

Spinning New Tales from Old Yarns

Australian Fashion Designer Finds Inspiration in the Northern Highlands

“I LOVE THE ETHNIC MINORITY TEXTILES BECAUSE THEY EMBODY A DISTINCT CULTURAL IDENTITY AND AT THE SAME TIME SHOW A HIGH DEGREE OF CRAFTSMANSHIP. THEY ARE BEAUTIFUL AND FUNCTIONAL,” SAYS CYNTHIA MANN, FOUNDER OF THE FLEDGLING FASHION HOUSE FUTURE TRADITIONS WHOSE DESIGNS BLEND CONTEMPORARY FASHION WITH INDIGENOUS MATERIALS.

Every two to three months, Mann travels to the highlands to purchase the authentic fabrics which she will later use in the clothes she produces back in Hà Nội. “At the moment I work with a lot of H’mông batiks and am inspired by the Red Dao embroidery,” she says. Rather than imitating or using entire indigenous garments in her fashion, Mann decided to mainly employ ethnic minority textiles as decorative features or design highlights with her garments, for example as pleats in her skirts. “The trips to the markets in the highlands are important,” Mann adds, “not just to buy textiles, but also to refresh my design-mind and to meet the inspiring artisans who make these fabrics.”

Mann has come to fashion design as a profession rather late in life. Trained as a secondary teacher of Drama and English literature in Melbourne, she first worked in theatre before switching to film and television where she had a variety of roles in Production and Post-Production as well as in Distribution. It was her stint in the film industry that brought her to Việt Nam for the first time in 2003 to assist a friend with making the documentary *Vietnam Symphony*. “I fell in love with the country and when I returned the following year, I still loved it.”

When her father passed away in 2007, it felt for Mann like the end of an era and the right time to start something new. She left Mel-



FUTURE TRADITIONS FOUNDER, CYNTHIA MANN, WITH RED DAO WOMEN AND FRIEND

bourne and the film industry, arrived in Việt Nam with only two suitcases and set up house in Hà Nội. Her part-time job in marketing and fundraising for the vocational training centre KOTO turned out to be a full-time job and after almost two years, she decided to leave the well-known charity and open her own business. “It was time to work on some of the projects I promised myself I’d do when I made the move to Việt Nam,” she

says. After much preparatory work, she finally released her first collection of Future Tradition designs in 2012.

While on the face of it, opening Future Traditions was a big departure from Mann’s previous career, Mann is quick to point out that she is actually following in a family tradition with her mother being a fashion designer and her father an advertising artist. “I was cutting patterns and designing things since I was a wee small thing,” she laughs. “More importantly, my mother instilled in me a love for textiles and taught me to have a keen eye for detail,” she continues.

Future Traditions produces garments to suit a variety of occasions, ranging from more classic tailored jackets and pants which can be worn in an office environment, to funkier, more casual skirt and tops combinations. Like the

indigenous textiles which Mann admires for their aesthetic qualities and usefulness, her designs highlight the beauty of the fabrics from the Northern highlands and are at the same time comfortable and easy to wear. To date her best sellers have been the denim wrap skirt with a H'mông appliqué and the Future Traditions signature jacket – unique, one-off jackets made from a combination of vintage and new, hand-dyed and woven textiles. She also does a contemporary take on the classic Áo Dài, featuring panels of indigo batik and appliqué adapted to suit more western figures.

For Mann, using traditional designs and materials isn't just a one way street from the mountains to the city. It is meant to also benefit ethnic minorities communities, as an incentive to continue with their craftsmanship rather than use synthetic machine-

produced versions, more often than not imported from neighboring China. Here, the philosophy of Future Tradition is as simple as it is ambitious: to provide a sustainable market for the continued production of ethnic minority textiles and thus generate a financial stream back into these communities.

Text: Andreas Pohl

Photos: Michael Fountoulakis & Andreas Pohl

CYNTHIA MANN WEARING THE FUTURE TRADITIONS SIGNATURE JACKET

