

design anthology

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Far from the Madding Crowd

Text / Payal Uttam Images / Courtesy of Moss & Lam

‘We’re artists visiting the design world,’ laughs Deborah Moss about her studio practice. ‘It’s like that Groucho Marx saying where he never wanted to belong to any club that would have him as a member.’ Straddling multiple worlds, Moss & Lam indeed defies categorisation. Known for intricate, large-scale installations and elegant artworks, the two have been described as ‘the hidden hands behind spectacular rooms and works around the world’, and since its early days, the studio has been called upon by leading interior designers including Yabu Pushelberg, David Rockwell and Tony Chi to infuse warmth and personality into hotels, restaurants and retail spaces.

Moss established the studio in 1987 with her husband Edward Lam, a fellow art student. ‘When we started, we never thought it would be a business,’ recalls Moss. ‘We paid the bills, thought we could be artists — we had a lot of fun!’ Then business snowballed, and the couple shot to fame for their works including an undulating, hand-carved plaster wall relief in W Hotel New York’s Blue Fin restaurant and delicate cherry-blossom wall panels they painted for a flat in the Frank Gehry-designed Opus high-rise in Hong Kong.

In 2013, however, Lam passed away suddenly due to a brain aneurysm. It was a tragic loss but Moss eventually returned to the studio, where today she leads a team of more than a dozen artists. While she works on prominent projects including the new Nobu Downtown in New York, for which the studio created sculptural painted screens, Moss prefers to keep a low profile, describing her suburban Toronto studio as a ‘lily pad’ far away from the buzzing design scenes of cities like New York — a quiet place where ‘ideas can percolate’.

The 1,200-square-metre studio is an artistic space-cum-laboratory, ideal for tinkering with

new ideas. Past the kitchen is a giant workspace with several areas for different art forms, spanning woodworking to ceramics. ‘At one point, it was like standing inside a Rothko painting,’ says Moss, gesturing at the soaring walls that were previously covered in enormous oxblood red canvases; these have now been rolled and shipped to the new Four Seasons Hotel Kuwait at Burj Alshaya.

Hand-painted canvases are the studio’s signature. Recently, for the Clement restaurant in the Peninsula New York, they painted watercolour flowers over three metres in height. ‘My dad loved Japanese watercolours, so I grew up with those prints,’ recalls Moss. ‘And my husband was Chinese, so we spent much of our early years in Japan and China, absorbing that tradition of craftsmanship and the aesthetics.’

Lately Moss has been making accessories and small furniture like the W1 tables. Using an ancient Roman technique that combines pigment and glue, they could be mistaken for marble. Moss is most excited, however, about her work on the new Las Alcobas hotel in Napa Valley, for which she was given free rein to curate the hotel’s entire art programme. ‘The client is a very sweet person and we want to reflect him, so we created something like his personal art collection that has evolved over time.’ From shooting photographs of a gymnast falling through space to composing delicate drawings and watercolours, the studio created an assemblage of original works for display in each guest room.

‘Clients can always buy ready-made wall coverings or digital panels, but we try to bring an element of ourselves into the project,’ says Moss, staying true to her own roots as an artist. ‘It doesn’t matter who we work with — we bring a bit of soul.’



Magic Garden in the central atrium of Seoul’s Lotte department store is just one example of Moss & Lam’s intricate, large-scale installations



Hand-painted canvases are the studio's signature, seen here, for example, at Dalloyau in Hong Kong (top and bottom left) and The Peninsula New York's Clement restaurant (bottom right)



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