Finding Sanctuary: Paola Melendezâ??s Comforting Textiles

Description

Puerto Rican textile designer Paola Melendez makes work with comfort in mind; her brand, titled Paola Melendez Casa, specialises in the most sumptuous fabrics made with craftsmanship and quality at their core. Working

with hand-designed motifs, hand-crafted Belgian linen and screen-printed designs, her works are built to last, and she hopes, will become family heirlooms that will be passed from one generation to the next. Placing such a high emphasis on quality, she sees her textiles as works of art that are constantly evolving and adapting. She says, â??Handmade fabrics are more than utilitarian yardage, they are art,â• adding, â??Even though your art lives within you, it never ceases to surprise you.â•

Melendez was born and raised in Puerto Rico, and her creative childhood had a long-lasting impact. She cites one family member in particular for influencing her future career choice, noting, â??My late grandfather was a textile engineer in the countryâ??s first fabric factory. Even though he passed away when I was young, I believe itâ??s why textiles came to me organically.â•

In 2008, Melendez moved to New York City to study fashion at Parsons School of Design. While she set out to become a fashion designer, she found herself drawn increasingly to the textile department, and the many processes for creating richly patterned textures and surfaces. She said, â??Though my degree is in fashion, I found myself gravitating towards textiles,â?• explaining further, â??After taking courses on screen-printing, block printing, dyeing and embroidery, I realised that fabric wasnâ??t just a means to a fashion end â?? it was an end in and of itself.â?•

In the years following graduation, Melendez spent several years working as a design consultant to a vintage design archive, which was where she fell in love with the unique and varied qualities hidden within historical textiles. Looking back on this time, she remembers, â??I helped designers source archival materials, and was surrounded by museum quality fabrics all day.â?• The experience undoubtedly shaped her own design aesthetic, and it wasnâ??t long before she was emboldened to branch out on her own as a textile designer.

It was 2019 when Melendez launched her first collection of luxury fabrics. This first body of work was inspired by a road trip Melendez made through the US, and she went on to design a series of patterns which she called a tribute to the western landscape. For example, she says, â??[The fabric series] Modern Heirloom is based on a quilt I saw at a historical museum in Colorado, and another, Painted Desert, is an ode to the sandy deserts of northern Arizona.â?•

Over time Melendez has adopted a particular way of working that suits her stylistic approaches and needs. Each collection she produces begins with hand-painting, a process she says allows her to experiment freely with colourful patterns, painterly textures, and daring colours. The best of these

paintings are then digitized, so they can be translated into screen-prints, produced by the master artisans she has come to work with. Melendez prefers screen-printing for numerous reasons, explaining, â??I think screen printing is the Queen of fabric printing methods. Some of the most beautiful textiles in the world are screen-printed. Our production method makes every yard we produce a unique and long-wearing work of art.â?• She adds, â??Itâ??s a challenging, messy, complicated and pricey process. However, like a photograph, screen printing captures a real moment in time, and that canâ??t be replicated with a digital printer.â?•

As a maker who values quality and craft over mass-production, Melendez is keen to support the work of others who are embracing similar, hand-crafted working methods, even if they are more expensive. She says, â??If there are any boutique vendors or artists whose work you really love, try supporting them as often as you can. It makes all the difference in our growth and success in this industry.â?•

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