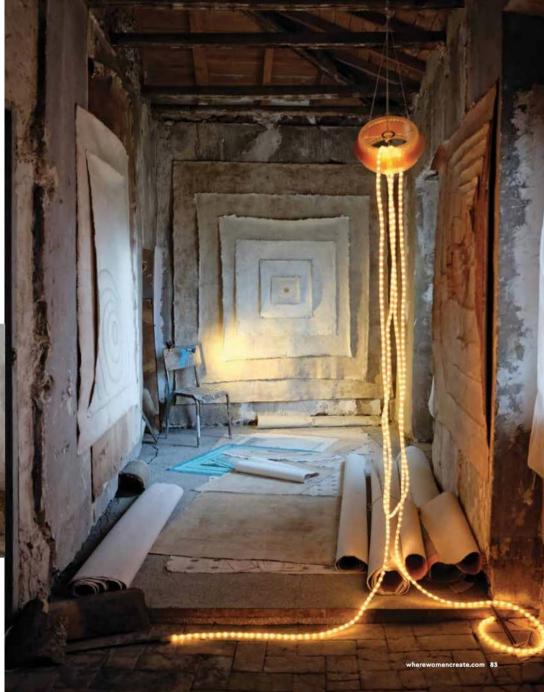


HEART OF MATTER:

AURÉLIE ALVAREZ





Text and Photography by Ruth Ribeaucourt



Aurélie Alvarez is a visual artist from the celebrated French antiques town of Isle sur la Sorgue, Provence. From her studio in the rafters of her 16th century home, Aurélie, a 1992 graduate of fine arts, paints decorative and contemporary works. Her contemporary canvases feature simple, geometric patterns and layered textures reminiscent of ancient Tibetan mandalas. Her decorative collection focuses on lightness, simplicity and the poetic, colorful universe of plants and animals. All of her work explores the duality between science and spirituality, her personal journey to the heart of matter and color.

I live in the town of Isle sur la Sorgue, a beautiful piece of countryside in Provence, France. It also happens to be one of the most exciting and dynamic hubs for antiques in Europe. Isle sur la Sorgue isn't a big city, but it is incredibly rich culturally and provides a never-ending source of inspiration for me and the many interior designers and antiques dealers who come here to source.

My house in Isle sur la Sorgue is part of me—or perhaps I'm a part of it—as I enjoy a profoundly symbiotic relationship with it. The structure itself dates back to the 16th century, when it served as an ancient hotel. My studio is located in the house's rafters, overlooking the rooftops in my town and bringing me closer to heaven. It is not in any way polished; I've left it natural and raw. I try to avoid imposing myself on it too much. I've even left untouched the wall's frescoes, handwriting and tiny scraps of original wallpaper. It nourishes my imagination and my need for regeneration. It is 330-square-feet of pure happiness.

I hang my canvases directly against the walls of my studio. It creates traces of my work, which I consider to be imprints of my creative life and evidence of my journey—like a footprint in the sand. I feel as if the walls inhale the paint and exhale inspiration.







Art + Antiques

I was born in Paris and grew up in a family of celebrated antiques dealers. At age 18, I decided to take a year to teach myself how to restore paintings. My mother and grandmother gave me beautiful 18th century paintings to practice my work. I found restoration fascinating. In a way it was like inhabiting the skin of the painter without being visible. It felt like a tantalizing form of sorcery. With each artist, I had to learn unique techniques to mimic his or her brush strokes and materials.

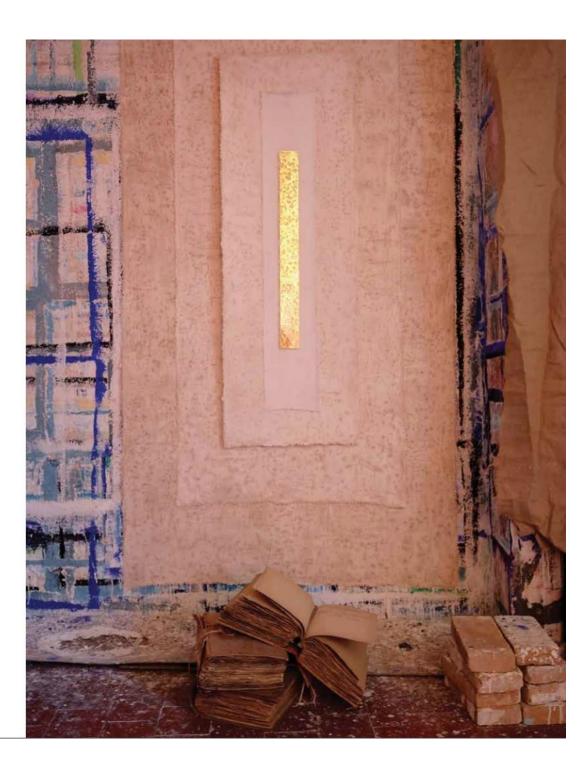
At age 19, I met the love of my life. Freddie and I applied for a fine arts course at the College de Beaux Arts in Avignon. Over the course of my five-year studies, I learned about freedom: freedom of expression and freedom to experiment with different materials, including photography and printmaking. I graduated, and then promptly put my creative path on hold to embark on a new wonderful adventure, being a mother to our two beautiful girls.

