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THE WOMEN'S MAKING



PAD. Pages on Arts and Design

International, peer-reviewed,
open access journal
founded by Vanni Pasca in 2005

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Publisher

Aiap Edizioni

via A. Ponchielli 3 – 20129 Milano – Italy

aiap@aiap.it

www.aiap.it

PAD © ISSN 1972-7887

#18, June 2020

www.padjournal.net

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INTERVIEWS

Textile Design between Tradition & Innovation

Interview to Brigitte Perkins

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Università degli Studi di Firenze

Keywords

Textile Design, Traditional Arts, Innovation, Social innovation, Embroidery.

Abstract

Through a long interview with Brigitte Perkins, a French textile designer who has worked in Morocco for 25 years, we want to present not only the story of a female designer, but also a common story of women through the Moroccan traditional arts of weaving and embroidery, imbued with a very strong symbolic dimension, where the weaving of fabrics, carpets and embroidery are deeply inscribed in Moroccan culture, with economic, social & cultural implications.

For many women, these traditional arts allow them financial autonomy, as well as a strong social bond. Between them, they weave relationships, exchanges of knowledge ... These arts, transmitted from mother to daughter, through which regional and family traditions are perpetuated, are usually the representation of the deep cultural expression of a feminine world, too often set aside or ignored.

Brigitte Perkins comes from the Parisian Fashion scene. In 1995, she founded the Atelier "Tadert Titbirine" in an old caravanserai in the medina of Marrakech, offering and revisiting the old tradition of weaving, with men, and then spinning and embroidery, with women, developing a production of excellence and innovative high-end. The particular character of Brigitte's project does not only reside in the conception of fabrics and products of remarkable refinement and quality, but above all in the methodologies that she established both for weaving and embroidery, which allow this level of excellence. Convinced that the aim of tradition is not to reinvent the invention itself indefinitely, but to preserve what has been transmitted, Brigitte, by modernizing traditional techniques, has indeed succeeded in perpetuating this knowledge and in restoring the value of a living testimony to a millennial tradition that defies time by mixing the dreams of yesterday and tomorrow.

