

HOME & interiors

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THIS SALE FEATURES

*Asian, Ceramics, Pictures,
Silver and Period Design*

AT HOME WITH

*Elaine Yan Ling Ng, a designer
of the future, inspired by the past*



Bonhams

at home with

ELAINE YAN LING NG

Swarovski's 'designer of the future', Elaine Yan Ling Ng is inspired by nature, tradition and technology. **Lisa Freedman** interviewed her at her Hong Kong home

Photography by Stanley Cheng

Elaine Yan Ling Ng is an unusually synthetic designer. Not merely because the materials she designs interweave the machine and the man made, but because her life and art are seamlessly blended. Born and trained in the UK, she now works equally successfully in China and Europe, and combines the best of the past with inventive routes to the future.

'My design is more Western, my values more Chinese, but there are really three sides to me - biological investigation, technology and craft.'

Ng started life in north London, before attending boarding school in Yorkshire and completing a Master's degree at Central St Martins college of art. Initially drawn to fashion, she soon realised that materials were where her true interest lay.

'I was attracted by the way nature could be transformed by man's intervention. I believe nature holds the solution to so many of our questions.'

In a remarkably short time, she went on to build a glittering career, initially working as a colour and material specialist for car manufacturers Nissan, then for Nokia in Beijing. 'I was offered the opportunity to work in China and felt I should challenge myself.'

It wasn't the easiest of transitions. 'I didn't speak Mandarin and found it difficult in a large commercial organisation to find the freedom to experiment and do the research my work requires.'

She soon managed to add Mandarin to her repertoire of Cantonese and English, but, in 2013, decided to launch her own company, The Fabrick Lab, to develop experimental textiles and materials for the luxury market.

'Biomimicry' has fascinated her since childhood - 'When I discovered that Velcro was inspired by burrs, I began my own research and eventually linked it with art' - and she constantly returns to nature as her muse.

One of her earliest projects, for example, was 'Sundew', commissioned in 2015 by Austrian manufacturer Swarovski. Here, Ng employed more than 20,000 crystals to create a dazzling kinetic installation in which a 'crystal fabric' coiled and curled around a pole, mimicking the colour, scent and shape of the carnivorous *Drosera* plant.

'Understanding the behaviour of the crystal was very important for me. I wanted to make the crystals look like a

structural element not simply a decorative surface.'

Ng loves to experiment, and was, therefore, delighted to be approached soon after by Nadia and Gianfranco Dalle Mese, owners of Italian manufacturer Studioart, a firm dedicated to incorporating the finest leather into interiors.

'The only time I'd worked with leather was in the automotive industry. They had to fly me over to their factories to learn what the machines were capable of.'

Clearly a quick study, Ng was able to produce a striking collection of leather wall coverings based on the way in which nature multiplies and repeats using complex mathematical formulae.

'I wanted to create an immersive experience through volume, tactility and illusion.'

Studioart, founded in the 1970s, has taken a historic craft and successfully modernised it for today's global luxury market, and Ng is now

involved in a similar endeavour in Southern China. Three years ago, she founded 'UN/Fold', a project intended to support and

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Ng's 'UN/Fold' project is helping develop traditional hand weaving and batik in Southern China.

Ng in her Hong Kong studio, an industrial space rescued from dereliction to become the perfect backdrop for her experiments with the material world. Front cover: Ng at her family home in Hong Kong.





Above: The leather wall coverings Ng designed for Italian luxury brand Studioart are based on mathematical formulae.

develop traditional hand weaving and batik in Guizhou.

'I was invited by a professor, who had seen my textiles at Beijing Design Week. When I arrived, I was shocked to find that most of the craftsmen now worked in chemical factories or in construction and these amazing textiles were only available in markets in two or three cities – or in museums.'

With the help of a grant from Hong Kong Design Trust, she set out to bridge the gap between the village artisans and the modern consumer world, working with her own staff to train apprentices in essential skills such as hem stitching and rolled edging.

'Their weaving and batik work is incredibly sophisticated and I wanted these craft skills to continue and grow,' say Ng, who has helped revitalise the traditional weave by introducing materials like copper and high-strength nylon.

She has worked strenuously, too, to set up a relationship with international luxury brands, such as Stellar Works, disseminating the fabrics to a wider audience.

'I want to bring sufficient income into the village for the next generation to continue. I feel very proud of my Chinese heritage.'

It is, of course, a heritage she herself is contributing to in numerous ways. Her work has already been exhibited at the V & A and the Science Museum, and her portfolio of bespoke designs is growing rapidly, including a recent one-off copper sculpture for a home in the exclusive Peak district of Hong Kong, which took over four months to hand weave.

Ng has now transferred her business from Beijing to Hong Kong, where she lives in a house built by her grandfather nearly half a century ago. Lined with veneered walnut and rich hand carvings commissioned to her grandmother's design, the

interior is a testimony to Chinese tradition.