As my children grew older, I rediscovered my paintbrushes. I gave one of my first original paintings to my mother, which she proudly displayed in her antiques shop. I continued painting, and by the time I completed my third one, I had received an inquiry from a customer. Anthropologie buyer-at-large Keith Johnson was interested in purchasing several paintings for the brand. It was the opportunity of lifetime, and it launched a 12-year partnership with Anthropologie. Keith's support and trust were a major confidence booster and allowed me to experiment and grow as an artist. I took off with my own wings at that moment of my life and have never looked back.

Old Soul

My favorite way to express myself is through paint and working with my hands. I feel like I've been painting all my life. As a child, I was always in my father's atelier playing with his hammers and screwdrivers. I remember the vivid color of his gouache paint and the hours spent drawing with pencils and markers.

Today I create two different bodies of work, my decorative collection and my figurative collection. They are different but exist in unison, one nourishing the other. My decorative work is inspired by the world of antiques, which impressed my earliest childhood memories. I like to create images and motifs inspired by the 17th and 18th centuries, as well as from the Renaissance period. I create more than 20 layers of materials on canvas, including paint, old wallpapers, textiles, collages and gilding.





"IT IS IMPORTANT-ESSENTIAL, EVEN-TO CONFRONT ONESELF IN ORDER TO CREATE SOMETHING YOU ARE SATISFIED WITH."



My contemporary work explores the duality between science and spirituality; matter and vibration. This work centers and grounds me. It allows me to ask deep questions through the medium of canvas and paint. Each work is like offering up a prayer or burning an intention and watching it release into the air.

If I was focused solely on my contemporary work, I would miss the poetry of my decorative work. I'd long for the motifs that move me, the color that fills my heart with happiness and gaiety. It is perhaps less spiritual but more emotional and spontaneous. When I'm painting blackbirds, for instance, every canvas produces entirely different creatures with individual personalities. One bird may have a curious nature, while another has a maternal side. Still others are thinkers or lovers.

Inspiration Inside, Outside and Above

So many things inspire me. It can be words, a scent, a breath of wind that catches my hair, a tiny remnant of wallpaper or a little flower pushing up through the concrete. One of my favorite things to do is explore old abandoned ruins. They are savage, raw and rich with energy. When I hear an old house is about to be demolished, I often sneak in to snatch a souvenir scrap of wallpaper or some other remnant. Wallpapers are like strata—layers upon layers, imprints of different time periods and intentions.

Countless people and artists have influenced my work. Artist Fabienne Verdier wrote a great book, "Passagére du Silence," in which she recounts her creative journey to Asia and her apprenticeship there with local artists. The focus of the apprenticeship was repetition. The master would demonstrate an example and instruct his pupils to repeat it until perfect. Such devotion is rare in our culture, where the importance is placed on proving ourselves as quickly as possible. I personally learn a lot from repeating my work.

I've never suffered through my creations, including the repetitive parts. There are certainly times when I don't like a particular painting, but there is never any inner battle or conflict involved. In these situations, I simply need to work harder to make the painting my own. Often these paintings are the ones I end up loving the most.

Painting is much like meditation. You set an intention to create something, and while you work, you have no other thoughts. I often feel like I am a canal when I am working. The canal empties, and then something fills it from above. I am simply a vessel, and it's only once I've finished a painting that I will stand back and know why I had to paint it in the first place.



