

Love local, love sustainable, Love Milo

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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As we slowly – but finally – wise up to the negative effects our growing consumerism has on the environment, it could be argued that the most progressive product design is that which is sustainable. But eco-friendly doesn't have to mean unattractive.

Proving this is [Love Milo](#), a Cape Town-based boutique homeware and décor design studio owned by photographer-turned-designer Nicki Ellis and her business partner Matt Finch. The company's online store and open studio situated in Gardens stocks an array of contemporary ceramics, lights, crockery, wood pieces, bags and printed fabric products.



Love Milo is dedicated to the use of sustainable materials sourced within South Africa and every attempt is made to manufacture products in studio themselves. When this isn't possible the work is outsourced to local businesses, a move that Ellis feels helps grow the local economy and uplift the local community.

"In many ways, it works out cheaper to have the products made abroad and then import them, but this goes against our ethos. That's why you will find our products are more expensive, but you are ultimately paying for someone in this country to have work, which is a mindset we need to get into as South Africans. Buying cheap products that are imported from China not only harms our economy but the quality generally doesn't last," says Ellis.

With ranges that include prints of ant trails, birds in flight, mineral rock patterns, tree branches and dragonfly wings it's clear that nature is a dominant – and noticeably charming – theme. Rather than using computers, Ellis's designs are created using photographs of natural elements or drawings, taking designs that already exist in nature and bringing them into daily life.



Love Mio owners Nicki Ellis and Matt Finch

In the spirit of [#DesignMonth](#), Ellis lets us in on what it takes to create locally-sourced, eco-friendly design that's easy on the eye.

Why the career change from photography and cinematography into retail?

I wanted to work for myself and create things I like. I found that in the advertising world I was merely creating for others and often against what I liked, like a robot or machine. It wasn't my vision. Having a child was a catalyst in wanting to create things that were authentic to me.

What inspires your designs and how would you describe your aesthetic?

Nature and imperfection inspire my designs. I enjoy finding beauty from what is around us and not creating it on machines. It's about juxtaposing imperfect elements with handmade elements and bringing these into a harmonious story.

Experimenting with mixed mediums of materials also reflects this and you will see this in many products where we juxtapose warm hand-carved wood with cool perfect ceramics. It's this play on imperfection that makes us unique, because we are not about creating designs but rather about finding them in nature and then bringing them to you, because we don't always have the time to go out see this beauty.





■ ***You place a strong emphasis on sustainability. What are some of the eco-friendly materials and techniques used in your product development?***

We use alien trees for our wooden products. These trees are harmful to our natural environment and need to be removed, so we use these trees to create beautiful products. We do not believe in cutting down indigenous trees that take many years to grow for the sake of beauty but to rather reuse what doesn't serve us anyway. We also only use eco-friendly inks and locally sourced materials.

■ ***What are the challenges associated with sourcing locally, and how do you overcome them?***

Finding people who can make the quantities we need. We have had to intelligently outsource and almost create a separate business within ours with suppliers who share the same focus and ethos as us.

■ ***We hear you've been working on a fabric range to encourage an eco-fashion lifestyle. Tell us about it...***

Our fabrics are not only printed locally but the cloth itself is made here in South Africa. All fabrics are 100% cotton and eco-friendly ink is used for the prints. The range includes nature-inspired shopper and tote bags, clutch purses, sling bags, picnic blankets and even a nappy bag.

As a mother myself, I thought, why do I have to carry around a nappy bag that I don't find aesthetically pleasing? This gave birth to the idea of a more fashionable nappy bag. What's great is that it looks so stylish that it can easily be used as tote bag when the baby phase is over.

There are so many wellness benefits of being in and around nature, so our aim is to always bring this to the consumer by making fabrics and accessories that marry locally-sourced materials with style.





■ ***Do you think consumers are becoming more conscious of buying eco-friendly and locally-made products?***

I think they are, but we have a long way to go. Our culture is very "disposable" based on the thinking that what is "cheap" is better, understandably as most don't have much money to spare. Some can afford to be more environmentally conscious, whilst others can't, and sadly I think this is the divide that we need to overcome.

■ ***What other local designers do you admire?***

Skinny laMinx, Missibaba and Michael Chandler.

■ ***What's next for Love Milo?***

We want to continue to focus on growing our business and online presence. Furthermore, we are concentrating on more great designs that reflect our country and environment.

Keen to see more? [Shop Love Milo online](#) and connect with the brand on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Pinterest](#) and [Twitter](#).

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