

Designing Sea Life from the Desert



It's no coincidence that Ayala Serfaty's organic, sea-life-inspired designs spring from a desert country. Serfaty, who works in a Tel Aviv loft, is obsessed with water, and her lighting fixtures, chairs and other furnishings take on a sensuous fluidity. Trained as a fine artist in Jerusalem and London, she made the switch to design after the first of her three children was born in 1992. Her design firm, Aqua Creations, which she runs with her husband Albi, has clients worldwide. Tall tubes of delicately etched glass sprout from the floor of the lounge at the Ana Hotel in Tokyo, Japan. Chandeliers recalling sea anemones flutter along the ceiling of the Oceanographic Park in Felix Candela, Spain. And, rare for an Israeli artist in the highly charged Middle East, her work is also featured in the luxury outpost of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. —Michelle Albert

Do you describe yourself as a Jewish artist? An Israeli artist?

Just an artist. I am very Israeli and Jewish in that I live and work here. I was in Europe for a few years, but I made my choice to be here. I like being here, but not

necessarily as an artist. I believe in global aesthetic values. Really, none of the artists who inspire my work are Israelis. And the Israeli market for my work is limited because my designs are so particular and expensive to make.

We sell to Arab countries but we sell without labels: We don't write "Made in Israel." I recently met a Lebanese man who was looking for something nice for his home, but he was scared he could be arrested.

You've referred to the experience of your work as "accelerated intimacy," taking time out to reflect on existential matters and to draw on yourself. How does cultural identity enter into this interaction?

My work is related to the fact that I have Polish roots and that my family suffered during the Holocaust. The fact that I live



in the Middle East and Israeli politics don't affect it as much. My life, however, is deeply influenced by the conflict. Israelis live in a permanent state of conflict. Recently, I was watching a video of a Dutch woman and thought there was nothing more peaceful than a Dutch girl with sheep.

It seems like underwater life—coral reefs, fish and so forth—shows up in a lot of your work. How did it come to influence you?

I used to snorkel and spend time on the Sinai coast when it was part of Israel. It was the best possible place to relax. However, it was water in the womb that was my true inspiration. Water themes began showing up in my work during my first pregnancy.

You've said that childhood memories play an important role in your work. Do you intend for such themes to connect people to each other?

I believe that if you create something that is totally authentic and true, even if it's the most individual thing, the purity of

such authenticity will make it universal. I hope that people will connect to my work through their own childhood memories.

Have you encountered any political resistance or discrimination as an artist based in Israel?

Sometimes we send a newsletter and get an email back saying, "Please delete my address; never send me information from a Jewish country." We sell to Arab countries but we sell without labels: We don't write "Made in Israel." We sell to Dubai through an agent. But we don't get any photographs from him after the sale. Recently, I met a Lebanese man who was looking for something nice for his home, but he was scared he could be arrested.

If there's "world music," a genre featuring converging ethnic musical traditions, is there such a thing as "world design?"

There are world crafts. International designers try to find these crafts in the most remote places and incorporate them into a contemporary, global design. I don't think you could call it a genre along the lines of Greek design, Israeli design or English design. You can see tendencies, but it's not the same as what is happening in music.

You've described an artistic process of always searching for new media of expression and new forms. In recent years you have also incorporated glass and polymer, creating a line of sculpture you call SOMA. Where do you think you're headed now?

Recently I've designed pieces from upholstery material and felt. I've always liked felt, it's very organic. It's very loose and warm, you can incorporate colors and you can shape it how you want.

How do you want to be thought of in terms of your contributions to world design?

I'm proud to be a woman working in design. My generation does not have many successful women designers; it's more of a man's world. I hope the language I have developed in design is making a contribution: Other artists have told me that they are influenced by it, or that they study it and then do their own work. If you are good, you are a step in an endless ladder. ♡