"IT IS MUCH EASIER

TO DESCRIBE MY

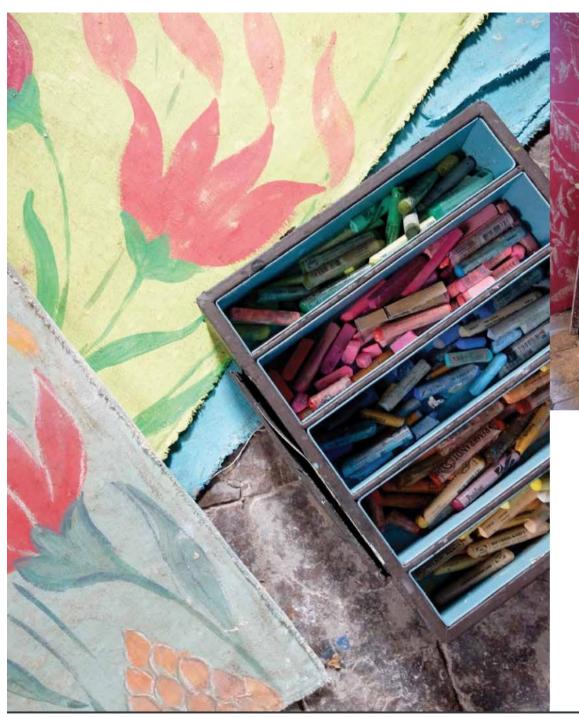
EMOTIONS AND MY

STORY WITH PAINT THAN

IT IS WITH WORDS."

-Aurélie Alvarez







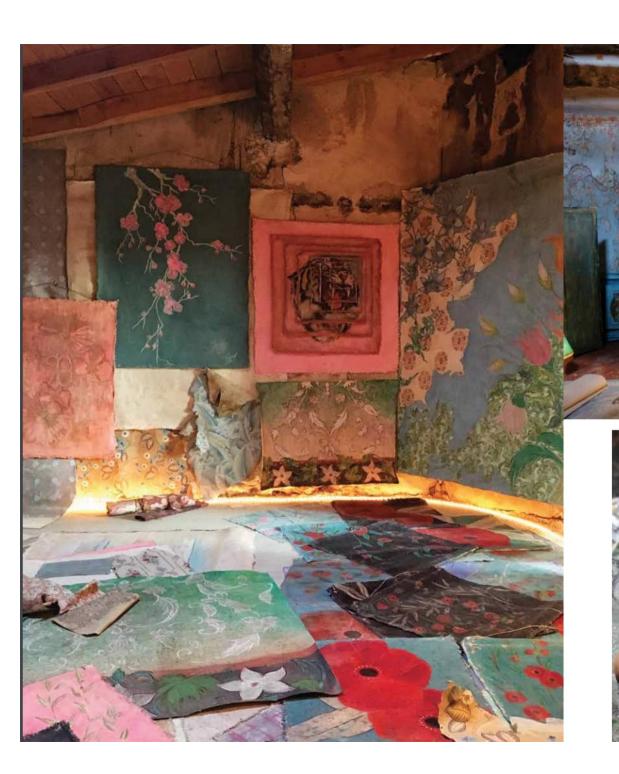




Aurélie's Favorite Quote

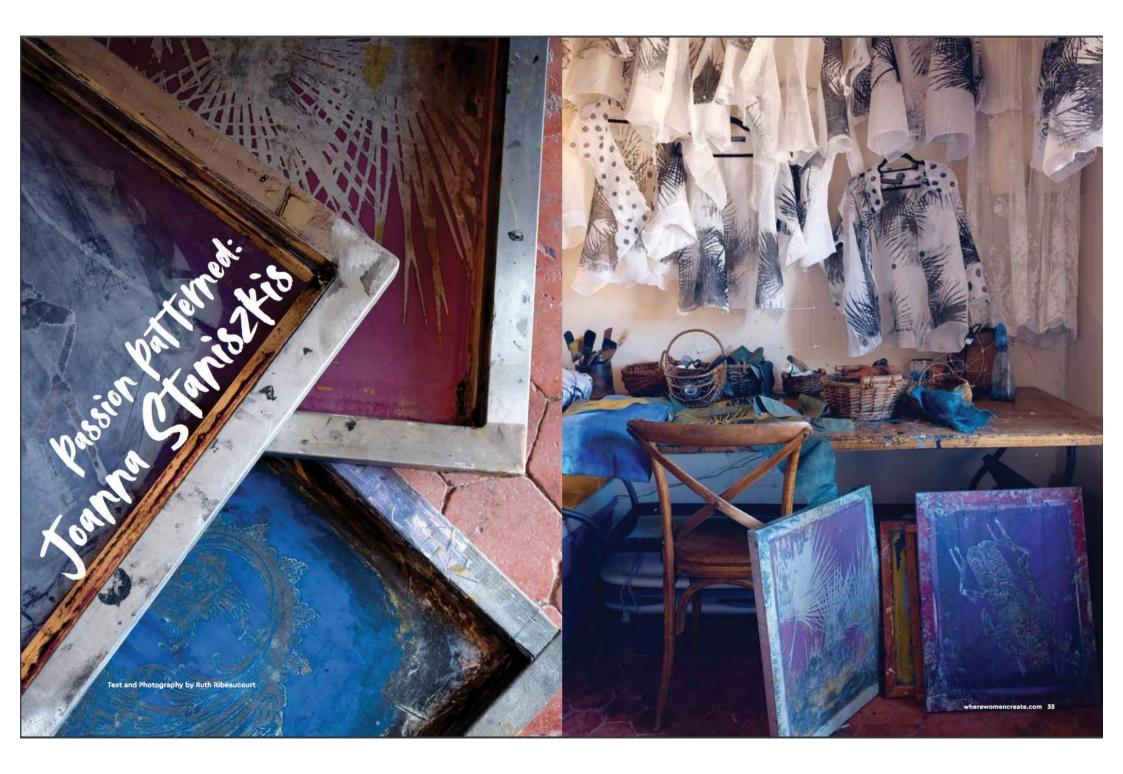
It's very good, dust. Besides having the taste of an old biscuit and the faded smell of a very old book, it is the fluid velvet of things, the fine but dry rain, which dilutes excessive hues and uneven tones. It is also the paring of abandonment, the veil of oblivion.