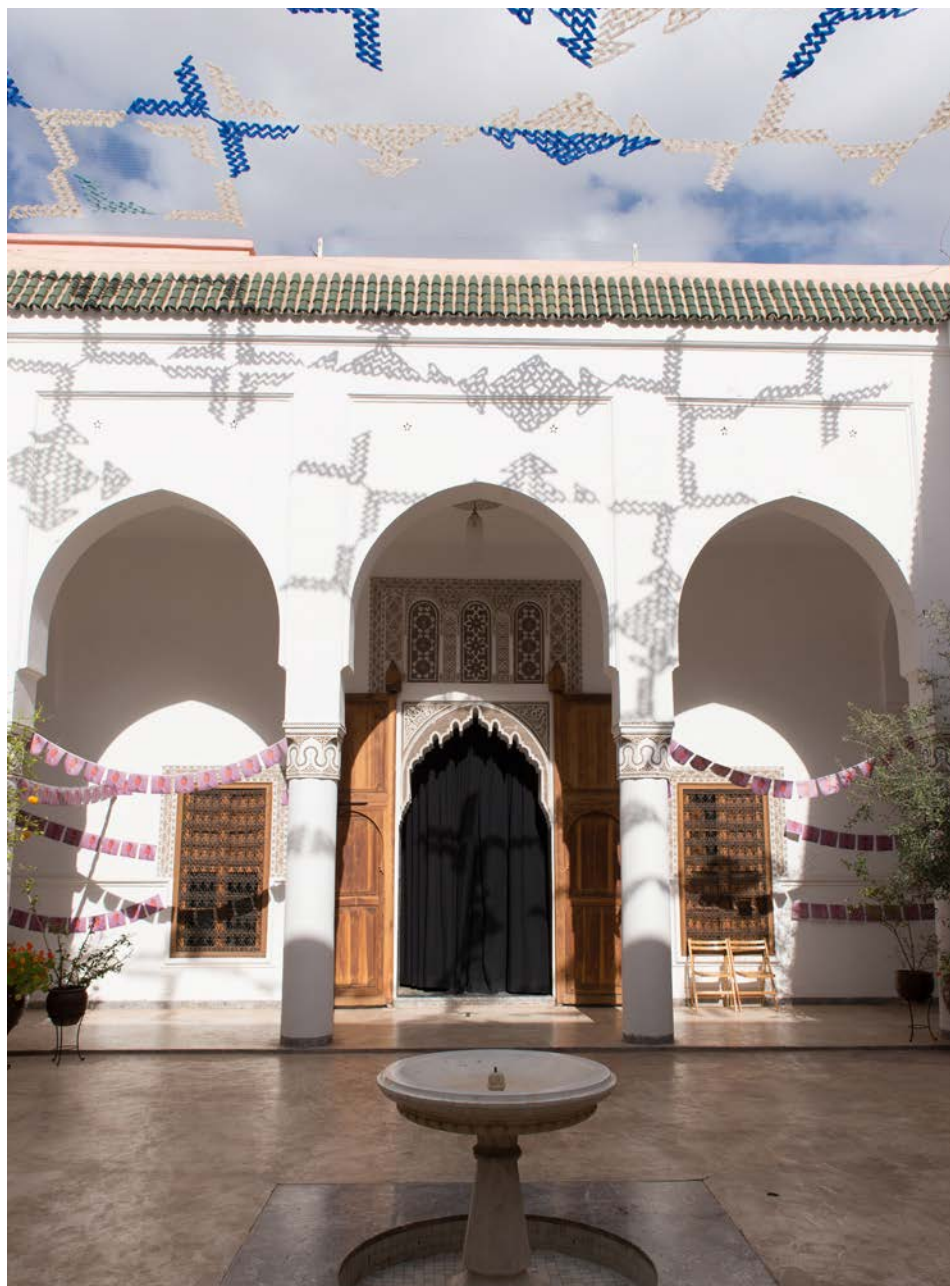


Figure 1. *Tapis du Ciel. Carpet of Heaven.* Work created for *Féminin Pluriel*. Photo by Terry Munson.



Figure 2. Brigitte Perkins/Atelier Tadert Tibtirine, embroidery of Fez in Gold Sabra on cotton voile. Photo by Brigitte Perkins.

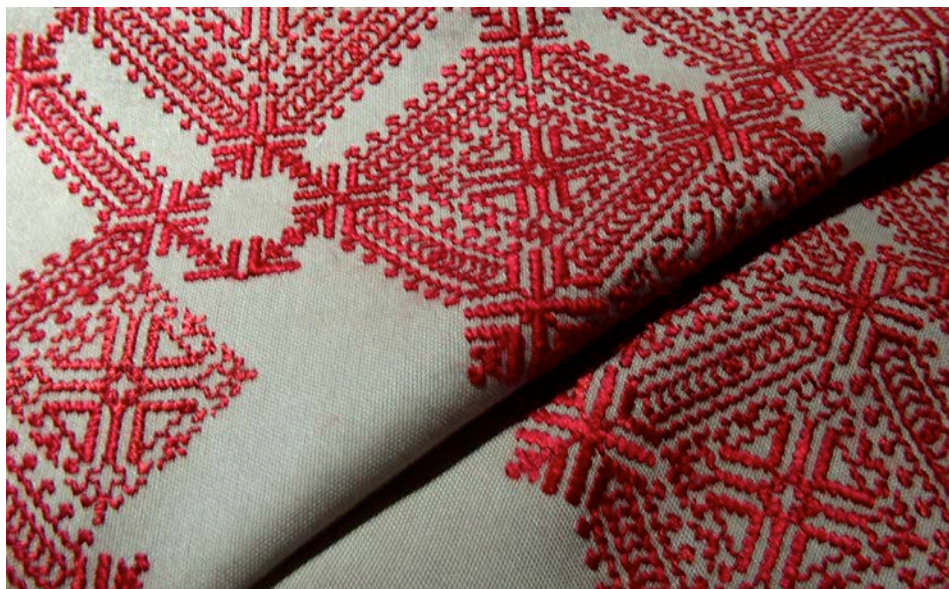


Figure 3. Brigitte Perkins/Atelier Tadert Tibtirine, silk embroidery of Fez on cotton. Photo by Brigitte Perkins.



