



Chichi® plaster sculptures are handmade and painted in bright Caribbean colours by local artisans and painters at Serena's Art Factory and are a popular souvenir for visitors and locals alike.

Chichi®:

# Strong, Proud and Sensual

Firmly rooted in Caribbean culture, Chichi® was created by Berlin born artist Serena Janet Israel. *Chichi* is the Papiamentu word for big sister. She represents the eldest daughter of the family, who binds the family together in a loving and caring way. She is a recognised female role model and part of Curaçao's colourful heritage.

TEXT KATY BRANUM

### Birth of an idea

In 2008, Serena, a true visionary, created the Chichi® name, concept and story within just two weeks. When Serena reflects on the creative process that allowed her to develop the Chichi® sculptures, she believes that it was her formal training as a mould maker that gave her the skills and ability to take the idea and execute it. Serena explains, “Everyone can come up with wonderful ideas, however it is really about your ability to apply your craft to those ideas with technical expertise that you have obtained from the rigour of attending and completing an apprenticeship.”

Within just two months, she had trademarked the concept. Serena shares, “Deciding to trademark at an early stage was a challenging question, as we were not sure what exactly it was that we were trade marking. Was it the process, the single piece concept, the design, the logo? And justifying the cost as a struggling artist was also difficult. However, it was an essential step, as unfortunately time and time again, an artisan discovers that someone has taken their idea for their own, and then it is too late.”

### Balancing Act: Artist Versus Businessperson

Artists are driven by creativity, however to survive commercially, it is essential that they are business savvy. This means it is important to develop business skills that enable the artist to effectively manage various aspects of business, such as cash flows, an area that entrepreneurs’ often struggle with. Understanding pricing and the distribution channel, for example, if the items are to be sold in galleries, stores, or both are key elements to get right. Selena comments, “I was lucky as I used my network and received a lot of good advice from others in business who helped me along the way.”

### Discovering Hidden Business Value in Unexpected Places

Often the path to develop a sustainable business, and ultimately your competitive advantage, is a process of evolution. These nuggets of differentiation take time to form, but ultimately can become a core pillar to the business model.

In regards to Chichi®, it was the evolution in the painting of the Chichi® sculptures that have greatly influenced the current business development path. Serena chose an innovative process as part of her business model that involved approaching local people to paint Chichi® sculptures in their homes.

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Serena shares, “We decided to approach folks who went to the local church and found our first painters from this group. First, we started in the neighbourhoods behind the church where they give out extra food and household supplies to the needy.”

Since Chichi® is a concept with which local people can connect, they were receptive to the concept as they felt they were working with a historical element of their local culture. These valuable nuggets, such as the Chichi®, are very powerful as they allow the old to teach the young about local customs and culture.

Serena shares, “Painting Chichi® sculptures have a positive effect on the painters and their families as they have something that they are proud of and to which they can feel connected. Once a painter begins painting Chichi®, a transformation begins. These painters begin to make their homes a little nicer, perhaps tidier, or maybe they add a lick of paint to the place, and their children see mum or dad at home painting, earn-

ing extra money. As a result, these children go from trying to break the newly painted Chichi® sculptures to wanting to paint them too.”

### Skill Shortage

In regards to developing the Chichi® team, Serena shares that despite her desire to further their careers, she has successfully promoted only two people so far. Her challenge is that she is unable to find candidates from the local technical school who have the desire to join her team.

To help address this, she has developed relationships with teachers and meets with them regularly to talk about possible candidates that might be interested in working with her. Serena admitted that this is a major challenge to growing the business.

### Going From Intuition to Expansion

Serena’s training as a mould maker gives her a deep understanding for the Chichi® production process - she can “feel” when the produc-



Serena Janet Israel



tion process is going well and when there is a problem, even if she can't actually pinpoint what it is at the time. Serena explains, "Familiarity to the rhythm of the business means that I can look around the workshop and sense if all is well or if something is not right. However, this has limitations too, because as I expand, it will become too difficult to monitor the business this way. Now we are documenting these processes so that a manager can quickly assess if the business is where it should be."

#### Quality control

Serena is able to look at the finished product and slightly scratch the plaster to identify if something went wrong in production. She is training her employees to develop this knowledge and also works with them to link each person in the production chain to share with them how they are dependent on each other to ultimately produce a high quality product.

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Serena comments, "My staff can't be expected to do what I need them to do without buying into the vision for the company. As a leader and a manager, I know where we are going, but it is very important that I take the time to help them understand this too. For example, if the mould maker does a poor job with the plaster, this impacts the painters and their ability to produce a good result. This

affects the quality of the Chichi® produced. If the quality of the product drops, demand will fall and optimum pricing can't be maintained. It all has a flow on effect."

#### Feel Good Factor

Serena knows that once employees understand their importance in the process, they feel like they are part of the company and productivity and commitment to their roles increases. This decreases production challenges such as employee absences. This process of securing employees buy-in to the business is a process that is Serena constantly repeats. Serena explains, "This is not done with a single conversation; this is something that needs constant reinforcement. To make our team feel valued and happy we celebrate birthdays and have happy hours after work to give the team the opportunity to socialise on a private level."

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She is also very aware that as a foreigner, trying to replicate management policies and processes developed elsewhere does not work. Alternatively, she works with her local team to agree on solutions that work for them and the business. Serena explains, "Being flexible is important, for example the carnival festival is very important to my staff, so they want to be able to have time off to celebrate this festival. However, the impact to the business if everyone goes home early is that we produce less, and thus can sell less, at a busy time of the year for us. So I sit down with the team and we agree on how we are going to recover the lost time, or we consent to complete additional work upfront so that extra production is in place, thus this time off does not negatively affect the business."

#### Looking Ahead

Serena is further empowering her painting team; no longer will the painter be invisible or anonymous to the customer, they will become a feature of the Chichi® business. Profiling them on the website with portraits and biographies, customers will be able to match their Chichi® back to the individual painter. This enables customer compliments to go directly to the painter who made the creation. This is very empowering and a great way to motivate her painters to grow with confidence in their painting.

Thus Chichi® is transforming from a creative business with a platform focused on the island Curaçao, to a platform that celebrates the people of Curaçao, encouraging them to become the best they can be.