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COMMUNITY




IN A CLASS OF HER OWN: Paula Bouffard, the founder of Touche textile.

Photo by Swapna Nambodiri



Thoughtfulness

Canadian designer and natural dyer Paula Bouffard says her work is meant to be a statement against the throwaway culture of consumerism. **P4-6**

QUIZ

Sherapova steps away from the game.

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Dance yourself to fitness.

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“Design (is) not only about making beautiful objects, but also thoughtful ones”

— Paula Bouffard, textile designer and natural dyer

SUNDAY CONVERSATION



Creating objects that are personal, authentic and made with concern for quality and intention, is an antidote to the world of overproduction we live in today. I consider it a privilege

— Paula Bouffard

By Mudassir Raja

“The tactile quality of traditional techniques of natural dyeing in a modern context brings a sense of mindfulness that I find both inspiring and illuminating.

I enjoy working with my hands directly with the materials. It is very meditative.”

So says Canadian national Paula Bouffard, a textile designer and a natural dyer. She created Touche textile as a creative outlet soon after she started living in the Gulf region. *Community* engaged with Paula to discern about her passion for natural colours.

Please tell us about your journey so far.

I was born and grew up in Montreal, Canada. I was a rather solitary, introvert and creative child. These features still define me today.

Three women marked my early life. My mother had studied decorative arts. She has always been a decorator in spirit. Every room, in every home that we lived in was worthy of a magazine feature. Given this context, painting, creating wall effects, sewing curtains, pillows, varnishing custom built units, and, very importantly, shopping for rugs, antiques and vintage treasures was a big part of my childhood.



PASSIONATE: “I enjoy experimenting, making my own colours from foraged material,” says Paula.

Photo by Marie-Josée Bédard

The second woman was my maternal aunt, who married a Turk and moved to Istanbul. Her husband, the son of two renowned Turkish artists, ran a Yazma (traditional Turkish block printing) studio using the motifs and designs painted by his parents. The third was my grandmother, who was also a major influence. She awakened my sense of a woman's world, particularly its domestic aspect and taught me how to knit, my entry point into textiles.

At university, I got into linguistics by chance. Studying human language and cognition appealed to both my logical and aesthetic sides. I completed my BA, MA and PhD degrees successively and immediately landed an academic position in the French Studies Department at Concordia University in Montreal. I held the position of associate professor of French language and linguistics until I moved to the Gulf with my husband and our son.

What propelled you towards textile designing and natural dyeing?

A change in career was not within the planning horizon; but expatriation, for family or other reasons, became life changing. I founded Touche textile in 2014 a few months after I started living in the Gulf region. It began as a personal project which involved making my own textiles to decorate our new home. When I started, I did not know how to sew or print, as most of my textile work until that point had revolved around knitting. I found working with different textures and materials both challenging and gratifying. Learning how to translate my drawings into printing blocks, and later into silkscreens, opened a whole world of different patterns allowing my surface design work to develop.

The idea of shifting my practice from synthetic inks to natural colours began to develop in my mind in the summer of 2018. I was in the quiet, green and colourful countryside of Quebec thinking about ways to work closer to nature. I started experimenting with foraged plants from surrounding fields and food scraps from my kitchen counter and was struck by the unparalleled beauty of the hues I was creating.

When I returned to Doha after that summer break I decided to continue experimenting with natural dyes focusing on extracting colours from selected pre-consumer food waste that are well known for their dyeing properties. I started the Alwan Qatar project, through which I would collect bio waste from local restaurants and supermarkets to make colours. I incorporate these colours into my textile work with the hope to raise awareness about waste and inspire, although at a very small scale, global action about pollution and climate change.

What do you love most about your work as a textile designer?

My practice embraces a broad range of techniques spanning



ARTY STATEMENT: Avocado skins collected at Evergreen Organics in the Pearl. **Photo by Marie-Josée Bédard**



POCKET POUCHES: Patchwork turned into everyday objects is a great way to maintain a zero waste studio.

knitting, patchwork, printmaking, sewing, stitching, weaving, and natural dyeing. The tactile quality of these traditional techniques in a modern context brings a sense of mindfulness that I find both inspiring

and illuminating. I enjoy working with my hands directly with the materials. It is very meditative. Creating objects that are personal, authentic, and made with concern for quality and intention,

is an antidote to the world of overproduction we live in today. I consider it a privilege. I enjoy experimenting, making my own colours from foraged material. I love the idea that a

textile creation starts in a field of wildflowers or in a forest of evergreens. Each plant gives a different hue, and each fabric takes it differently. Therefore, there is always an element of surprise.

