

# Paper weight

Filipina artist and designer Tes Pasola is tearing up preconceptions with her curvaceous textural paper creations.

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For most of us, paper is purely a means to an end – a functional container for objects, or something to write on. For self-declared paper advocate Tes Pasola, it is so much more. Through her barrier-breaking art and design she is on a mission to exalt the humble medium to its rightful place as an end in itself – its own object and idea.

But then the Manila-born artist has always thought outside the box. The third of four children, Pasola was never interested in ready-made toys. "I would fashion and create things and objects from the litter in my father's workshop," she remembers. "Ditto with wood scavenged from the carpentry. I literally made my own playground."

After breezing through art school and university she met and married inventor Ronnie Pasola and helped him design and market *The Game of the Generals*, which became an iconic board game in the Philippines. Her entrepreneurial and innovative spirit then led her to experiment with wheat sculptures, which found their way into the export market.

Pasola's interest in paper began innocently enough. Searching for suitable packaging material, she

stumbled upon a piece of paint-spattered, crumpled paper, which inspired her to mix mesh and pulp fibre for her first batik on paper series. Spurred on by increasing demands from buyers she experimented further with handmade paper, playing with different textures and churning out reams of stationery products.

Somewhere along the way, her fascination for paper became an obsession and Pasola knew she'd found the one. "It's like meeting a guy," she explains. "We met, fell in love, and now have a relationship. It wasn't planned and it still goes on. It could have been metal or glass. In my case, it was paper that I fell in love with. It's probably because I'm an artist and paper is a given companion. Like any relationship you take care of your partner, nurture it, keep loving it and you defend it. It's a love affair I have with paper."

And just when many of her fellow Filipino creatives were feeling the pinch from the onslaught of competition from China, Pasola's newfound passion opened her eyes to paper's potential as an independent medium – not simply a vessel for art, but art itself. From that realisation came a succession of stunning collages made solely from handmade

paper, itself fashioned from virgin pulp of *abaca* – Manila hemp – sieved and made into sheets that are stripped down into components.

Her bold, swirling, textural creations exude warmth, earthiness and vitality. The urge to touch them is almost irresistible. For a recent show she made a rug from paper twine, to challenge preconceptions about paper's abilities. "Paper is not as used as it could be, because everyone views the material as having so many limitations. I'd like to think I defy those constraints to give paper a chance to prove its worth," she says.

That ambition has fuelled her powers of invention, daring her to create sculptures and giant hanging lamps made from crushed shell and paper pulp on wire frames, not to mention a collection of vases, lamps and candlesticks made from paper.

The James Bound collection emerged from Pasola's passion for fashioning her own books by experimenting with unusual shapes and uses for them. Using handmade paper, old newspapers and fresh leaves, Pasola created wads of odd-shaped pages that were die-cut and



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Previous page, foreground: Giant Paper Candlesticks; background: Paper Rain. This page, from left to right: Tes Pasola; the James Bound Hanging Vases, made from old newspapers and inspired by Pasola's passion for fashioning her own books into unusual shapes.



bound in the same way as books, before being fanned out to create the rippling structure of the vase. A detachable aluminium container in the centre holds the water and prevents the paper from getting wet.

The functionality, originality and aesthetic beauty of the James Bound collection won Pasola a Good Design Award in 2003 from the Tokyo Design Council and consolidated her growing international reputation as a premier paper artist. Her work has been exhibited in New York, Milan, Paris, Valencia, Tokyo and Dubai under the banner of Movement 8, a loose alliance of Filipino artists and designers whose mission is to present to the world the face and the reality of Filipino design. She has also consulted with the likes of Karim Rashid and Swarovski.

A buyer of Pasola's work for the past 12 years, Barbara Hermon of Hermon and Hermon in Melbourne attempts to define the artist's development.

"I suppose you could say that she has become more daring and in some ways more sophisticated in her use of paper, from making small items to the 'ooh aah' pieces such as oversized candlesticks and sculptures." For Hermon, Pasola

distinguishes herself from other artists working with paper with her honest and simple use of the medium. "She lets the paper talk without embellishing it," Hermon says.

Despite accumulating accolades, Pasola insists recognition and commercial success are secondary effects – rather than the primary motivators – of her pioneering quest. She is driven by the firm belief that innovation opens the door to a better existence. "If you don't innovate you're just like anybody else trying to comply with all the rules," she says. "But if you innovate, you're never wrong, you make the rules."

Not that she views her work as exemplifying novelty for novelty's sake. Although underlined by a healthy sense of humour, Pasola's art is clearly inspired by deeper goals. "My passion for reinventing poses the challenge for me to make the audience see things in a fresh and new way so that a new understanding can be born," she explains. And in opening people's eyes to the functional and artistic potential of a material as humble and commonplace

as paper, she plays her part in challenging preconceptions on a much wider scale.

Pasola is proud to wear the hybrid label of artist/designer although she does draw a clear distinction between the two roles. "Through my art I am able to express any kind of emotion or sensibility, while being a designer compels me to create a scheme to come up with a function for a specific need," she says. It is through blending these disciplines that she finds her talent. "Being an artist/designer empowers me to come up with ideas that are not only useful but also arresting. As well as being functional I would like to believe that they could also be considered museum pieces," she says.

Her growing list of exhibition credits and design collections would seem to support such a belief, but whether or not her work lives on in lounge rooms and the hallowed walls of the world's galleries is not important. For Pasola, achievement begins and ends with the creative process. "I start each day feeling thankful for another chance to further fulfil my passion, which is to see my ideas through from conception to fruition," she says. ●