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Sustainable Style: Providence's Balanced Design creates eco-friendly home accessories with a modern aesthetic

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A felt appliqué peacock pillow.

Melinda Cox was on the cusp of the green design movement when she started making eco-friendly throw pillows in 2002. Cox, who owns Providence-based home accessories company Balanced Design, now thinks the next big thing will be American-made home furnishings and décor.

"It feels like there's going to be a renaissance," Cox said. "Green will be part of it because the more local we are the greener we are, but there's more to it. It feels like we are starting to get on the right track toward correcting all of the outsourcing we have done."

From rugs and vases to coffee tables and couches, it's shocking how many non-American products fill the average U.S. home. Earlier this month, ABC's "World News with Diane Sawyer" illustrated that point dramatically by removing all foreign made items (nearly everything) from Jon and Anna Usry's Dallas home for its "Made in America" challenge. The news team then replaced the items with American products, including Balanced Design pillows.

"It was actually an honor to be part of the American products they were bringing in," said Cox, who designs from a studio in her East Side home.

Cox, who previously worked as a graphic designer for magazines, came up with the idea for the company while on a trip to Paris shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks of 2001.

"It was a dramatic time to be an American in Europe, and because of that I was looking at everything with fresh eyes," Cox said. "I remember seeing people carrying in bags for groceries and there being recycling bins on the streets. I remember thinking, 'I wonder if my country will be able to make that shift to a greener lifestyle.'"

Cox launched Balanced Design with a line of appliquéd and printed throw pillows, and has since moved into producing tufted rugs, fabric and tote bags. The brand is unified by vibrant colors, whimsical patterns and eco-friendly — sustainable, organic, nonsynthetic — fabrics and production.

She sources materials from the United States whenever possible (New Zealand wool used to make the rugs and feather pillow inserts from China in the pillows are two exceptions.) Balanced Design's pillows are sewn in Fall River, the fabric is printed in Westerly and the rugs are tufted in Alabama.

"One of the most important things about being green is just working as locally as possible," Cox said. "Sometimes local means Rhode Island, sometimes it means Southeastern New England and sometimes it means U.S.A."

Cox's modern sensibility set her work apart early on. Back when eco-friendly products were just beginning to come onto the market, there weren't many options for consumers who also wanted bold, contemporary design.

"Back then, there was nothing modern in green," Cox said. "It was all beige."

Drawing inspiration from artists such as Henri Matisse and Mark Rothko, Cox often designs with happy, bright colors. Her peacock rug, for example, incorporates graphic splashes of turquoise and sea blue. Her hand-printed pillows, made using water-based inks on linen, come in a variety of patterns and shades, including red, blue, green, brown and purple.

Cox also frequently looks to nature to spark her creativity. Many designs translate organic shapes—leaves, flowers, pods—into graphic patterns. For example, the inspiration for a bird's feet design, found on pillows, fabric and rugs, came from a seagull footprint Cox spied in the sand while walking on a Rhode Island beach.

Her work process includes snapping photos of items that inspire her, lots of sketching with Sharpie pens on tracing paper and using the computer program Adobe Illustrator to further refine the patterns.

Taking the time to design well is just as important as sourcing eco-friendly materials, Cox said.

"At the end of the day, the design has to stand on its own," she said. "I want the end product to be beautiful. That's why the company is called Balanced Design. From day one, we've been balancing sustainability issues with design."

Balanced Design products are available locally at Kreatelier, 804 Hope St., Providence, and through online retailers including allmodern.com and 2modern.com. For more, go to balanced-design.com.