

ON THE SAME WAVELENGTH

Ptolemy Mann meets three designers whose work is saturated in colour

A luminous blue silk satin slip vibrates against the dusky ochre of an arid Santa Fe landscape. For the third member of our textile triumvirate the moment when you “fall in love with a colour” is extremely exciting. Nancy Traugott shares a love of botanical dyes with Flint and presents a seasonal collection of extremely wearable garments under the banner ‘Homefrocks’ from her South West studio. These clothes evoke a sense of American history; deserts and ruffled petticoats. The colours hold a rare intensity, coral pinks and deep mustard yellows; so vibrant it’s hard to imagine some of them are naturally dyed. Photographs reveal an unexpected and almost filmic quality to the proceedings; a dramatic narrative unfolds in which colour plays a starring role. Particular combinations of cloth and colour reflect a specific kind of light. Traugott explains that “the botanical dyes have an inherent complexity” for her. “They are nature in all her perfection. When we use botanical dyes, we’re doing more than just putting colour to fabric, we’re encoding the fabric with a memory of a plant, a reflection of a place and time.” The black walnuts gathered at her family’s farm in Pennsylvania have a variation of amber tone from season to season which is apparently influenced by water, sun and age of the nuts. For her, this personal connection gives a different kind of gravitas to resulting colours. For Homefrocks, as a fashion brand, there is a delicate balance between commercial expectation and a desire for a creative and personal touch. Happily her customers are increasingly engaged and interested in the botanical dyes and the provenance of the colours she produces; so much so that this coming summer sees their first natural dye workshops hosted at their shop.

She says, “Our botanical colours are derived from flowers, barks, beetles and nuts. The dyes can be mixed, layered and printed. Botanical dyes are their own entity. We prepare to see the unexpected beauty by detaching ourselves from expectations.” Traugott feels that the New Mexico light has been a key factor in her work, something that heightens her senses. The shifting light of each season somehow informs the imminent colour choices. The historical flavour of Homefrocks is enhanced by a new collection of ‘botanical watercolour’ pieces made up of several ‘dippings’ in various dyes to create an iridescent and antique effect: she concludes the garments look like “they’ve been places and seen some things.”

Like Waller and Flint, she definitely trusts her intuition. Each of them share a deep relationship with their respective landscapes; these three artists use colour as their propelling force. In different ways they have found a sense of purpose in their creative work through clothing; defying the sometimes vapid world of fashion to create artworks you can wear on your body, giving you an opportunity to feel and absorb the plants and ecosystems that helped create them. It’s by no means the only thing they each do but it definitely links them. The lingering image however is a deeply colourful one; it is colour that spurs these creative women along and keeps their fabrics flowing.

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