drawn on again. Through an incredibly simple sleeve design, you can link the notebooks together. When they're not linked, the sleeve functions as a storage pocket. They chose a standard 5-by-7-inch size with graph, lined and blank paper inside.

"One of the main points of Start Here was the idea that we give you a starting point, but we really want the user to run with it and not be dictated to in terms of what an ideal way of working or an ideal way of organizing is," Chang says.



STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Esther Muir's and Tina Chang's partnership started here ... with an idea for a simple notebook system they dubbed Start Here. Producing and selling a product has helped them identify with their design clients. "We're very sensitive to people because we understand the nervousness of putting your own money down and how you can go crazy over little things," Chang says.





ORDINARY ELEGANCE

Mun and Chang love to design for ordinary, everyday products like toothpaste. This project for Rembrandt was their first collaboration. They rebranded it with a new logo and package to elevate it to match its luxury price (\$8 per tube). The clean, simple and friendly graphics give way to a flood of color when you open the boxes.

Even though the finished product looks extremely simple, it went through many stages and forced the duo to analyze and define their point of view on good design. The process provided just the type of energy they had been missing in their client-driven work. "We really got to know our aesthetics a lot better because this was the first time we were producing our own thing," Chang says.

The pair soon discovered that, like many designers, they always strive for simplicity in their work, but that they also share a particular sense of practicality they hadn't found in other designers. "We're not fancy. We don't like labels. We don't like luxury goods," Chang explains. "Donna Karan would be a terrible client for us. Toilet paper would be an amazing client for us."

IMMIGRANTS' SONG

Part of Chang and Mun's similar points-of-view could be chalked up to their similar training at the School of

Visual Arts and at the same design firms, but it goes deeper than that. Is it because they're both Korean? Sort of. They feel their philosophy is more informed by their immigrant background rather than their ethnicity. Both came to the U.S. from Korea as children and had parents who worked very hard to make a living.

"When we came, we didn't have a lot of money, so the things we bought, we really conserved. It had to last. It couldn't be something you were going to throw away in a few months," Chang says. "I think we've lost a lot of that.. Good design is expensive and therefore can be passed down. Cheap things are breakable, and you can't pass them down. But I remember—a time when that wasn't so. It didn't have to be one thing or another. Those are the things that I appreciate about design—practical, beautiful, functional for everyday."

"We just feel like even/body should own and use nicely designed things and be surrounded by that," Mun says. "You don't have to be rich to afford that kind

4 WAYS TO FIND YOUR STRIDE AS A YOUNG STUDIO

Tina Chang and Esther Mun say that one of the hardest things about starting their own design business has been finding their unique voice, especially since they both previously worked for high-profile studios. "They do amazing work, and it's easy to kind of churn their ideas and philosophies and way of working into your way of working," Chang admits about being a designer at a big-name firm. "We can do nice design, but I realized that a lot of people can do nice design and somehow that wasn't enough."

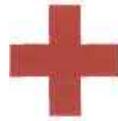
Now in the third year of their partnership, the duo has decided they need to merge Start Here, their product line, and Little Fury, their design firm, into a single entity with the mission to bring practicality, functionality and smart design to the mass market. It may make perfect sense from the outside, but it took some work for Chang and Mung to figure it out. Here are four tips for young studios struggling to define their identity:

1 Look forward, not backward. When Mun and Chang began Little Fury, their networks were tethered to larger design and ad agencies, which was good financially. But they knew they would never come into their own if they didn't forge ahead and attract their own clients. As a result, they worked hard to get projects from several start-ups, a tactic that was more in line with their mission and more fulfilling to them creatively.

2 Put your passion into it. When they formed their partnership, offering design services was a means to launching their dream, the Start Here products. "We just had this really clear line," Chang explains. "What we've found is that those two lines can actually bleed into each other." Blending the two businesses will help give Start Here that unique stamp they've been searching for. "What we're trying to do now is re-examine what gets us excited and [determine] how we bring that into the reality of the design service," Chang says. "We enjoy designing as long as it has the underlying philosophy of Start Here."

3 Give it time. Don't expect to figure out your mission and identity on Day One. "You can't start that too early on because you have no idea what kinds of clients you're going to get, how you're going to work, what your process is like," Chang says. "We couldn't have answered those questions early on. Now, in our third year, we can look back and be deliberate about how to move forward as a design entity."

4 Go to Puerto Rico. Little Fury has been affected by the sluggish economy like everyone else, and they've used the slowdown to indulge in a little self-administered business therapy. The partners took a long weekend trip to Puerto Rico to focus on who they are and where they want to be in the future. That's where they decided to merge Start Here and Little Fury into one entity. "Our trip was really about going back to that [night we met] where we kind of free-flowed and talked," Chang says. "I think it's important to do that because you can get stuck in reality too much, and then you feel stuck with that reality. But the whole reason you started your own business is to create your own reality and be challenged by it."



INSPIRING FINDS .

Chang (far left) and Mun collect odds and ends that inspire them and keep them on a wall in their office, organized in CD sleeves. Most items were acquired randomly, either off the ground or from packages they've received. Mun also haunts 99-cent stores. "She finds the best things," Chang says. Check out their blog, www.furyfinds.com, for more.



of mentality. So whenever we get projects, it's work, it's more down to earth. Design for everyone, but still very well thought out, very detail-oriented."

Chang and Mun learned just how challenging it can be to design well for the mass market as they developed their notebooks. "At every turn we could've done a cheaper, crappier version that would have brought down the price point, made our profit margin larger, saved us a lot of money, and probably most consumers might not even notice the difference," Chang explains. "But it's adhering to a certain standard that we want."

Their latest line of notebooks, which retail for \$14 to \$16, are 100% biodegradable, manufactured locally and made of mostly postconsumer fibers—all qualities they had to work to achieve. "You are constantly asked to lower your standard at every point, so it was challenging," Chang says. "The other thing we said is that if we're stuck with 10,000 of these notebooks, we'd better love it. If we had 10,000 crappy notebooks, that would suck. Whatever we're making, we have to be happy with it if we don't sell any of it."

FROM HERE TO THERE

The notebooks are only the starting point for Start Here. "The bigger philosophy for Start Here is really this idea of practical, functional, smart design for the masses," Mun says. "Notebooks were an easy start." The pair recently began producing a tote bag kit, with a screen-printed grid, that comes with a needle and thread so customers can stitch their own designs. "It's about trying to leverage everybody's individual taste and personality, but I feel like people don't quite know

how to get there on their own, so we're trying to provide that platform," Chang says.

She and Mun have notebooks full of ideas: the perfect desk, window blinds, trash cans, a laundry bag. Eventually they would like to expand their line and open a store to sell their products, as well as help other budding product designers bring their wares to market. Oh, and it would have a coffee bar that would serve just one size for one price. "It seems like we really want to take things into the monotonous land, but we're really reacting against the concept of being inundated with choices," Chang explains.

Even though Chang and Mun are usually on the same page about most things, like any good relationship, they have distinct personalities and different execution styles. Mun is illustrative and Chang is more type-driven, but they find these skills complement each other rather than clash. "The more we work together, we realize that I have holes, and it just happens to be the things that she's really strong in, and I'm strongest in things she's weaker in," Chang says.

And after four years as partners, they haven't lost that creative connection that was sparked in the coffee shop. "I always hated working in groups because I always felt like I was compromising," Chang says. "But with Esther, I do feel like that first night just repeats itself every time we start something."

"It's like a marriage," Mun jokes. "We just need to adopt a dog." HOW

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