

The Bulletin

summer



THE TEXTILE MUSEUM • 2008

exhibition feature

Green Overtones in *BLUE*

An Interview with Artists Maria Eugenia Davila and Eduardo Portillo

The Textile Museum exhibition *BLUE* delves into the role of indigo dye in cultures worldwide. Some contemporary textile artists now look to natural indigo for its ties to older traditions and its ecological qualities. Eduardo Portillo and Maria Eugenia Davila weave together in the Venezuelan Andes and practice sericulture, from raising silkworms to spinning thread. They also find and cultivate their own natural dye sources. The Textile Museum asked the artists to provide further insight into their lives and work. *Translated by Annie Laurie Sánchez.*

What initially attracted you to sericulture, and the process of making silk? Had you studied textiles or weaving before going to Asia to study sericulture?

Eduardo: The silk, and principally the raising of the silk worms! The transformation of the cocoons into thread, dyeing them and weaving them, demands great dedication. Twenty years after beginning all of this, we continue to be amazed. Before leaving for Asia we already had spent years weaving and trying to raise silkworms, but definitely the trip to China was the best decision [we made].

What challenges and risks did you encounter when opening your studio for sericulture, weaving and dyeing in Venezuela?

Maria Eugenia: When you begin a life project you don't see the risks. Later, with time, we see the beaten path and I think that the real challenge has been to maintain [our] original idea, [to have] continuity and constancy.



Eduardo Portillo and Maria Eugenia Davila work together at their studio in Venezuela. Photo courtesy of the artists.

E: I think the principal risk was cultural, with silk [production] being a culture for which we have had to adapt knowledge obtained in other places to the conditions of Venezuela. Probably the most complicated [aspect] has been the creation of a regional culture of appreciation for what we do, but in this too we have succeeded.

How did you first become involved with indigo? Do you produce your own indigo?

ME: We knew of indigo producers and dyers within Venezuela, but they are no longer there; it is a culture that has disappeared in this country. But we encountered [the dye] again in 2002 when we had the book *Indigo* by Jenny Balfour-Paul in our hands — a very complete work that inspired us to invest ourselves in this.

E: With Balfour-Paul's book, we found ourselves in a new world and decided to delve into it with the same passion with which we did silk, and with this book we went again to China, to the southeast, where the indigo tradition is still very much alive. We also went to Isan in Thailand, to Mexico and to India, always searching for the true indigo blue.

There is an indigo plantation in the south of India from which we brought the seeds of the indigo that we cultivate, in a modest way, in Venezuela. It is a variety (*indigofera tinctoria*) with which we produce a paste. We have found ourselves realizing two related processes: cultivating and creating indigo paste, and dyeing with indigo, which

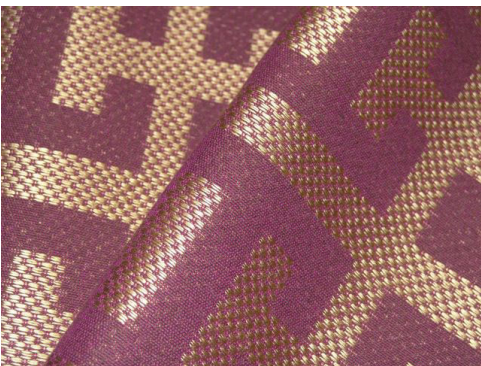
[are both] very satisfying. But for the ability to experiment with the dye we have had to use indigo from other places.

What other dyes do you use in your works, and where do they come from?

ME: Venezuela is a country of great ecological diversity; we try to use all of the dyeing materials that exist around us — to identify, recognize and collect them. We frequently use eucalyptus, annatto, onion, *morinda* (Indian mulberry), *divi-divi* (*Caesalpinia coriaria*), certain mushrooms, mosses and ferns. For the reds we use cochineal, which we bring from Peru and Ecuador. Raising them in-house is possible but it requires additional effort.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of working together? Do you collaborate on each part of the artistic process?

ME: We divide the different parts of the artistic process and collaborate on each of them. One of the advantages of working as a team is that each



supports the other, and doesn't let the other fail; but this also brings new demands, probably greater than what one could have set out individually.

E: Fortunately, we enjoy each phase of the process, from raising the worms to preparing the threads [for dyeing]. In the dyeing [stage] we think of the variations of the colors and how it is possible to relate them to the final design. Our individual inclinations interlace and enrich the result.

What different types of textiles do you make in your studio? Do you produce functional objects as well as artwork?

ME: We weave as much as we can, without regard to the format. We use silk and other fibers, including man-made. Besides artworks we make functional objects such as fashion accessories, cloth, rugs, cushions, etc. We always see in these [objects] the opportunity to experiment with color and the structure of the fibers. Sometimes the artworks come out of a functional object; sometimes they inspire us to explore greater forms.

What is the importance of place (location, geography, etc.) in your work?

ME: It's very important in our lives and therefore in our work. When one is in a place that [one feels] is a safe space, that offers the tranquility that allows for creativity in a trade that requires time and constancy.

E: I think that the most important thing for us is Human Geography, the relationship between humans and nature and how this manifests in culture. We live in the Venezuelan Andes and that makes a stamp on everything we do here. Even so, it isn't the only country that influences us, and from each place we visit we bring something — it influences us a little. In the case of *Guardian*, the work presented in the *BLUE* exhibition, it emerged after long, repeated trips to the delta of the Orinoco River, a vast and exuberant region of Venezuela. There was born the series called *Guardians*, made with plant fibers from this region and our silk that was intended to represent each of us as guardians of the natural world.

Left: Cara del Jaguar [Face of the Jaguar] detail, from the series Imagineria Yekuana, 2005. Silk, cotton and acrylic.

Opposite page: Collapse weave silk scarf, detail. Silk with natural dyes. Photos courtesy of the artists.

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