

Things Elemental: Blanket Benefits

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Oakland textile artist Hiroko Kurihara wants to wrap the world up in something warm and beautiful. Her elegant line of home furnishing and fashion accessories is not only richly designed but also designed to benefit the not-so-rich.

For every handcrafted blanket, pillow, throw or fashion accessory she sells, Kurihara donates a blanket or scarf to someone who is homeless or in transition; arranges for a tree to be planted; or gives a pillow to a nursing mother needing support — it's how she promotes ethical consumerism.

"I had some personal experiences with the homeless that led me to want to build empathy between them and my clients," Kurihara says. "Blankets are a signifier of someone who is homeless. You often see them wrapped in them and I wanted to create something that would allow me to help keep them warm."

The blankets, scarves and pillows that Kurihara donates to those in need are made from recycled polar fleece or organic cotton, and come with an attached postcard that she invites the recipient to fill out and return to her. Then she posts their remarks on her Web site to foster a connection between the

benefactor and the recipient.

"I want to complete the circle," she says.

Kurihara's commercial designs are crafted locally and made from a lightweight European virgin wool that is EU ecologically certified.

"I spent a year looking for the right material," Kurihara says. "Though I'd hoped to find something locally produced, I finally settled on this lovely Italian knit because it was the perfect weight, it was water resistant, and the color palette reflected a deep sensibility with nature."

In her "Brick and Lichen" series, for example, deep red, celery green and pale cream stripes are combined into a striking "organic geometry" pattern. In "Delta," three pebble-like brown and grey stripes are connected with a slate blue serpentine stitch. Kurihara combines the strips of wool by lining them up side by side with no overlap and then carefully stitching them together so that the designs are attractive on both sides — a process that creates a pleasing consistency for Kurihara.

Inspiration

"My style is influenced heavily by the Bauhaus, particularly the work of German textile artist Anni Albers," she says. "Architecture and urban living also impact my work."

Though Kurihara was well into designing her own line when she first saw the Gees Bend quilt exhibit at the de Young, she recognizes similarities between the patterns and colors of the striking quilts and her own designs.

Kurihara was born in Germany, later moved to Japan and then ended up in New Jersey before training as a textile artist at the prestigious Rhode Island

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School of Design. At the time she gravitated toward weaving and silkscreen printing as well as sculpture and architecture.

"I look back now and realize that we didn't know about the geopolitical impact of the textile industry," she says. "Today I'm much more aware of how an artist's work is undervalued."

Bay Area arrival

After living in New York City for a few years she decided to make her way to the Bay Area to live closer to family and to start anew.

"I came just after the Loma Prieta Earthquake," Kurihara says. "I figured it was OK to move here since there'd just been a big earthquake so the odds were good it couldn't happen again right away."

Instead of working in the arts she became involved with social services through organizations such as Habitat for Humanity and The Unity Council. After her second child was born, however, she decided she wanted to create a socially responsible business using her design skills.

"I was a reluctant capitalist," she says. "But I had this idea that I could do something that wasn't just a one-directional charity; I wanted to move beyond charity to justice."

This year, not only is she running her own design studio but she's also been approached by her former employer, The Unity Council, to direct the Made In Oakland project. MIO is committed to creating 60 living wage jobs for people who will help a select roster of craftspeople produce and expand their product lines.

"The goal is not only to create jobs but to cut back on shipping costs, shrink our carbon footprint, and

improve the quality of home products by working locally," Kurihara says.

Helping the world

That's a tall order, but for someone with Kurihara's desire to do good while doing good work, it's a perfect fit.

Hiroko Kurihara's designs are available at The Gardener in Berkeley, August in Oakland, and The DeYoung Museum in San Francisco as well as other stores and galleries listed on her Web site www.hirokokurihara.com.

She will also be selling her work at two upcoming holiday craft fairs:

Holiday Artisan Fair 2008, noon to 8:30 p.m., Nov. 21, and 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Nov. 22, de Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco; and the RISD Holiday Sale, 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Dec.7, Fort Mason, Building A, San Francisco.

Kathryn Loosli Pritchett lives in the East Bay and writes about home and garden design. E-mail her at klooslip@earthlink.net.

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