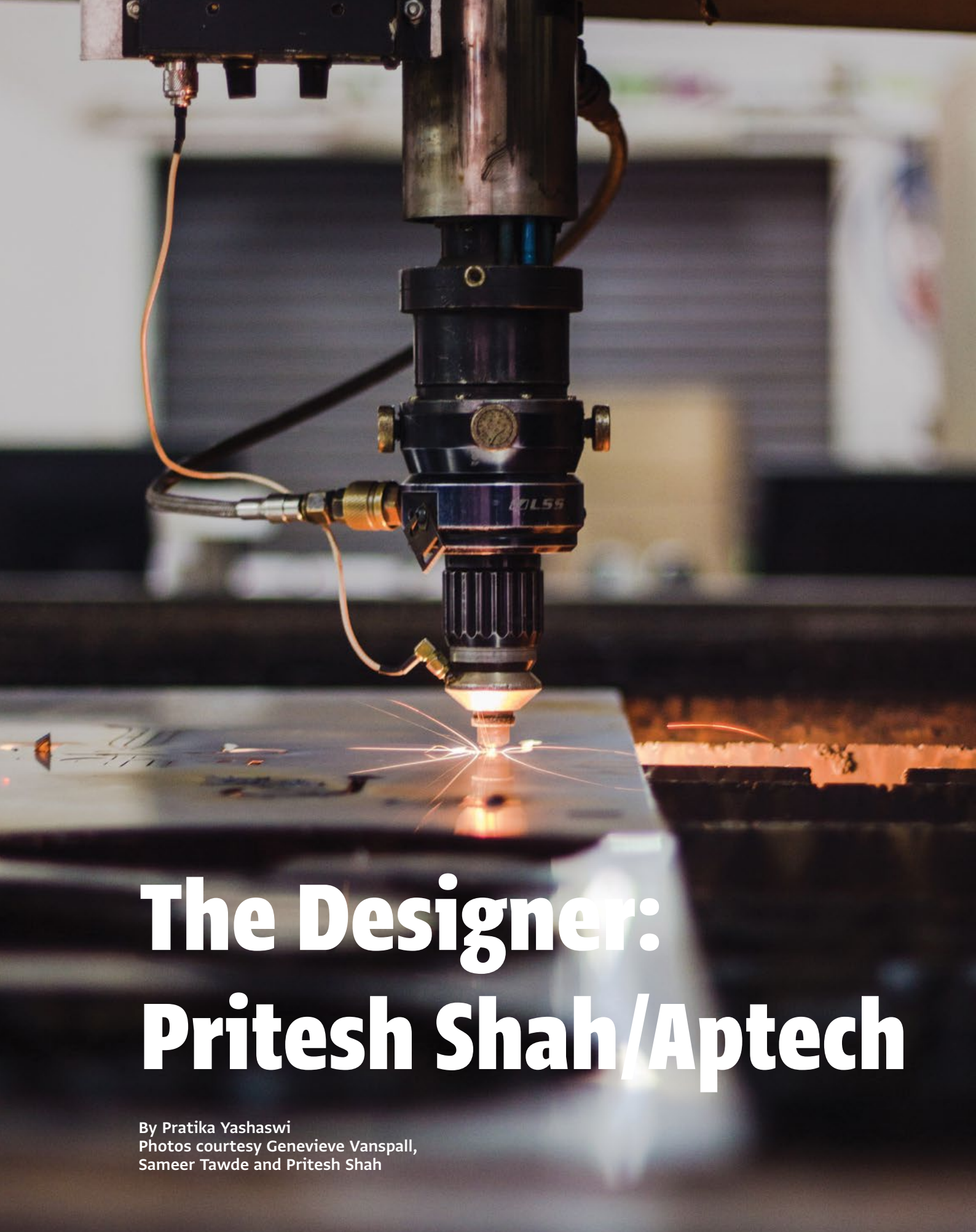




The Designer: Pritesh Shah/Aptech

By Pratika Yashaswi
Photos courtesy Genevieve Vanspall,
Sameer Tawde and Pritesh Shah



Aptech's workshop is a large, airy, 6000 sq.ft space. Sawdust flickers in the sunlight at the entrance. Lasers rapidly flare in blinding, buzzing sparks, and the shells of the patterns they have made lie around the shop, salvages still good enough to be reused. Completed lattice and *jali* work on balustrades, installations, ceilings and scaffoldings are stacked neatly against the walls.

I am greeted by Pritesh Shah, the founder of Aptech. A courteous and strikingly tranquil man, he shows me around, explaining to me the workings of the laser-cutting and CNC machines, the instruments with which he and his team help realise the imaginations of artists, designers and architects.

"This is a prototype we're making for an international rock-themed restaurant chain," he says, pointing to a knee-high metal globe structure lettered with proverbs in Devanagari script. When approved, this will be turned into a ten-feet-high spherical cage suspended over a water installation. "That's for a leading hotel," as he points to another. Occasionally, he pauses to inspect work or help a workman load a piece of plywood properly into a routing machine. He handles them with ease. Having undergone training to use the machines at the time of purchase, he teaches his workers to operate them himself.

We are in the smaller of his two factories: the other one is in Navi Mumbai. "Most of the creative work comes here," Pritesh informs me.

I comment on the difficulty of finding his website on Google or a listing on Facebook. "I haven't looked at the website in ages," he says sheepishly. "We have too much work to spare any time for anything else." Like marketing, for instance. Most of the work he gets is mostly through the architects he regularly collaborates with, and word-of-mouth.

When he was 18 years old, Pritesh, under the guidance of his father and enabled by a not-so-demanding B.Com curriculum, started a business manufacturing labels for industrial products. He called it Aptech, on a throwaway suggestion by his father to include the first letters of each of their names (Abhay and Pritesh). 16 manually operated Pentagraph machines ran throughout the day everyday for years, until in 2005, a labour strike forced him to make an important choice: shut down the business and join his father, or start something entirely new. "I did not want to bend," he said. Earlier, on a business trip to Delhi at a Giftex exhibition, he'd seen a man operating a laser cutting machine for the first time.

"What my 16 machines could do in one month, the laser machine could do in one day." Excited by its potential, he purchased it, but it was not met without well-meaning apprehension. "I was the first person in the Label line to purchase a laser machine. People said it was a mad thing to do. A Pentagraph cost around Rs. 35-40,000. In 2005, a laser machine would cost you 17-18 lakhs, which was an absolutely crazy investment for a label manufacturer." At the time, the capacity of the efficient laser machine far exceeded the volume of work. "I started chasing customers for work."



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