

design

ANNIKA FERNANDO

Words by Khema Wijewardene, photography by H.N. Sampath



It's my first visit to PR, the latest of Paradise Road's retail offerings and I'm greeted by the easy smile of Annika Fernando, who I'm here to meet. Looking remarkably relaxed in a simple white shirt and violet parachute skirt which I spend the interview coveting, she's incredibly unflustered for someone who has just micro-managed the opening of her new fashion store. In fact, she has the air of a proud parent as she shows me around PR, lovingly handling fabrics and introducing me to each of her hand-picked pieces. After a quick browse, we settle into

chairs in the office next door and chat about her love for design, her unexpected penchant for the sciences and the challenges of being a modern mother.

The Beginning

"It's funny – at school I was always drawn toward the sciences, the logics: maths, physics and my love of symmetry stems from here," Annika begins, on being asked if design was a natural career path for her. Of course her background and the fact that her father, Shanth Fernando,



is one of Sri Lanka's design heavy-weights must have had some influence, I suggest. "Design is something which came very naturally, yes, because of my family and upbringing. When I studied interior design it all just flowed." She reflects, "I was 8 when Paradise Road first started. It was a small business and my sister Saskia and I used to sit behind the counter and help out. Everything I know about retail and design, I learned from my father and watching the shops he set up."

Today it seems that designers are often in need of more than one vent for their creativity, and in this regard Annika is no different. "As a profession, I'm an interior designer," she asserts, "but I closed down my practice 4 years ago although I still do select projects and have had at least one running since then. I have a son who's now 5, and interior design, as much as I like it, isn't the kind of work I can do and be the kind of mother I want to be." She pauses to draw breath. "I love retail. My first jobs were behind the counter at Paradise Road for short stints,

though I always ended up fighting with my dad and walking out. PR gives me the chance to indulge that love and expand upon my father's legacy."

More than just a 'clothes store', PR houses a carefully curated selection of items, both by local and international designers. In effect, it's Sri Lanka's first fashion concept store, which essentially means that all the items conform to a certain aesthetic brief; in this case, Annika's. "Every item here I've selected myself," she explains, "they're all pieces I like and they're all pieces I'd be happy to wear." In fact the violet parachute skirt I'm so envious of turn out to be from her own label, Maus.

The Process

Maus is in some senses at the heart of PR. It's a range of what Annika considers wardrobe essentials ("White shirts! White shirts! White shirts!"), and the blacks, whites and restrained colour palette reflect the wider aesthetic of PR.



A fan of pen to paper sketches as the best way to convey her thoughts, Annika admits to being better at drawing interiors and spaces than she is at drawing figures or clothing, having worked with Heidi Rampinelli allowed her to materialize her visions for the label. Certainly she's more practiced at doing the former having studied drafting as part of her interior design degree. "I like the looseness of pen to paper drawings, it leaves space to develop your ideas in a way 3D renditions on the computer just don't." She goes into the details of the merits of various design programs. We discuss her inspiration and she laughs, "I'm inspired by everything! Other good design, other bad design – if there is such a thing as bad design," she thinks for a moment and amends, "maybe it's not bad design, just design I don't like."

"I'm most definitely not a fashion designer and don't want to be one either," says Annika. "When I sat down to convey what I wanted in a certain piece for Maus, I found I drew figures very badly. I respect professionals who have achieved their skill through their training of work or study and don't think I deserve that label. I am an Interior Designer, I say again!" Nonetheless she seems

to have managed, and Maus hangs happily on the shelves amidst various other designers, both local and foreign.

Actually, Annika's role at PR is really as a design curator which is what sets the store apart from many others in Colombo. Little is understood about the importance of the role of a curator, but increasingly they're being acknowledged as the driving force behind trends in art and design. Choosing her favourite pieces from brands and designers like Ayne, Touche, Papillon Du The, Khogy, Salt and Arugambay (to name those we've home grown), as well as from Rajesh Pratap Singh, Smallshop, Sanchita and Abraham & Thakore (among other foreign designers), the collection at PR adheres to certain guidelines, such as the fact that Annika tends to favour timeless and classic pieces. "Quality and cut are also really important to me," she adds, "as is the fact that I handpick every piece bearing in mind that Sri Lanka is a small country and people don't want to be in the same outfit as someone else."

The Future

"I'd like to see Maus grow further, but my number one priority is my son," she says of her



plans for the future, coming back to a topic we touched on earlier – women and their work/life balance. “Today’s women; we are our own worst enemies, we think we can do it all so we make ourselves into machines – and we do it.” Annika seems to have a fairly good sense of balance, confining her work, where possible, to the hours when her son is at school. I question whether she’ll be able to maintain this if PR

expands. “I don’t want PR to grow bigger than this store – it’s meant to be a small selection of good things.”

Housed at No 41 Horton Place, LT are fans of PR’s simple chic, Annika’s new range and the fact that it has a strong ethos of supporting local designers.