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The Fabric of Your Life



SMALL TALK

Deborah Eydmann in conversation with Myriam Balaj

French multidisciplinary designer Myriam Balaj boasts a rich and impressive career, one which has taken her from set design to the world of haute couture via Chanel and Dior and to home textiles through Egg, Armani, and Agnès b. An accomplished photographer as well, she ventured into decorative accessories with Les Copirates before naturally returning to weaving and founding her successful handmade bracelet brand LOOM.

Balaj makes style look effortless. Immensely creative, she breathes, eats, and sleeps with colour, pattern, and texture. On her artisanal path, she has found balance and serenity, and it suits her well. Deborah Eydmann visited her in her beautiful workshop and home in Nîmes to talk about textile design, generosity, process, and how the quest for lightness led her to LOOM.

Deborah Eydmann: Myriam, tell us about your background.

Myriam Balaj: I studied at the Fine Arts School in St Etienne, France. It was so liberating after a fairly traditional Catholic education. At last, I could let my curiosity and imagination run free. I've always made, tinkered with, and transformed things. It started with my toys, then I moved onto my mother's wardrobe, which I reinvented by cutting, sewing, recutting and rearranging my own accoutrements. I did a lot of unweaving before I began to weave. Once I was at St Etienne, being into materials, I naturally oriented towards Industrial Design. After graduating, I settled in Paris. Through meeting people, I managed to work in theatre, TV, and film, mainly as a decorator. I was in my element. You had to make do with nothing, be reactive, and be inventive. Most of my craftwork culture comes from this melting pot.

DE: Have you always loved textiles?

MB: I loved playing with clothes and creating disguises and décor in my teens. I think I recognised textiles' transformative power straightaway. Later, I became particularly interested in Arte Povera and the *Supports/Surfaces* movement. I found this same love of textiles

in artists such as Anni Albers, Louise Bourgeois, and Annette Messager. They helped strengthen my idea that textiles could also be an art, an aesthetic, and an expression of a way of life.

DE: India has a special place in your heart. When did you first travel there, and how did your experiences influence your creativity?

MB: I first went to India in the mid-90s, location sourcing. I was immediately struck by the beauty of the women and their saris. Textiles were alive everywhere. You could meet craftspeople working on the street. I got a real glimpse of all the possibilities and came back with plans for another trip there focused on textile design. On our second visit to Madras, my husband and I were fortunate to meet a family of weavers who opened their homes to us and shared their know-how for several months. Determined and passionate, we invested in a silk loom and carefully selected the yarns and dyes to bring our vision to life.

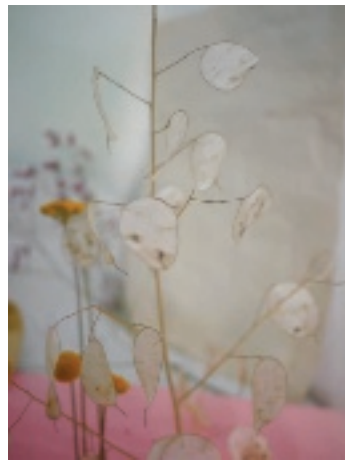


When we returned, we exhibited in Paris. My husband and I had set up our textile design agency, *Du Proche et du Lointain* (Near and Far), and were encouraged to take our work to London; where our designs were welcomed enthusiastically. The late Maureen Doherty from Egg took a liking to us. She even offered us an office in her beautiful premises on Kinnerton Street and introduced us to her network. Her generosity and eye illuminated our Anglo/Indian years. David Champion, another fine person instrumental in our success, was so right to put us all in contact.

DE: Was this your first encounter with weaving, and did you enjoy working on this scale?

MB: Yes, I had never practised weaving before. I had intertwined material but only developed part of the creative process. With these large pieces, I respected the geometry of the warp and the weft. I was working within the tool's possibilities, particularly for widths, ▶

Myriam Balaj



Images: Myriam Balaý and her LOOM bracelets.



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without really pre-establishing function. The main idea was to make finished pieces and not fabric by the meter. The mystical weaver-poet Kabir, whose poem *The Bijak of Kabir, Romaini 28* is always somewhere on a wall in my workshop, knows that the weaver weaves the good days with the bad. Inspired by him and his vision, I have always sought to work on opposites or polarities in my approach. I like that a piece can be both incredibly detailed and refined and very raw. I mixed materials like silk, linen, and even paper or made “moiré effects” (interference patterns produced when a partially opaque pattern is overlaid on another similar pattern) on natural fibres like jute. I was interested in colour, and each weaving was an opportunity to explore a palette. The main rediscovery was warp painting, an ancestral technique in which I used natural materials – cotton, jute, and linen – and painted directly with a brush on the stretched warp.



DE: In late 2014, you embarked on a new adventure by creating LOOM textile jewellery. What gave you the idea, and which tools and techniques do you use?

MB: LOOMs are like miniature versions of the large weavings. I started making them at a time when I was looking for lightness and independence after a number of passionate but exhausting periods of work. With simple pieces of textiles, I reconnected with many aspects of my life. In the beginning, I didn’t know what I was weaving; I was weaving, and that was enough. I showed my LOOM bracelets on social networks and got spotted straightaway. The presentation of my first collection in the Parisian concept store Merci marked the starting point of a new enterprise that continues 10 years later. My bracelets are intended to be very simple. Colour and textures take precedence. I deliberately use a limited number of patterns in keeping with my quest for lightness. The cross motif, recurrent throughout my first collections, is still my favourite (this cross was the very first piece that I wove in India). I work on my customised, hand-sized loom, that I made for my measurements.

You need at least this kind of comfort when you spend all your days repeating the same gesture.

DE: Your creativity knows no bounds. Where do you find your inspiration for new models and commissions?

MB: Creation isn’t work; I draw on everything – my travels, visits to museums, thoughts, emotions, and life! Work comes afterwards in the workshop, where I accumulate materials and experiments while following my artisanal path. Focusing on the same project daily allows you to understand the process’s details and intricacy. Sometimes, I make minute changes that open up another avenue and transform a model into something completely different. It’s like the work generates itself. Listening to one’s work is what weaving allows: patience and listening; it’s like the warp and weft of this craft. I also appreciate being able to respond to specific requests. A client may spy on a model and suggest another colour. I propose my colour range, and I usually introduce this new model into my collections. There are nine in all today.

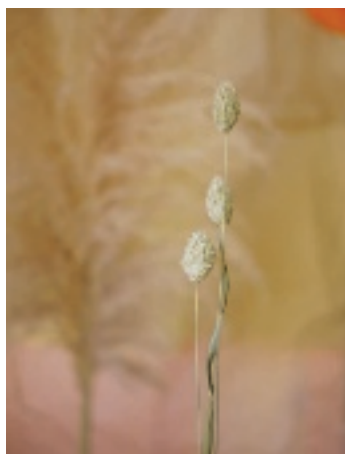
DE: What materials do you use, and where do you source them?

MB: I find my threads all over. I don’t produce large quantities of bracelets, so I’m more like a collector. I source from numerous places, in France and in Europe. I go to flea markets where I have found some real gems, and of course, I have my secret addresses. As research remains at the heart of my studio work, I also experiment with weaving paper or more unusual materials, like VHS tape, on various supports and surfaces.

DE: Would you agree that creativity truly is a way of life?

MB: I try to do things when I feel like doing them, so if people appreciate what I do, it’s all the better. I don’t calculate too much; living and creating are one and the same for me. Long live weaving, creation, craftsmanship, and life! *** myriambalay.fr





Images: Myriam Balaÿ in her workshop surrounded by her colourful woven fabrics.