

ANNA+JUAN

Charlotte Rivers goes behind the scenes at the Swiss dyeing collective Anna & Juan to find out more about plants, natural dyes and sustainable textiles.

Along with many other people in this world I'm into all things eco. Our house was detoxed a few years ago; regular cleaning products swapped out for eco ones, big brand toiletries given away and replaced with natural products, even my make-up bag now contains only chemical free products, and we try to buy organic food where possible. It's become a lifestyle choice which has extended into other parts of our life; I knit with eco wool and sometimes buy organic cotton clothes. It goes without saying that it's all pretty expensive, but we simply buy a lot less, and focus on using less.

Of course we are not unique. More and more people are making these choices as awareness grows around the impact of chemicals, not only on our bodies, but also on the environment. It was this thinking that led to the formation of the Swiss-based textile company Anna & Juan. Founded by Josefina Eliggi and Luzius Schnellmann, they specialise in finding natural ways to dye wool and are convinced that, if carefully researched and thoroughly tested, the use of plant dyes could become a sustainable alternative to conventional dyeing.

Josefina, originally from Argentina, has a background in textiles, fashion design and printmaking, while Swiss-born Luzius studied and taught graphic design and illustration. 'For some

years, quite separately, we had both started specialising in sustainability within design in our respective fields of work,' Josefina tells me. 'I had a clothing brand back in Argentina and had been experimenting with the use of plant dyes, meanwhile Luzius had been researching the history of different textile fibres and the benefits of using them in relation to increased sustainability. Essentially, as designers we had both started questioning what we were doing, asking ourselves more and more about our responsibility towards creating more sustainability within our work. So when we met at a summer school programme in Germany in 2010 one thing led to another and we started Anna & Juan.'

The pair soon moved to Zurich together where they set themselves up with a dye garden growing an abundance of traditional dye plants such as Madder, Weld and Japanese Indigo, all known for the rich colours they produce. One of the reasons Josefina and Luzius were particularly inspired to experiment with plant dyeing was because of the bright, intense colours that plant dyes can create. Weld (*Reseda luteola*), for instance, looks like a fairly unassuming plant yet produces a yellow that Josefina and Luzius describe as 'unbeatable', or the dye from the indigo plant, which upon removal from the dyeing bath appears to be greenish-

yellow, but then develops into a deep indigo as the yarn is exposed to the air. When this happens, they tell me, it is one of those 'magic moments'. However, as well as the colours, they were drawn to plant dyeing because they were intrigued by the dyeing process itself. 'The colours excited us, most definitely, but also we both like experimenting and trying out new processes. Although the technique is, of course, extremely old, it was new to us,' Luzius explains. 'We also liked the fact that it made us rethink the dyeing process. Plant dyeing requires a completely different production and design process, their use can be quite complicated and getting it right is a creative task in itself.'

Josefina and Luzius began their journey initially by just dyeing wool, but soon extended their process and started applying it to different fibres, and eventually entire fabrics, including silk and linen. Due to an unfortunate lack of availability of textiles in Switzerland, they import their yarns and fabrics, mainly from Europe - Germany, Spain and France - but also from Argentina where they have yarns produced exclusively for them, albeit on a small scale. From there creating colours that are 'just right' can be a long process. There is a huge amount of research to be carried out, formulas, or 'recipes' need to be tested, adjusted



and retested, and of course there is a huge amount of experimentation. 'We've had times where we've tried using certain plants without any real hope that we would get a good colour because the dye bath looked so dull or colourless,' Josefina tells me. 'But then after an hour the colour in the bath suddenly develops into the brightest, most brilliant yellow or orange. When something like that happens it totally blows our minds.'

For Josefina and Luzius, however, making environmentally friendly yarn only makes sense when combined with rethinking towards a more moderate consumption in general. 'We sometimes feel like producing and sustainability is a contradiction in itself,' Luzius tells me. 'This is why recently

we have become more and more focused on teaching, and championing the culture of making things yourself. And, in fact more importantly, fixing things yourself. Making and fixing things makes you value you them in a different way.' To this end the pair now host Anna & Juan workshops where they aim to share their knowledge of sustainable design and production and raise awareness around the issue. They have a really great variety of workshops including textile design, plant dyeing, knitting, crocheting and sewing, mainly held at Dynamo in Zurich. 'What thrills us most about the workshops is seeing people's faces when they realise what they can achieve just with some fabric or yarn and their hands in one afternoon,' says Josefina. 'The people that come are of

all ages. Around half of them already work with textiles in some way, but the other half work in industries such as law, teaching, banking, and so on, and come because they miss creating and making with their hands.'