Figure 4. Brigitte Perkins/Atelier Tadert Tibtirine, Fez embroidery on silk. Photo by Brigitte Perkins.



Figure 5. Brigitte Perkins/Workshop Tadert Tibtirine, cotton plaid. Photo by Brigitte Perkins.

DG: Can you tell us about how you came to Morocco and your work on textile design?

BP: Nothing was premeditated... I would never have come if one of my friends hadn't invited me to spend a few days by the sea in the south. Later I spent a year and a half, between 1990 and 1992 in Marrakech, discovering this country and especially the Berber communities of the Ourika Valley and the Ouirgane region on the road to Tizintest, their often very difficult living conditions, their potential.

I returned to Paris in mid 1992, but too far from the fashion world in which I worked, after what I had experienced in Morocco. So, I decided to set up a project in Morocco with women. Between 1993 and 1995 I divided my time between Paris and Marrakech and set up a network of Artisans for this rather ambitious initial project. Worked with *Potiers for actions*, a humanitarian association, carried out with the HEART WEAR Foundation.

In November 1995 this Foundation asked me to see what could be done in textiles. Met a corporation of Weavers, most of them elderly, in an old Foundouk in the Medina of Marrakech, who were weaving blankets and fabrics from *Djellabas* "beldi"¹. From the next day started with them a small series of samples with what I could find as (contraband) fibres on the spot.

The encouragements of some Parisian decorators, pushed me to continue. The evidence of a lack of structure immediately appeared to me and also that I had to commit myself really

1. The *djellaba* is the traditional Moroccan costume, *beldi* in Morocco, simply means traditional, hand-made, local, as opposed to *roumi* which suggests something more modern and industrial. Nda.

and for a long time! Everything was empirical and repetitive: the same drawings, few or no colours. I started colouring the textiles, but finding very few cotton colours, I started mixing them with *sabra*² threads used mainly by embroiderers on traditional outfits, which nobody was doing at the time (Fig. 1). The success was immediate. The Arab House, the first charming hotel in the medina of Marrakech, asked me to create their fabrics. It was during this period that the need for a more precise methodology than the one I was using became apparent, in order to be able to reproduce identical pieces of fabric without errors. The French and international press, which was interested in my work in fashion, followed me... we were increasingly solicited by decorators, prestigious interior designers and a private international clientele.

DG: How you have developed your work?

BP: We improved tools, looms, combs and smooths, developed textiles of different structures, work on matter and light. We had to import our raw material, as we couldn't find reliable spinners on site and yarns of the quality I wanted. The weavers easily adapted to the methodology, which I had developed with them, and were soon self-sufficient on the looms. In 1998, I was asked to participate in a development project in Tamesloht – a city whose importance and influence was recognized until the independence of Morocco – which aimed to rehabilitate its *Zaouia* (small religious university or school) through a cultural project.

2. Vegetable silk derived from the agave, Nda.

We set up a cooperative of women embroiderers and spinners in Tamesloht, and we moved our weaving workshops there. We also set up a studio of “Tapissières” in Marrakech, since we supplied fabrics mainly for interiors, as well as a studio for the hand finishing of products, such as plaids, stoles, *Hammam* and bath sheets.

We collaborate with international artists on some of their works, running programs in partnership with universities, such as the University of Design and Architecture in Florence. (ShareDesign Project), or Foundations. We provide training in embroidery methodology (Fondation Orient Occident, Dar Bellarj) and sewing (Fondation Jardin Majorelle).

We produced a Manual for the Modernization of Moroccan Embroidery in 2008 for the Fondation Orient Occident.

DG: What is Design for you?

BP: An Aesthetic research applied to the creation of a form taking into account its function... in 3 words Aesthetic – Form – Function . Going to the essential and simplicity. When it comes to Textiles, transcribing images or a concept... telling stories.

DG: Your work is based on the traditional art of weaving and embroidery, as a designer innovation is a very important element, how can you combine these two things?