Research and experimentation with botany and natural fibres have taken my textile practice to another level. The science and know-how related to the art and craft of natural dyeing suits well my scientific mind. Foraging plants and growing flowers specifically for natural dyeing feels very curative for both the soul and the body, especially in the contemporary context of global ecological degradation. I consider design to be not only about making beautiful objects, but also about making thoughtful ones. My work is meant to be a statement against the throwaway culture of consumerism.

When struggling in your creativity, what do you do?

Creativity is energy! I place strong emphasis on leading a healthy lifestyle. I cook food that keeps me feeling light and fueled, get good sleep and go outside daily to jog, bike or simply walk. Discipline is an important part of art work.

I keep my textile design process experimental, tactile and playful. Like everyone, I sometimes feel stuck or unhappy with what I am making, but I keep at it. I manipulate fabric with my hands, juxtapose colours, shapes and textures until that feeling disappears, and my work turns into something I like.

How would you best define natural dyeing? What is distinct about it?

Natural dyeing serves to change the colour of some material by using a substance that comes from a natural source. Natural colours can be obtained from rock minerals, insects, lichen and plants. Colours derived from nature have been around for millennia. In fact, up until the mid-19th century, colours were all obtained from natural sources.

Making natural dyes from plants is a local, small scale and seasonal process. Tree barks, roots, and leaves are all products of our natural environment. They are affected by soil, climate, time of harvest, and extraction methods.

Synthetic dyes and synthetic fibres are manufactured in response to the growing demand by textile mass production. As a result, natural dyeing became obsolete and has nearly disappeared. It survived in the West thanks to the artistes of the Arts and Crafts Movement who stood for traditional craftsmanship and favoured the pure shades and subtle varieties of natural dyes in their creations.

Recently, the market for natural dyes in the fashion industry has witnessed resurgence. Growing numbers of consumers are becoming more concerned about the health and environmental impact of synthetic dyes, and there is an increasing demand for naturally dyed products.

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– Paula Bouffard

COSMOS COREOPSIS: Cosmos coreopsis grown in Qatar, harvest 2019-2020.

INSPIRED: The artist at work.

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What is distinct about natural dyeing in my practice is the fact that colour is no longer something that I shop for at the art shop, or something that I mix from pre-existing colours that I bought. Colour is something that happens in the dye bath that I prepare. Avocado skins, for example, can yield a bluish pink very similar to the trendy millennial pink we see on the runway; but it can also yield a peachier hue, and even sometimes true beige. Accepting what comes from nature is a big part of the process which makes it very distinct in my view.

What has influenced your creative work the most? Do you follow some particular designers?

My aesthetics is deeply rooted in my homeland with an eclectic mix of the urban vibes of Montreal city and the majestic nature of the Quebec rural area where I spend my summers.

My work is also influenced by my travels, especially to Turkey and Morocco, two countries where I also feel at home because I have family. I have lived in Doha for five years, and I can see how the colours of the country and the lines and shapes of its rich architectural landscape find their way into my work.

My work is set at the intersection between craft, design, fashion and art. Sources of influence are therefore many.

There are many designers who inspire me and whose work I admire. I can name Arounna Khounnoraj, who runs Bookhou in Toronto, Canada; Kiva Motnik, founder of Thompson Street Studio in New York; and Lotta Jansdotter, textile designer and author. Dutch textile artiste Claudy Jongstra is another one. She is a material artiste. In

fashion, I have been enjoying Eileen Fisher's simple and elegant designs for years.

How would you define your stay and work in Qatar? What prospects of textile designing do you see here?

Qatar has been rich in terms of opportunities. As soon as I arrived I joined Qatart, a community of artistes, designers and makers who focus on handmade.

I have taught different workshops at Katara Art Studios and with Hobby House Qatar to

communicate and share my experience in textile techniques. Through the Alwan Qatar Project, I gave a series of short lectures on sustainability with a focus on making colours using bio waste. I have also taught natural dyes in the Community Program of VCUarts, Qatar.

The element that makes Qatar's emerging creative industry initiatives particularly interesting, in my view, is the country's commitment to sustainability. Prospects for textile design are excellent

both locally and regionally.

What are your future plans?

I would love to travel to India where the textile history is like no other. Each region has its set of native plants; so there is always something to learn. I dream of creating a dye garden in Doha, a place where people from all occupations and age groups, including schoolchildren, could observe dye plants as they grow, and connect with the process of making colours from local organic matter.



TAPESTRY: Patchwork tapestry named 'Qanat' recently exhibited at the Sheikh Faizal Bin Qassim Museum.

Photos supplied