—Joris-Karl Huysmans, 1895





To see more of Aurélie Alvarez' work, visit AurelieAlvarez.com. To tour her studio, visit TheFrenchMuse.com.







Joanna Staniszkis is a renowned textile artist whose work has been seen in major museums and shows across the globe. Born in Poland but now splitting her time between Vancouver and Provence, France, Joanna specializes in large-scale architectural textile commissions and more recently, handmade clothing. She is a graduate of the famed Chicago Art Institute and spent part of her career on the faculty of the University of British Columbia, where she taught design, textile design and history of costume. She has received numerous awards and is a member of the Royal Canadian Academy for the Arts and the International Women's Forum.

I was born in Warsaw, Poland, during World War II. My love of art has always seemed to come from within, and I have been "making" for as long as I can remember. My mother was a dentist, and when she cast crowns, I would collect all the little scraps of gypsum and use them to carve miniature sculptures. In my teenage years, I went to many museums and took drawing classes in high school.

After high school, I enrolled in Warsaw's Fine Arts Academy. Shortly after, I was invited to apply at the Chicago Art Institute. When I was 20 years old, I left Poland for Chicago on a scholarship.

My early months in the United States were very surreal. I was one of the first students from behind the Iron Curtain to attend an American university, which made me a major novelty. I remember being interviewed by "Good Morning America," and for the first three months I lived with the school's dean. I attended countless events and premieres and was introduced to VIPs of the American art scene. Chicago was an exciting place in the 1960s-perhaps the hottest spot in North America. And the Art Institute was at the epicenter of it all, with its unparalleled art collection.



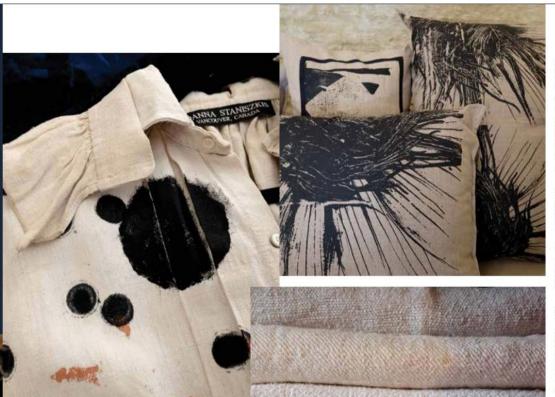
P.S. I Love This!

These hand-carved wood thimbles fit onto the three largest fingers and were used in ancient tapestry and carpet weaving. As the warp on tapestries and carpets can be very tight and rough, these thimbles would help protect fingertips from abrasion. When I try them on I have the strangest urge to weave!

Just below the thimbles is another hand-carved gem: an antique wood comb from Turkey. It would have been used to beat down the weft on tapestries during carpet making. I love that it's so smooth from years of use and has a unique shape from the fit of the hand that used it for so long.







Change of Plans

Initially, my plan was to study interior design. But my arrival happened to coincide with one of the most thrilling times in textile art. Four grande dames of contemporary textile art, (Sheila Hicks, Jagoda Buić, Magdalena Bokanović and Olga de Amaral), were transforming the distinctions between "art" and "craft." Tapestries came down from the walls and became 3D art installations. It was impossible to not get caught up in this exciting new wave, and I found myself wanting to focus more on textiles.

I had always intended to return to Poland after graduation, but the country was deep in the throes of communism at the time, and my parents encouraged me to stay in America. I'm glad I listened, because soon after that, I met my husband. In 1967 the two of us moved to Vancouver.

