



THE NEW GENERATION

SARA ANG: FORGED IN FIRE

Joining her mother's glassmaking company, second-generation leader Sara Ang sees herself as a steward of traditions.

By HELMI YUSOF

MAKING GLASS ART IS ENORMOUSLY difficult: Sand, limestone and soda ash are melted at very high temperatures, until they transform into a glob of molten glass. One blows into it to turn it into a vessel, and sculpt it while it's hot. If it cools too quickly, it develops a crack. If the chemical mix isn't right, it will topple to the ground. Glass factories are littered with failed attempts and misshapen objects, evidence of the countless unsuccessful efforts required to create the perfect glass piece.

This arduous process serves as a fitting analogy for Sara Ang's trial by fire in the glass-making world. Eleven years ago, she joined her mother's glass company Synergraphic Design after finishing a business degree at Singapore Management University. Almost from the get-go, she had to master the intricacies of finance, team leadership and delegation, sales and marketing, and business growth and scaling, in addition to the craft of glass-making.

Her mother Florence Ng, an artist by training, was running a tight ship with over two dozen employees. She founded the company in 1986 and built a roster of clients over the years. But competition from the Chinese market was coming on strong, and Ang had to figure out how the company could stay ahead in a fast-changing environment.

"The firm had been focused on B2B, working directly with interior design companies. Most of its revenue had come from hospitality projects, almost half of which were overseas," recalls Ang. "By the time I joined the company, the market was simply not the same. We had to figure out ways to continue doing what we did, while also cultivating new customer segments such as a B2C market. We could not afford to carry on as we did."

Diversification included the introduction of a new affordable arm called SynerG for home and interior clients, as well as ArteGlas, a website that offers bespoke art, sculpture and objet d'art to retail customers. Following a worldwide trend of

companies transforming their waste into useful products, Ang also began working with the firm's craftspeople to upcycle its glass cut-offs into functional and decorative pieces.

Despite countless challenges along the way - including the shuttering of SynerG because of its low return on investment - many of these developments helped raise Synergraphic's visibility in the industry. Regular clients comprise local and international designers, brands and developers, not to mention hundreds of homeowners looking to find or commission a one-of-a-kind glass feature for their homes.

A NEW GLASS BRAND

Synergraphic is now collaborating with well-known industrial designer Olivia Lee to create a new line of functional art glass objects that would be bold and distinct enough to be showcased at major design fairs such as the Milan Furniture Fair. "It will neither be a furniture brand nor a glassware brand," Ang says. "It will be a glass brand, respecting all the qualities and potential of glass. It is a subtle difference, but there is a difference."

"Glass is one of very few natural materials that allow light to pass through it. It can be transparent, translucent or reflective. It can be very strong or extremely fragile. And it can last for centuries with little decay - unlike, say, metal, that will rust or tarnish. In short, it can be

made into a whole spectrum of products, from the purely functional and foundational to the decorative and collectible."

Ang, who is married with a three-year-old daughter, says that despite the firm's milestones, the journey to get to each one was often painful and exhausting: "In the early years of my joining the company, there were many times when I wasn't sure if I wanted to stay. I had to ask myself, where do I see myself in Synergraphic and its future?"

But what ultimately tipped the scales and made her stay were her affection for the long-time craftspeople who have worked in the company for decades - as well as her love for her mother.

"My mother founded the company in 1986. If we didn't keep the company going, it would be a waste. Some of our senior craftspeople have devoted their entire lives to mastering the art of glass-making. The knowledge that they have is rich and tremendous - even if it isn't obvious to the outside world. And they still have so much to contribute to society."

"I see my role as one that goes beyond the bottom line. I see myself as a steward who holds the responsibility of preserving this space for them, and helping them pass down this knowledge and expertise to future generations. There are still more surprises in glass that we have yet to discover."

"Some of our senior craftspeople have devoted their entire lives to mastering the art of glass-making. I see myself as a steward who holds the responsibility of helping them pass down this knowledge and expertise to future generations."

SARA ANG