

Bohemian Rhapsody

Forget urban chaos: escape to the sunny space that is fashion designer Mara Hoffman's Manhattan headquarters—a serene den of creativity.

BY EMMA GRADY PHOTOGRAPHED BY GEMMA HART INGALLS

Busy, chaotic and crowded only begins to describe the tourist attraction that is Macy's Herald Square, located just three blocks north of Mara Hoffman's New York headquarters. But bright, colorful and vibrant better captures the designer's awe-inspiring, eclectic and vibrant ready-to-wear clothing and swimsuit designs—worn by the likes of Blake Lively, Rihanna, Miranda Kerr and beach babes everywhere. The lesson: Even amid NYC's nonstop madness, you can find serenity.

From a no-frills lobby, a rickety elevator ride to the ninth floor takes you to Mara Hoffman's modern bohemia. The main office is open—no cubicles to be found. Everything is visible. Here, in-house design, production and East Coast sales (they also have sales showrooms in Paris and London) work together under one roof. Visitors and buyers including Saks Fifth Avenue and Shopbop get to see how the women's fashion brand operates, from inspiration to the final product—colorful ready-to-wear swimsuits, caftans, dresses, pants and tops.

The showroom, gently separated from the main office by a wall with glass doors and a stained-glass window, boasts three walls with large windows that look out to bustling Sixth Avenue and Macy's. "It's so light in here, it's refreshing," says Dana Davis, 32, director of production.

The entire scene is a feast for the eyes: Minerals and crystals decorate a table; a hot pink neon MARA HOFFMAN sign glows above a giant mirror built from reclaimed

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Spring 2013 ready-to-wear and swim samples hang on a rack below the bright stained-glass window; (L to R) Dominique Cammaert, Dana Davis, Mara Hoffman and Stacey Spigel; Hoffman staffers hard at work in the light and airy office; a Medicine Wheel bustier top from the 2013 swim collection.



wood; and a colorful dream catcher—a gift from jewelry designer Pamela Love—hangs above VP of sales and merchandising Stacey Spigel's work space. A palm tree stands tall above rolling racks filled with richly patterned fashions and brings to mind the brand's recent Hawaii-inspired Spring/Summer Mercedes-Benz New York Fashion Week show, which opened with ukulele players and featured models in palm headdresses.

The brand's new digs—where it has been located for a little less than a year—are a far cry from its overcrowded former office on 28th Street, in the Flower District. "It was almost like an episode of *Hoarders* in there—we were just bursting at the seams," says Mara Hoffman, owner and president of the namesake brand. "Coming to a new space, you get the opportunity to start over." And start over they did. To the 13 people who call this office their home away from home, the energy is calm yet focused, and anything but corporate. "It's the most relaxing environment I've ever worked in," says Spigel, 35, who repped the label at an independent showroom before moving into the new headquarters to handle East Coast sales. "I feel like I'm getting so much work done, but I'm a little more relaxed while doing it."

Hoffman, very much a free spirit, has a boundless energy all her own. To balance it, the office remains clean and organized. Reclaimed furniture and bright woven rugs add character, while Ikea furniture provides structure. Desks are outfitted with essentials—iPhones, Moleskine journals, Apple computers—and only a few personal items: family photos, inspiration pieces (such as a straw platform espadrille on design manager Dominique Cammaert's desk) and, on Hoffman's desk, Ganesha's elephant head. "I'm into Hindu mythology and the deities that go along with that," says Hoffman. "Ganesha [the remover of all obstacles] is one of our champions." Adds Cammaert, 27, about the office vibe: "It's not completely communal or completely segregated—it's a good balance of being together but apart. I find it great creatively."

As for office style, each girl gives the casual dress code a personal spin, often starting with the brand's vivid and print-heavy staples. Cammaert, who steers toward classics, balances colorful patterns with a blazer and oxfords; fashion-forward Spigel always wears a piece from the current line, favoring the best-selling Medicine Wheel print. Meanwhile, Davis depends on jeans and isn't afraid of layering a statement necklace atop a patterned shirt. Hoffman wears a denim-denim "uniform" every day—a cross between *No Country for Old Men* and a Canadian tuxedo, as she describes it—and still manages to look ultra-fashionable.

At lunch hour, you won't see any fast-food wrappers piling up around the wastebbin—or the recycling bin, for that matter, since recyclables are carefully

sorted here. Instead, healthy meals (kale salad is a lunch-hour staple) are the norm and are eaten while hard at work. There is always time, however, to step out to the neighboring Gregor's Coffee (where Hoffman swears by the soy latte and Spigel opts for the decaf), get market updates from *Women's Wear Daily* and browse for inspiration on blogs like Nowness and style.com.

The 9 a.m.-to-6 p.m. workday is balanced with frequent in-office yoga classes at 8 a.m., and once the city gets sweltering, early-out Fridays give the team a much-deserved break. "Work and life should be happy and joyous," says Hoffman. It doesn't hurt that everyone gets along and shares a mutual admiration and respect for one another. "We are all really close friends, and that adds to the vibe," says Cammaert. "We're one big family." It's a feeling everyone shares. "Mara's the type of person who we want to succeed for," says Spigel. "Not only are her designs beautiful, but she is a beautiful person on the inside and out." Adds Hoffman: "My team believes in me and the bigger vision of what we're a part of."

It all boils down to one word: "aloha," which means hello, goodbye and love in Hawaiian. The inspiration behind this season's vibrant swimwear perfectly describes the state of the growing brand. "We are on an awesome upward cycle right now; whatever we want to do is possible," says the designer. And at the heart of it all is this vibrant space, with plenty of room to develop Mara Hoffman into a lifestyle brand. "We're able to do more because there is less of a chaotic energy here," says Hoffman. "Once the weeds are plowed, there's room for flowers. The sky's the limit." *EF*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Mara Hoffman's Ganesha statue sits on her desk; the gigantic dream catcher Pamela Love gave to Hoffman as a gift; bolts of sample fabric used in past seasons; the showroom portion of the office houses a neon Mara Hoffman sign, a palm tree and racks of items from the Spring and Fall 2013 collections.

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