In Canada I spent 36 very happy years teaching at the University of British Columbia, where I worked as an associate professor teaching a variety of design courses. Feeling the need to explore my art more personally, I retired early and began my work in clothing design.

What I love most about clothing design is that I can get instant connection and feedback when a client tries on a garment. With the large-scale architectural textile commissions of my past, (which can still be viewed today in private collections and in lobbies and offices of several North American corporations), the work unfolded over long periods of time, with the assistance of many artists. When I'm making clothing, I can achieve my art alone, in my studio, in a relatively short timeframe.

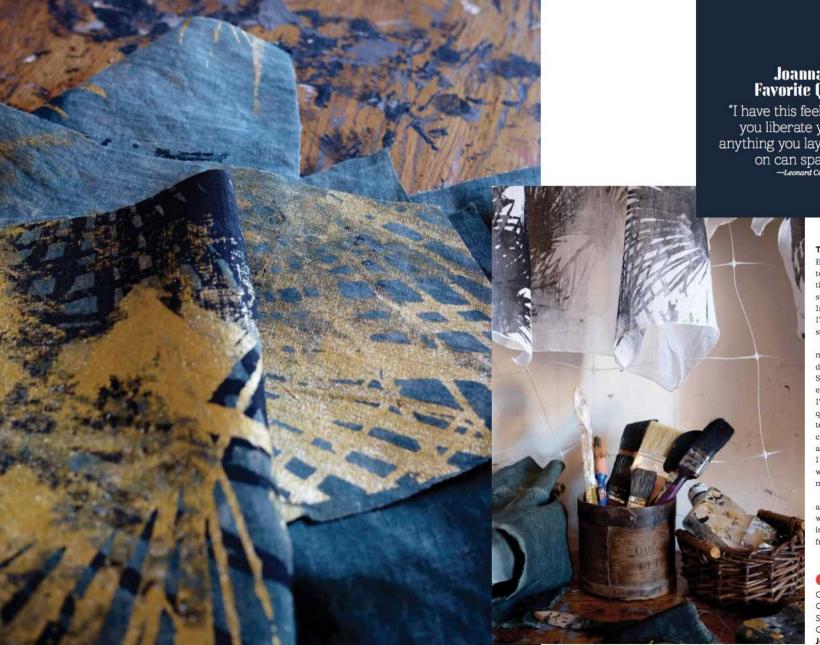
Just Joanna

Working on my clothing is very fulfilling, as I'm able to do whatever I please and am solely responsible for everything I create. It is the antithesis of mass-produced clothing—or even smaller productions—where work is farmed out to seamstresses and printmakers. When you are making for yourself, there are always ways of creating something successful, even when you make a "mistake." I don't always follow a pattern but rather create "shapes." By changing a cuff or collar, a garment can become utterly unique.

Three years ago, I set out to expand my current textile atelier. I didn't have to look very far, as a large, cathedral-like vaulted cave next door became suddenly available. It took me three years working with a skilled craftsman to transform the neglected cavern into a light-filled atelier and showroom. It was one of the most challenging products I have ever undertaken.

Today my studio is filled with stacks of antique textiles, including hemp, nettle and hand-woven linens from the 1800s. I love picking up beautiful old baskets at French flea markets; they are perfect for storing my tools.





Joanna's Favorite Quote

"I have this feeling that if you liberate yourself, anything you lay your hand on can sparkle.*

Textile Travels

Even in my second life as a clothing designer, I continue to participate in 9 to 10 big arts shows annually. Spending time in one space with hundreds of fellow artists has supported the development of my own personal style. In absorbing the works of other accomplished artists, I've been able to see that everyone has their own unique style-there is rarely any duplication or imitation.

Whether traveling for art or recreation, I have always managed to combine it with my love of cloth. My preferred destinations are places known for their woven fabrics. South America was one of my early interests for its extremely advanced pre-Colombian textiles. Since then, I've discovered Asia and India as well. There is no country quite like India when it comes to variety and quality of textiles and techniques. Over the years, I have developed close relationships with several Indian weavers. This allows me to have fabrics woven to my own specifications. I typically choose white, un-dyed silk of various textures, which I then transform with dyeing and printing back in my studio.

While I'm very proud to have won several prestigious awards in various exhibitions and for certain bodies of work, at the end of day the most important thing to me is that I get the chance to do what I love and have the freedom to create.



Catch Joanna at one of her 2018 shows, including Convergence Reno 2018; the American Craft Show in San Francisco; and IWF World Leadership Conference in Miami. Visit her website at

Joanna-Staniszkis-in-Provence.com.