'It's been lived in by three generations of my family and hasn't changed at all,' she says. 'I particularly love the four jade paintings in the dining room, where we gather for every festival. For me, it represents warmth and my cultural roots.'

Equally beloved, however, is the contemporary studio she

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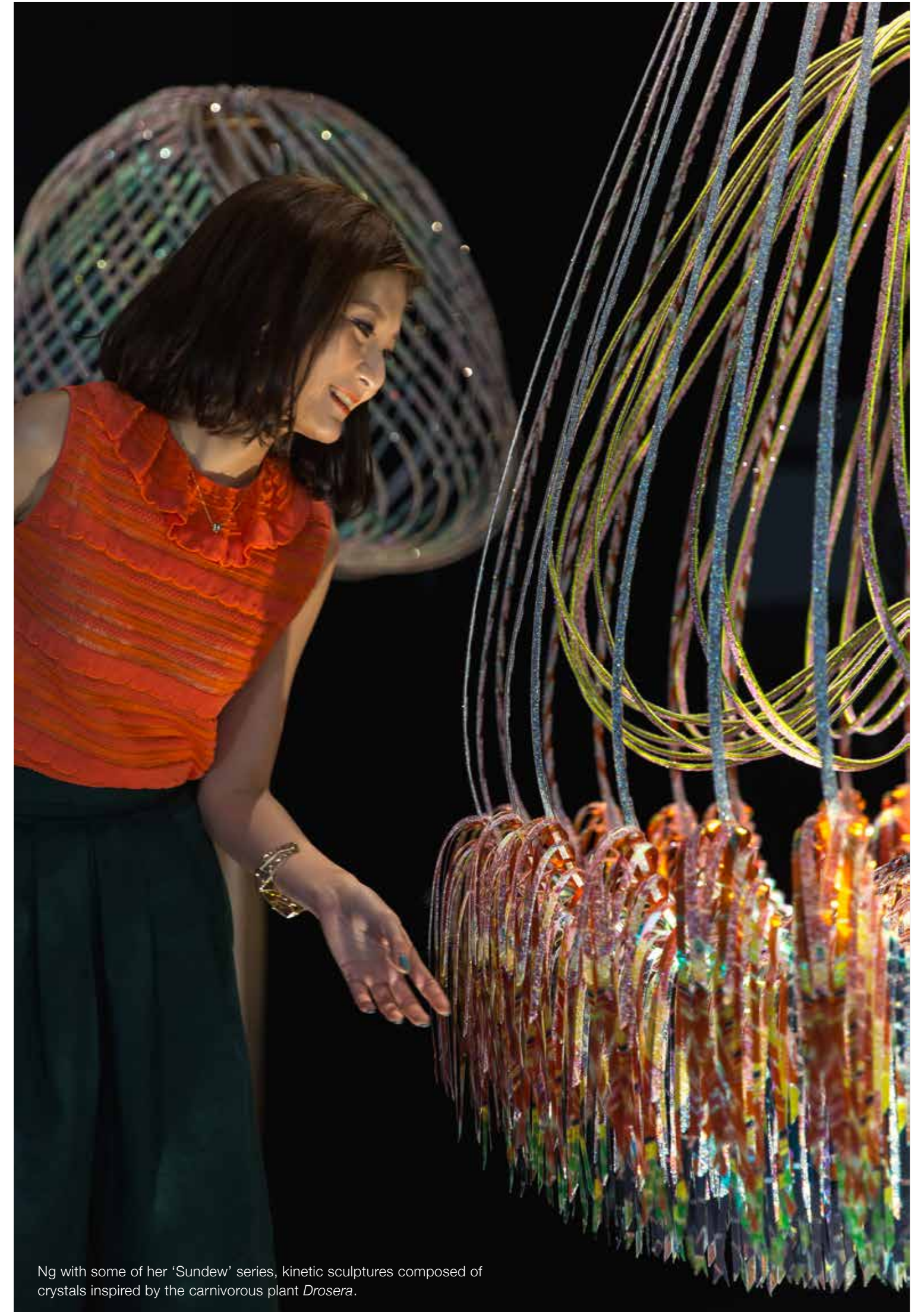
has refurbished in the New Territories. 'I found this amazing industrial space, which was completely derelict. It gave me the freedom to decorate exactly as I wanted and create a loft-like space, where the focus could be on the work.'

The unadorned white wall, however, is not her decorative style, and she regularly introduces interesting finds - picking up ceramics in Italy, vintage silver in London's Brick Lane, and antique embroidery, wherever she sees it.

'I've been interested in textiles since my grandma taught to me to stitch my first paper wallet. After that, I fell in love with needlework.'

Swarovski may have named her a 'designer of the future', but, for Elaine Yan Ling Ng the future can never exclude the past.

Contact details: www.thefabricklab.com



Ng with some of her 'Sundew' series, kinetic sculptures composed of crystals inspired by the carnivorous plant *Drosera*.