In addition to the workshops the pair have also opened a series of pop up shops, most recently in late 2014. This, their third pop up shop, was in a café in the city of Lucerne where they collaborated with local cupcake maker Die Zuckerbäckerin. 'Pop up shops are a great way for us to test the market, but also they allow us to be more visible,' says Luzius. 'The experience is always encouraging. With the last one, people could do their Christmas shopping, have a tea, eat a cupcake, sit and knit, or participate in one of the workshops we had going on. On the downside, it can be tiring setting up new places only to take it all down again after a few weeks, so for that reason we now feel it is time to have a permanent shop.'

The concept for their permanent shop will be similar to their last pop up in that they will sell their own products - yarns, fabrics, knitting and crochet sets, crochet needles - together with a broad mix of other brands they admire. 'It's a simple concept but I think it's the best: sell things because you love them,' says Josefina. 'Switzerland sometimes seems like a difficult place to start something like this. The quality of life is high here and the economy is still wealthy, why sit down and knit a hat when you can buy one for half the price? But we can see that people are starting to rethink this, and are beginning to value the culture of craft and of handmade. We need to be patient but it is happening.'

The Anna & Juan shop will open in Zurich in fall 2015.

For more information about their workshops visit annajuan.ch

NATURAL DYEING WITH ONION SKINS BY ANNA + JUAN

Materials needed

Dyeing supplies can be found at wildcolours.co.uk or dharma Trading.com
 100-200 g of onion skins / 100 to 200% of the weight of the dry wool
 100 g of clean, pure wool yarn
 10 g of potassium alum (alum) / 10% of the weight of the dry wool
 5 g of potassium bitartrate (cream of tartar) / 5% of the weight of the dry wool
 3 tsp of white vinegar to fix the colour
 2 old stainless steel or aluminium pots (for dyeing only)
 Cotton thread to secure the skein
 Glass jar
 Heat source (hot plate or stove)
 Lab thermometer to control water temperature
 Neutral soap
 Rubber gloves
 Scissors
 Sieve or cloth
 Metal clips or pegs
 Spoon (for dyeing only)
 Wooden stick for stirring

Preparation

Prepare the skein by wrapping the yarn around the back of a chair and tie the ends together.
 Secure the skein with the cotton thread: place 3 to 4 loose ties throughout the hank forming '8s'.
 Keep in mind that the yarn must be able to move freely during the dyeing process in order to achieve an even colour.
 Soak the hank in water for at least one hour.

Mordanting

Dissolve the potassium bitartrate and the alum in a glass jar of warm water.
 Fill one of the aluminium pots about half way with water, add the potassium bitartrate and the alum solution and stir well.
 Put the soaked wool in the pot. The hank should fit comfortably. Add more water if necessary to cover the fibres completely.
 Simmer slowly (at approximately 80°C / 176°F) for one hour, stirring gently from time to time. Let it cool overnight.

Dyeing

Put the onion skins in the other pot and cover them with fresh water. Simmer slowly (at approximately 80°C / 176°F) for one hour and let it cool overnight.
 Pour the onion skin 'tea' through the sieve or cloth and keep the liquid. Discard the used onion skins (compost them).
 Take out the mordanted hank and rinse it carefully with cold water. Next, put it in the onion skin 'tea' or dyebath. Simmer slowly (80°C / 176°F) for one hour moving the fibres occasionally without shaking, to avoid felting. Let cool completely.
 Take out the hank and rinse it carefully under the tap until the water runs clear. Put it in a bucket of fresh water and a small amount of neutral soap for ten minutes and rinse gently.
 Last, immerse the wool in a bucket of fresh water and white vinegar for 30 minutes. Squeeze out the excess water and hang out to dry in the shade.
Important: In order to keep the wool fibre from felting, avoid sudden changes of water temperature and friction.

