

Chicago Tribune

Design duo redefining the notion of window dressing



Crystal Grover, left, and Linsey Burritt of Indo in their West Loop workspace. (E. Jason Wambsgans, Chicago Tribune / July 24, 2012)
Christopher Borrelli

3:56 p.m. CDT, July 24, 2012

Linsey Burritt and Crystal Grover design window displays. They [work](#) under the name Indo. Which is “window” without the w's. *We* are the w's, Burritt says pleasantly, “one on each side, right?”

Then she nods her head quickly, as if punctuating this fact. The name suits them. They are conceptual by nature, abstract in practice. And lately, pretty sought after. By Merchandise Mart, by Taste of Chicago, by Steppenwolf Theatre. When you ask if their window designs are art or marketing, though, Grover shifts in her seat a bit.

“We are trying to make a living, and window campaigns are the world that jibes closest to what we are doing,” she says. “If we *were* recalling this art, I don't know how we would fit in. Some people do say it's art, though, so I suppose we are a little bit of both worlds, art and marketing. And a little bit of neither.”

It's art.

Specifically, Indo creates abstract art installations that happen to double as window displays, for offices, lobbies, retail stores, showrooms. Picture shards of paper slivers, intricately organized and resembling shattered glass; a sign built from repurposed nail-polish caps; honeycomb-like fragments of egg cartons arranged as winding DNA strands. If one of the problems with art installations is finding good real estate for them, you might say Indo has ingeniously engineered a way to feature its work in splashy, eye-catching locations. And remember: We're not talking outsize, tourist-friendly Marilyn Monroe sculptures. Indo displays are elegant, demanding, chilly.

We're talking that 50-foot wall of paper that Burritt and Grover installed last fall along the entrance of Steppenwolf's Garage theater, 6,200 pounds of white sheets of recycled paper, stacked into towers, representing decades of scripts, accented with props culled from the theater company's long history. We're talking hundreds of squares of recycled polypropylene installed in the Celebrity Chef du Jour tent at Taste of Chicago, printed with shades of red and arranged to resemble a kind of jagged, rose-colored sunset. We're talking a hundred mannequin arms (donated by a mannequin repair shop) in a Merchandise Mart window and suspended from fishing line, woven together so seamlessly that the effect evoked a long, fluid [school](#) of fish.

Check out the Indo display in the Brizo-Delta faucet showroom at Merchandise Mart, and you'll find thousands of round, translucent polypropylene sheets hung from the ceiling, lyrically mimicking a flow of bubbles, seemingly traveling left to right, pockets of black fabric woven through like ink dropped in a stream.

Says Shannon Downey, owner of Pivotal Production, a Chicago-based [marketing company](#) that has twice hired Indo: “Their work, aesthetically, is beautiful. That they work with materials you'd find in a landfill and turn it into something pleasing, that's so surprising. You look at one of their displays and you're like, *gorgeous*, but then get closer

and — huh, Styrofoam cups? How weird. And it never feels like they're making a statement."

Says Tereasa Surratt, the Chicago creative director for the [advertising firm](#) Ogilvy & Mather: "They're getting so well-known among artists and advertising people, I think, because no one in Chicago is really doing what they are doing with window displays. They're just totally unique out there. Except in one way: They are artists first and foremost, and they're a great example of how really smart brands and companies are hiring actual artists, the people around them, instead of merchandising and in-house (employees)."

Burritt and Grover are 28. They met at Columbia College Chicago. They are artists but also, unquestionably, creatures of corporate marketing; they don't talk in terms of meaning or even aesthetics so much as "soft re-branding," "messaging." Burritt, who grew up outside Benton Harbor, Mich., studied graphic design and worked in package production; Grover, from Grayslake, studied interior design, worked in store design.

Four years ago, Grover recalls, she was passing the Wicker Park shoe store City Soles, admiring the window design. Owner Scott Starbuck often allows local artists to take a shot at designing his window. Grover enlisted Burritt. Their first window, which used a barrel for a wishing well and recycled cotton balls for flowers, was a hit. They did more windows for City Soles, using a bolt of silk found behind a shuttered suit shop, using tree branches they collected after storms. As word of their windows spread, they were offered more windows.

They quit their day jobs.

"We were cold-calling businesses at first," Grover says.

"We didn't know what we were doing," Burritt says.

"We'd be, 'Hey, let's talk about window display' and they would be like, 'We have a window display,' and we'd be like, 'Yeah, we see that, but we, uh, might do it better.' It was a series of short, awkward conversations," Grover says.

"It's hard explaining our value, because (businesses) don't necessarily allocate for window display. They want to know how they measure our success, beyond just the art of (the design). They want to quantify it," Burritt says.

But the more windows they did — for design shops, beauty parlors, offices, restaurants — the more surreal their designs became. "Some clients have a hard time visualizing what we're going for sometimes," Burritt says. A window for Colori, a Bucktown paint store, featured a mannequin wearing a dress made of paint swatches, juggling paint cans. After being asked to design a green-friendly window, they also began to work exclusively with recycled materials.

"But we didn't want to label ourselves 'eco window dressers,'" Grover says. "We decided that people should react to the beauty of the window, not some hippy-dippy eco art. You're not going to see us filling up a window with plastic water bottles to make a point. We decided to stay subtle."

So far, it has worked.

When they called Liz Sammon, a sales coordinator at Recycling Services on 47th Street, and asked for *a lot* of paper for their Steppenwolf installation, "of course, we thought it was bizarre," Sammon says. But the company eventually donated all 6,200 pounds of paper to the project, then it set up Burritt and Grover with a free work space to organize the installation. Indo spent several months there, flattening sheets of paper.

These days, the price of an Indo display runs from hundreds of dollars to thousands. Their 40-foot-by-60-foot installation for Taste of Chicago, for example, chosen after their work came to the attention of the Department of Cultural Affairs and the Chicago Artists' Coalition, cost the city \$5,000. They have yet another Merchandise Mart window coming in the fall, and while they don't do installations in private homes yet, that's probably coming. Burritt says: "These women from Arizona were visiting Chicago recently. They saw a piece on us in (Martha Stewart's Whole Living magazine) and they asked us to have coffee with them. One owns a shoe store."

"So we meet and they're hugging us, saying nice things," Grover says.

"You don't expect to touch people with a window display. It took us a bit to figure them out," Burritt says.

"Turns out, it's not a business meeting, they're just fans," Grover says.

"Yeah, we have fans," Burritt says.