BP: All we did was innovate... my art direction work, methodologies, various partnerships and other achievements. The two seem to be inseparable, if we want to bring these traditional arts to life, we have to know how to transform them

while respecting the techniques, their deep essence and their history. The evolution must be constant and continuous.

DG: The fact of being a woman designer in a traditional society like the Moroccan one has created problems for you?

BP: No! because I created our company very quickly, a guarantee of independence, and the relationship with all the people who are part of it is based on respect, trust and recognition of everyone's abilities and their value. The first thing the weavers thanked me for was showing them that they could do beautiful things... Now living in Morocco is not an easy thing, you have to know how to protect yourself and put limits around you... there can be no real integration.

DG: You have trained perhaps about 500 women in weaving and embroidery, can you tell us about this experience?

BP: Not so many ! but about 250 to 300 ... In both Weaving and Embroidery, the work was very empirical, without structure or rigour, with a lot of bad practices, hence the importance of establishing methodologies and transmitting them through training. We have trained our Artisans & Craftswomen in these methods, who themselves form small groups selected among the most experienced, who in turn form others by creating the "domino effect" under our supervision, to be sure that the methodologies are well mastered and transmitted correctly. These well applied methodologies structure any work required. Preparations can sometimes take a long time, but this is a guarantee of the excellence of the desired result.

They reinforce in the Artisans the certainty of the quality of their know-how which can freely express itself thanks to them.

DG: You also work with women's associations and for development projects, can you tell us about this experience?

BP: Always through trainings whose quality is often lacking in Morocco. The social and economic impact cannot be sustainable if the training given is not good. When the technique is mastered it is already a considerable advantage that makes all the difference. Then it is necessary to apply it to the right products, to set up strategies. This is the work we do with different Foundations or Associations.

DG: The project you're most attached to?

BP: All those where there is transmission, sharing of knowledge, and aesthetic creation... those where students and Artists work with Artisans, such as *ShareDesign*³ with the University of Florence, *Féminin-Pluriel – L'Espace Physique et Mental des Femmes*⁴, etc... Mainly those that opening up new per-

3. *ShareDesign*, 2013, Joint project coordinated by Giuseppe Lotti and Debora Giorgi with the collaboration of Aniko Boehler between Dipartimento di Architettura Università di Firenze (DIDA-UNIFI), Marrakech (ESAV), Centre de Formation et Qualification dans les Métiers de l'Artisanat de Marrakech (CFQMAM) with the participation of several Moroccan Workshops and associations among which L'Atelier Tadert Tibtirine, Fondation Orient Occident, and others. During the project 40 students in Design from the two Universities DIDA-UNIFI and ESAV Marrakech, worked for 5 weeks with the craftsmen of CFQMAM for the realization of 50 prototypes.

4. *Féminin Pluriel* is an artistic collective created & animated by Aniko Boehler & Debora Giorgi, art curators, in 2014, in collaboration with Brigitte Perkins/Tadert Titbirine, Florence Robert-Visy/graphic design department ESAV Marrakech, Maha Elmadi/Fondation Dar Bellarj, Nathalie Locatelli/Galerie 127, Poster for Tomorrow, Voice Gallery, Dipartimento di Architettura Università di Firenze. Organizes artist residencies, workshops, conferences, in the field of visual arts with a special focus on women artists.

spectives for Artisans and make them discover other horizons where they also have their place. But above all the creation of this collection illustrating the Moroccan Embroideries, with the *Fondation Jardin Majorelle*, which will be the subject of exhibitions or illustrations during conferences, probably a book, completing the Handbook on Embroidery.

Each of our embroiderers signs one or several “Masterpiece” showing the different techniques of the repertoire, considering that each City in Morocco had its own technique, its compositions and its colours. This collection honours the mastery of their know-how, the culmination of these years with us and the recognition of their work and themselves.

This collection will bear witness not only to a technical repertoire, but also to the innovation brought to the compositions, to the way of appropriating traditional designs, to a space of freedom linked to creation.

Each project is always a new adventure that allows you to evolve, discover and learn.

DG: What are your next projects?

