



MINDING HER OWN BUSINESS

Stina Sayre

Furthering the fashion industry from the Vineyard.

KATHRYN OSGOOD

A fashion statement, a political statement. Stina Sayre wants to make them at the same time, but it's not easy. Her political statement goes like this: "We're so globalized," she says. "It's like nothing is made in the Western world anymore. We westerners don't understand where our things come from. But when you go to Wal-Mart, the jeans you buy are made by slaves, pretty much. You can buy a pair of pants for \$25, but the person who made them doesn't make a buck an hour. And we live here and we think that we are so fair to each other and so civilized. And I think it's really rotten. The inequality between people and how we use each other is just appalling to me."

Stina Sayre is vehement, but it's incongruous, for she is standing in her office in a beautiful old waterfront house, with its views over Vineyard Haven harbor, her business a part – albeit a small one – of that industry so often targeted by the fair-trade and anti-child-labor

advocates: the apparel industry.

What makes her different from most of the industry, though, is that all the people who work for her live on the Island. No third-world sweatshops. "And it's a pride for me that I pay my people so that they can really live. I give them a decent wage," she says. And that's what makes it hard: having to compete not only as a small-volume designer, but as one who pays first-world wages. She's indignant when people, knowing she is a clothing designer, say, Hey, you must be getting so rich on this. "But I'm not getting rich on this," she says.

True, she lives a pretty nice life with her husband Nevin and kids, working school hours and sailing, as she has done all her life (she was formerly a world-class board sailor). "But," she says, surveying the cramped room – with its sewing machine, cutting table, and racked clothing – which is both the headquarters and workshop for Stina Sayre Design, "the business does not

support this house."

Actually, the place was bought long ago by her husband's family. Nevin, a world-class sailor and windsurfer himself, and Stina rent it out for part of the summer. The fact is, it's a constant struggle. She has survived twenty years in the apparel trade by a combination of canny marketing and clever design.

Over twenty years she's tried various strategies. First it was sweaters, made on knitting looms, sold through stores and privately. Then she moved to fleece "to save myself the trouble of making the fabric," and from there into clothing and bags. For about six years, she sold through some twenty stores across New England. But the markups added by the shops made her clothing less competitive. So these days, it's trunk shows, usually hosted by a friend who is paid in kind for gathering potential buyers at her home.

She makes up T-shirts, around fifty per run, and also clever things, such as pants and skirts that look enormous until you put them on. They wrap around and tie in the front, back, or at the side, depending on how you want to wear them; one size fits all. These make up bread and butter sales. Then there are the carry bags, simply constructed of a spiral of seat-belt fabric



A coat that wraps and ties in style.

KATHRYN OSGOOD



COURTESY STINA SAYRE

Stina Sayre uses seat belts in her line of bags, which sell for \$130 to \$250.

and virtually indestructible.

“But also there are bigger things like this coat,” she says, indicating a beautifully crafted piece, custom designed, for \$350. “This is not the piece a designer makes money on. It’s sort of the sugar piece that attracts. Then maybe I sell a ton of T-shirts. How it works with a trunk show is I have twenty to thirty women come. They don’t all want to walk home with the same piece, so I have to have a pretty good spread.”

And while she produces two new collections each year, each builds on what she has done before. “So I just add a few pieces, or I add fabric. And if someone says ‘I like this skirt but not this fabric,’ I say, ‘Well, we can fix that.’ What people enjoy when they buy from me is that they can get something that is distinctively theirs and that they are part of the creative process. It’s not an easy job, but it’s something I know how to do. You struggle with [the balance between] making money from it and being artistic. I get carried away and spend too much time on pieces, and I don’t get paid for that time. From a business point of view, that’s difficult,” she says

with a laugh. “One reason I think I am successful is that I know what a beautiful fabric is. And I realize it’s a treat for yourself when you buy clothing from me.”

Stina Sayre’s fashion goal is to become a “name” brand. But her political goal is what gets her most animated: to see craftsmen and -women valued in this country and fairly paid everywhere. “Is it important to have people like me who know how to do this? Is it important to

have the craftsperson who sews it? Do we value the infrastructure in our country? Or do we want to use people till they starve, just so we can have a new T-shirt every day or every week?” ♦

— MIKE SECCOMBE

Stina Sayre’s clothing and bags will be on display at a trunk show on Friday, November 24, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. at the Mansion House in Vineyard Haven. For more information call 508-560-1011 or visit www.stinasayre.com.

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