



'This is how I feel on a daily basis,' says designer Claire Sanchez, covered in handbags from her spring line. 'This is my mental state. This is my life.'

Bagging business



Advocate staff photo by ARTHUR D. LAUCK

Among the offerings in the spring line from local handbag designer Claire Sanchez are, from the bottom up, a red Nanette ruffle clutch, an Oxford leather clutch, a Caroline carpetbag, a mini dot reversible silver tote and an Edie one-strap tote.

BR's Sanchez finds success designing purses popular in the fashion world

BY KAREN MARTIN
Assistant People editor

Ever since she can remember, Claire Sanchez has had the urge to create. At 12, she was making and selling her own line of jewelry. At Episcopal High, she was always the kid coming up with the homecoming decorations and designing T-shirts. She found the right college — the Savannah College of Art and Design — but it took a few years to channel her creative energy. Since she tapped into the handbag market in 2003, however, this homegrown talent has been making a name for herself in the design world. Her handbags have been featured in such national magazines as *Vogue* and *Lucky* and one year were a part of the swag celebrities brought home from the Screen Actors Guild Awards.

With her spring line, filled with bright clutches and totes, on the shelves and her thoughts busy with her fall collection, the 28-year-old talked about how she's making it in the designer-eat-designer world of handbags. The economy has many small boutiques — Sanchez's main retailers — running scared, placing fewer orders to keep inventories down. Sanchez's handbags are sold in boutiques in 17 states, including five shops in Louisiana and two in the local area — Oliveaux at Perkins and Siegen and the Louisiana Art & Science Mu-



Advocate photo by KAREN MARTIN

Claire Sanchez's copper leaf designs launched her handbag business in 2003 and are still part of her Signature collection, which is offered year round.

seum gift shop. She also sells online. What's an entrepreneur to do when boutique buyers are cautious? If she's smart, she finds other ways to connect with her customers.

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Advocate staff photos by ARTHUR D. LAUCK

Claire Sanchez's spring line of handbags includes, from left, a white lattice-on-brown tote bag, totes in black and gold mini dots and in bold black dots on white, a silk bag embossed with silver leaf, a mod Twiggy oversized clutch and a leather clutch in bronze.

BAGGING

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That's what Sanchez has been doing, joining other vendors at one-day-only markets, such as the popular Mad Hatter's luncheon sponsored by the Baton Rouge Symphony League.

"You do what you have to do," said Sanchez.

So far, her business has been holding steady.

"At events and even online, people aren't going for bags on sale. They're paying full price," she said.

Sanchez's handbags retail for between \$60 and \$130 — somewhat of a bargain in these days of \$1,500 designer bags.

"I'm appealing to my own bracket. I mean, I'd never spend \$1,200 on a handbag," said Sanchez. "I want to be accessible to everyone. You might not be able to buy that \$300 outfit, but you can always get a new bag. It's an easy accessory. It always fits, and it's easily changed out."

Finding a Plan B is nothing new for Sanchez.

As with many good ideas, Sanchez said her foray into the handbag market came about with no real game plan in mind.

After focusing on painting her first few years at the prestigious Savannah art school, she discovered working with fibers.

"I knew this was where I could use all the tools in my creative arsenal," said Sanchez. "I could make my own canvas."

She created fabrics with abandon, many with patterns in copper leaf, a painstaking process she still personally applies to the signature bags in her collection.

Soon, she had "an overwhelming fabric collection," some of which she turned into pillows and home decorations.

Looking at the pillow, she thought, "What if I could carry it?"

The rest, you might say is history, but it's a history with a path as swirled as the mod pattern on the Twiggy clutch in her spring line.

Sanchez taught herself how to make a handbag. She stitched up about 60 — a dozen in each of her fabrics — and set out to sell them. The SCAD store in Sa-



Claire Sanchez bags are showing up everywhere from Vogue and Lucky to Cooking with Paula Deen. When she started making handbags in 2003, she didn't even have a label.

vannah took two of each design.

"By the end of the week, the manager called and said they'd sold them all and would take everything else I had," Sanchez said.

Then came the call that would change everything.

"Country Living magazine Editor Monica Willis was in Savannah on vacation and bought one of my purses," said Sanchez. "She called and said they wanted to feature it in the magazine, but wanted to know if I was prepared. Could I handle the orders that would come in?"

Well, she couldn't, but that didn't stop her from saying she could.

"I knew I had nine months to figure it out," said Sanchez of the time that would pass before the handbag appeared in the magazine.

"I knew nothing," she said. "I didn't have a label or a logo or know how to go about finding suppliers or getting them made. And no one tells you," she added with a laugh.

She set up shop in her home, which is still her headquarters, designing the bags and finding the fabrics. She still, however, needed someone who could produce the handbags in quantity. Eventually she found the American Fabrics Co., a century-old factory in Bogalusa.

"I brought them my patterns and pre-cut fabric, and they assured me they could do it," recalled Sanchez. "The next day the lady called me and said she was about to have a nervous breakdown. They had no clue

how to do it."

For the next three months, Sanchez made the two-hour trek to Bogalusa to teach two men how to cut fabric and five women how to sew it into her designs.

"They ruined so many bolts of fabric," she recalled.

Time after time after time, the handbags were tossed. Meanwhile, the magazine deadline was drawing ever closer.

One month before publication, the factory manager was ready to throw in the towel.

"I told him we had to try one more time. He said, 'We can't do it.' And I said, 'You have to do it. I don't have anywhere else to go.' I was hellbent on making this work."

Finally, finally, success. The grueling efforts paid off only to have another roadblock almost cause a crash.

"The magazine came out a month early for subscribers," Sanchez said.

Almost immediately the calls began ringing in.

"I had no Web site, no way to handle credit cards," said Sanchez, who was out of town the day the magazine hit.

"I got home, and my mom was sitting here in her pajamas at 10 o'clock at night still answering the phone," she said with a laugh.

Her mom gave her a quick lesson in processing credit cards and packing purses for shipping.

"I think I sat here for the next two months. I didn't move except to bring things to be shipped."

And all was right in her world

until ...

Sanchez's production was only a small part of the Bogalusa factory's work, so when its biggest client pulled out in 2005, it looked like her fledgling company might go under.

"One woman who had sewed my purses — she was the main sewer — wanted to continue. So I helped buy the equipment for her, and she set it up in her house in Franklinton," said Sanchez.

Maida Thomas is now the one-woman (and sometimes as many as three-women) factory for Sanchez.

"Now, instead of making \$6 per hour part time and working in an unair-conditioned factory, she works out of her house and is the owner of her own business and gets paid by the piece," said Sanchez, with more than a little pride in her voice.

"I love that I'm selling a local product, made in Louisiana," said Sanchez. "I love that I can help keep people sewing here in the U.S. Small designers can't afford to go overseas, so if you lose the people who are sewing, you lose the competition"

Sanchez believes in growing her business organically.

"When I need to take the next step, I'll take it," she said.

As from Day 1, Sanchez is still very hands-on in her business, from cutting out the pieces to taking and processing orders with her assistant, Jill Unis.

Her design "studio" is her garage, where a large cutting table equipped to hold bolts of fabric sits where the family sedan normally would. There are a couple of sewing machines and metal shelves stacked with bins of fabric.

Adding just the right design touch is the brass chandelier hanging from the metal bars overhead.

For a photo, Sanchez climbed on to the table to be covered in handbags.

"This is how I feel on a daily basis," she said, laughing. "This is my mental state. This is my life."

► ON THE INTERNET:

<http://www.claresanchez.com>