BP: An exhibition on Moroccan embroidery with the Museum of Angoulême (France) which owns the Prosper Ricard collection and will be invited to the Yves Saint Laurent Museum in Marrakech, for which we will have to provide some embroidered pieces. And this embroidery collection, on which we are still working, which will be a repertoire of the different urban embroideries that we master but also the demonstration of other interpretations of this Art. Collaborations with Artists and exclusive requests.

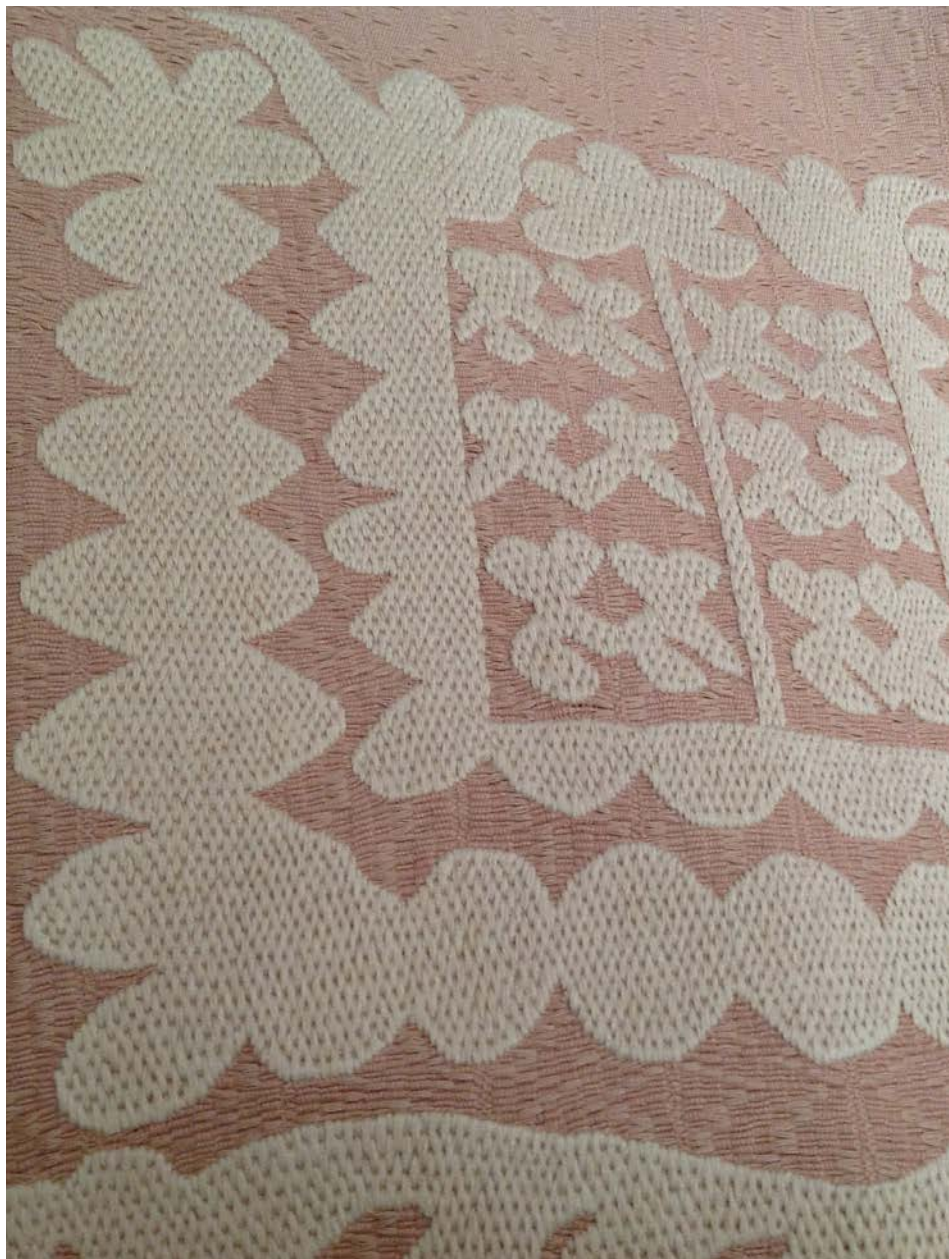


Figure 6. Brigitte Perkins/Atelier Tadert Tibtirine, Tetouan embroidery enlarged. Photo by Brigitte Perkins.



