

Ghislaine Viñas

The designer brings her bright outlook to workplace interiors and products.

By **Katie Okamoto**

Viñas's flair for color and narrative—a talent she sharpened in residential work—makes her firm a growing force in workplace and product design. Opposite: A corner of the Manhattan office of Barrows, a South African advertising firm, is typical of her use of bright hues and bold pattern.



Defying convention is in Ghislaine Viñas's nature. She'll routinely lie on the floor to discover the hidden quirkiness of things and shift her perspective or, in her words, "turn things upside down and give them a twirl." Born in the Netherlands, the designer grew up in South Africa and today lives and works in New York City. "Not having a real sense of where you're from makes you more flexible in so many ways," she reflects. "It gives you this feeling that you can bounce around more easily." Her readiness to try new things helps explain Viñas's success.

Ghislaine Viñas Interior Design, her ten-person firm, is having quite a year. At ICFE in May, it launched a rug collection with Aronson. This month, the firm will unveil two major projects at NeoCon: the new Scandinavian Spaces showroom in Chicago's Mart and Viñas's first textile foray, a collaboration with HBF Textiles. The latter takes inspiration from sea creatures—"tiny, fascinating, clownlike creatures," in her words. Best known for residential interiors, her firm is working on a growing number of commercial projects in the U.S. and abroad, affording the practice more expertise and acumen in the workplace domain.

In some ways, it's a return to Viñas's origins: Her first-ever project was a commercial art space in Chelsea, Manhattan, completed in 1999. Viñas had been working successfully in design and sales at a modular furniture company, but she had studied interiors in college and wanted to reclaim her creativity. When the client approached her, she pounced.

"A lot of designers have worked in other firms



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Viñas often uses color as an element to carve out and anchor spaces within an open plan, as she did at the Barrows office in New York City.



before and have mentors, but I didn't have that, and in so many ways, I think my life would have been a whole lot easier if I did," she laughs. But establishing a professional practice on her own helped her find her voice early on—a bright and optimistic aesthetic that defines her interiors to this day.

Viñas moved to the United States in 1986 to study interior design at Philadelphia University, before relocating to New York to work. "I did have this

outsider feeling," she says. The late '90s and early aughts equated a neutral palette with sophistication, and she found herself rebelling against the norm. "Life is like a big box of crayons with every single color in it, and everybody was safely gravitating to those beiges and grays," she recalls. "I'm like, 'What?'"

Viñas views color as a spatial element—an essential design tool that functions "in a very thorough, sculptural, and architectural way." (It should come as no surprise, then, that she's created wallpaper in collaboration with whimsical brand Flavor Paper.) In recent years, her color savvy has proved compelling in workplaces as well as residences. "The whole idea is that the workplace is a place that should feel like home," she says, referring to the current zeitgeist in commercial interiors. "It should make you want to stay there."

While this may be a common refrain among designers, the particular impact of Viñas's work is rooted in each project's distinct story. At the New York office of South Africa-based advertising firm Barrows, she applied graphic color and pattern as wayfinding and placemaking devices. Bright bands of color weave through a crisp white backdrop—evoking a Felice Varini aesthetic—to delineate space while referencing South African design and Massimo Vignelli's New York subway map.

"With storytelling, you come up with notions and ways of designing that you could never come up with if you hadn't created these stories," she says. "The fun part is there are always stories behind all the ways we design." ■