Figure 7. Collaboration with the ShareDesign project. Photo by Brigitte Perkins.



Figure 8. Collaboration with the ShareDesign project. Photo by Brigitte Perkins.

V

BIOGRAPHIES

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After completing his classical studies at the "A. Volta" High School in Como, he took composition at the "G. Verdi" Conservatory in Como, studying the cello and the piano. At the same time he undertook historical, archival and documentary research studies on authors and performers of Italian artistic, musical and performance culture between the late nineteenth and twentieth century, rediscovering and enhancing figures representative of an eclecticism often neglected by official historiographic critics. Since 2012 he has carried out independent research and historical-critical in-depth study for the purposes related to the progress of current research, coming into contact with academic figures of reference in the scientific-disciplinary fields of relevance, conducting research in archives and cultural institutions such as the State Archives in Rome, Bibliothèque National de France in Paris, Patrimoine de la SBM and Archives du Palais Princier in Monaco, Archive of the Teatro Regio in Turin, and The National Archives in London.

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PhD, associate professor of product design in the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano. Since 2014 she has been the head of MADEC, the Research Centre of Material Design Culture in the Department of Design. Her researches are mainly focused on design-driven innovation, design for materials (advanced and smart materials), news technologies integration in product and interior design, Future Design Scenarios. With her research, she has made a significant contribution to methodologies of Design for Materials and historiographical work. Moreover, she deals other research topic like the design in Mediterranean countries, gender issues in design and Design History. Co-founder of *PAD. Pages on Arts & Design* journal, since 2011 she has been the PAD editor in chief. Since 2015 to 2017 she has been a member of ADI's executive board, and currently coordinates the technical-scientific committee for long-life professional training of design professionals. Since 2019 she has been a member of the executive committee of *AIS/Design. Storia e Ricerche* scientific journal. Authors of more than 140 scientific publications, she is a member of scientific committee in international conferences, reviewer for international scientific journals, and research evaluator for academic research application in NL and PT.

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PhD, Architect, she is Researcher in Design at the Dipartimento di Architettura of the University of Florence (DIDA-UNIFI). Since 1991 she works on the issues related to Sustainable Local Development and the social implications of the project starting from the Cultural Heritage. For over 20 years she worked in projects in Ethiopia, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen, Jordan, Haiti, with the most important national and international donors WHC - UNESCO, UNCCD, World Bank, European Commission, WMF, AICS... Since 2011 she has been collaborating with the DIDA UNIFI especially in projects around Maghreb countries and in the social field promoting Social Design projects and workshops using co-design methodologies. She is professor of Service Design at DIDA UNIFI, professor of Design for Cultural Heritage in the License Course in DesignS at Ecole Euro-Méditerranéenne d'Architecture Design et Urbanisme de l'Université Euro-Méditerranéenne de Fès EMADU – UEMF in Morocco and visiting professor in some universities in Mediterranean countries.

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Dr. Melanie Levick-Parkin's research is focused on visual communication and design & making practices in relation to intangible cultural heritage, heritage and archaeology, framed by Design Anthropological approaches. Most of her work is about the agency of visual and material language and informed by a feminist lens. She is particularly interested in how gender manifests in/ affects how meaning is made within the public sphere, both materially and visually and how power circumscribes who is able to make meaning and give form in different spheres. She is currently the MFA Design Programme leader at the Sheffield Institute of Arts, Sheffield Hallam University, and also supervises doctoral candidates across Art & Design and for the Research England funded, Lab4living 100 Year Life Project.

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Post-war sculpture in New York. She did a four-month internship at Mumok (2017, Vienna) and a three-month internship at Artipelag (2018, Stockholm) and is a committee member of the Fondazione Centro Giacometti in Stampa.

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Professor Lynn-Sayers McHattie (PhD, MBA, BA, PG Cert, FRSA) is Programme Director for Research at the Innovation School at The Glasgow School of Art. Lynn's research foregrounds questions around “crafting futures” in the creative economy. Her research explores craft and textile practices that connect to the indigenous landscape and culture of island communities and the role innovation can play in socio-cultural. She works extensively in the Highlands & Islands of Scotland and S.E. Asia. Lynn is involved in supervising doctoral and M.Res. students whose interdisciplinary inquiries blur the boundaries between addressing contextually located social and cultural challenges and design innovation practice.

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Artist and teacher. She lives and works in Turin. She trained in Florence where she graduated in painting at the Academy of Fine Arts followed by a master's degree in Modern Literature, with a thesis in visual anthropology on photography as a mode of self construction. She is currently completing a master's degree in Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology. Always interested in the contamination between different artistic languages, she alternates projects of participatory art, with a particular attention to the female condition, investigated through photography, narration and performance, to a research with an intimate and dreamlike character. She develops her artistic research in the field of gender studies and visual anthropology.

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urban furniture supported by the Italian Ministry of Economic Development (2019-2022). In 2017 he wrote *La Fabbrica dell'Innovazione. Gli arredi del Palazzo delle Poste di Napoli 1936*, published by LetteraVentidue, Siracusa.

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Architect and PhD student in design at Sapienza University of Rome. Received the bachelor's degree in Architecture at the Federico II University of Naples (2013) and the master's degree in Architecture for sustainable project at Politecnico di Torino (2016). Since 2017 she has been active within the Architecture Department of Federico II University of Naples being design teaching assistant, exam and degree committee member. She has been a research fellow at the CESMA of the Federico II University (2018-2019). From 2018 she started a collaboration with the Fondazione San Gennaro, an organization that promote social innovation, as a member of the ReMade lab research team whose purpose is to experiment innovative technology to recycle urban waste (plastic and metal) on a local scale. Her main research interests are in the areas of design for social innovation, design for territories, design for sustainability.

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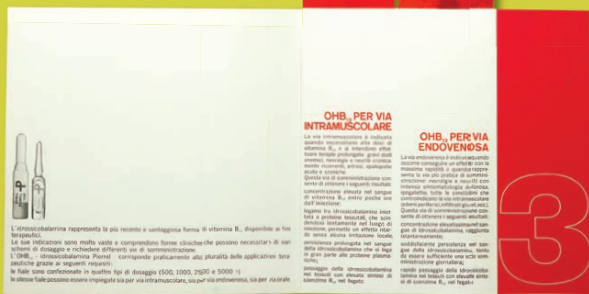
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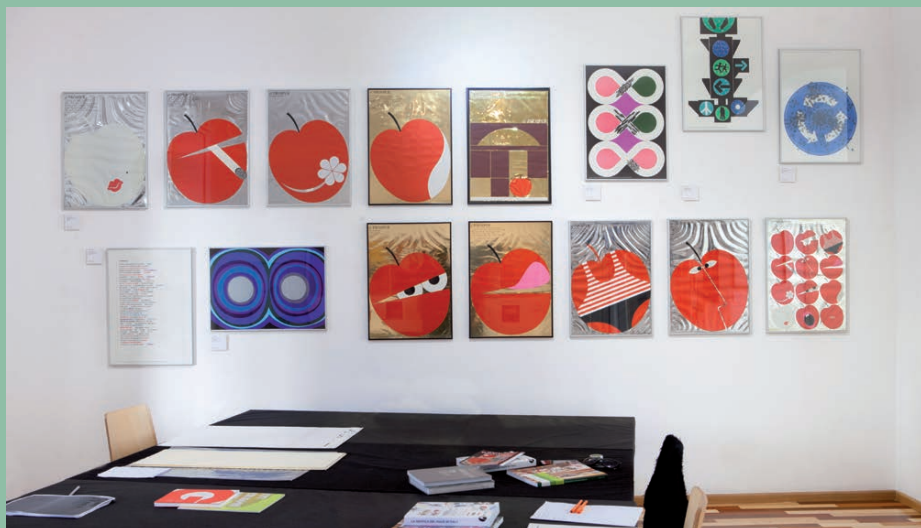


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PAD. Pages on Arts and Design

International, peer-reviewed,
open access journal
ISSN 1972-7887

#18, June 2020

www.padjournal.net



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associazione italiana design
della comunicazione visiva