A Visual Insight Into a Sustainable Fashion Business

 Posted on February 22, 2016

By Mia Windisch-Graetz

Check out some pictures I took during my time working for Uma Prajapati, ethical fashion designer and founder of Upasana based in Auroville, India.
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- The team
- Upasana Flea Market
- Tea Time
Amanda, a volunteer from the Rhode Island Design University draws patterns for Upasana.
“I am Full of Hope for the Future”

Posted on February 21, 2016

Sustainable fashion designer Uma Prajapati talks about bloody cotton, high-speed trains and why she never wanted to become a business woman.

Uma Prajapati in her apartment in India. Image Credit: Mia Windisch-Graetz

January 7, 2016. 3:22 P.M. Auroville, South India.

“Hold on tight or you won’t survive,” I keep telling myself while sitting on the back of Uma Prajapati’s motorcycle. The rebellious driving style of the fashion designer and founder of Upasana clearly reflects her obstinate approach to her career path. We are on the way to her apartment, where I interview her over a cup of tea. Besides her impressive book collection, design furnishings and a kitchen everyone in their twenties can only dream about, it is her story that fascinates me.
MIA WINDISCH-GRAETZ Tell us about your career progression, where you studied, where you worked, who influenced you.

UMA PRAJAPATI After I finished my studies in economics in my hometown Bodh Gaya, I went to New Delhi. There I did my major in fashion design at the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) from which I graduated in 1994. Then, I worked two years for the European fashion market in Delhi. For a design project I came to Auroville in 1996. I remember I only had 2,000 rupees in my pocket, less than 30 euros. Actually, I was supposed to be there for two weeks but those weeks turned into years. And well, I ended up creating Upasana in 1997. Wow, it’s now been twenty years since I first got here.

MWG What does sustainable fashion mean to you?

It means to care. Once you start to care about people and the environment, the ways you make decisions will change. This twist in your mind comes naturally. The way you think changes. And your plans change. You really have to plan ahead to dodge around big conglomerates that only want to make profit.

MWG What inspired you to create Upasana?

UP A couple of things. A little more than ten years ago, thousands of cotton farmers in India committed suicide because of the rising costs of farming brought about by Monsanto. It has driven them to crippling debt. They felt they had no other choice. That really hit me. And change happens when it hits you. It doesn’t come easy but when you get hit and cry helplessly, that is when you find the change.

Since then it became very clear to me that fashion has to be sustainable. I worked in fashion and with cotton at this time. I had to live with that. I felt responsible for what happened. Many people in India pretend to not know what’s really going on. There is a seed mafia and farming communities are not well educated. I knew that everyone would just continue the way they work. Why is the world so unfair? Fashion is the second largest industry in the world. And it’s a really bloody business. When we started to work with cotton farmers in South India, it changed my life. What I could do to help these people? I had the choice to either write nasty articles and blame others, or I could just go ahead and change the way I work and consume. And that’s what I did. At first, it was hard but I realized that positive conversation has a far greater effect than negative conversation for a positive cause. I thought, Okay, I will give you fashion but I will make it my own way. I also wanted to create a space where young professionals from all over the world can come and explore Auroville through textiles and design.
MWG You said ’a couple of things.’ What else hit you?
UP There was an old lady. I encountered her in a village where I was running a project to empower local weavers in South India. When I was sitting there, next to our car, about to go home again, she suddenly came over to me. She nudged me and asked: ‘Would you support us too?’ I did not expect that and just asked her: ‘What do you want me to do?’ She just wanted to work and earn a few rupees a day. This woman was about sixty and still had a dream. The dream of only earning a few rupees a day.

MWG How is Upasana a sustainable fashion brand?

UP We only use cotton from local farmers. Going organic was the biggest change we have ever made. The clothes are made by our seamstresses and tailors at Upasana. And we only use high quality, naturally dyed fabrics that are made in India.
MWG Sounds very costly... Between ourselves, does it pay off?
To be honest, it really broke us financially. We did not realize how badly it would hit our business. I did it all wrong. I jumped in blindly. If I had known how difficult it would all be, I would have done things differently. Instead of taking a leap of faith I might have taken baby steps in the right direction. Despite everything, I am very proud of that move.

Why did you choose fashion as your medium for social change?

Because I didn't know anything else. If I had known music I would have used music. If I were a writer I would’ve used writing…

Every project you have started so far has been very successful. You launched a concept store in Pondicherry and sell your clothes throughout India. You give TED talks, CNN reported about you, and local designers as well as people from all over the world come to work with you. Was starting your own business always a dream of yours?

No. I never wanted to start my own business. I wanted to be an artist. Even as a child I was obsessed with painting and writing poetry. It was clear to me that I wanted to become a painter or a writer. I knew myself well enough to know that I wouldn’t be able to make money. Making money didn’t interest me at all. But then I came to Auroville and well, look at me now. I don’t know why, but something in me accepted that I am a business lady now. It took me a long time to digest that.

What keeps you doing all of this?

I love the community. Many people appreciate us for what we do, for being consistent and for actually doing what we truly believe in. Bringing a sense of value in the fashion industry is what I am very proud of. I have a good night’s sleep, you know. And I am really grateful for all the support we get.
MWG Did other girls you were growing up with have the same opportunities as you had?
UP Wow, that’s a very serious question. I can’t speak for other girls. I can just say that you have to jump at every opportunity life offers you. I just did it. When you keep on asking yourself questions like ‘Is it the right time? Can I? May I? Will I?’ and never risk anything, then you might risk that there might be no more chance. And the opportunity will be gone forever. Sometimes we just have to make decisions and act. I can think of so many girls in my class that had the exact same opportunities as I had but few put them into practice.

MWG Do you think people consciously ignore the work that goes into what they buy?

UP We are living in a high speed train. Everything is so fast. Now you are relaxing and listening to me, but as soon as the interview is over, you will go back into the train. The speed of life is accelerating and the demands to our flexibility are constantly rising. Sometimes we manage to communicate through three technical devices at the same time. Everyone is on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp. And we are expected to respond within seconds. There is such an overload of information. The question is, How do we process all of that? Our attention is limited. Being quiet enough to make a conscious choice is very hard nowadays.

I personally need to mediate and do yoga for at least thirty minutes a day. It is challenging to make a conscious choice in times like these. When we hear that Africa suffers we say ‘Ah, that’s horrible!’ but a few seconds later, we forget about it because we get a Whatsapp message from a friend or see a funny post on Facebook. News touch our brain cells for just a few seconds and only a moment later, they do not exist any more. Because we have other problems. Because we do not feel responsible and don’t have time. I think that many people simply don’t know that the consumer has the power to make a conscious choice and change the world. So I would not blame anyone.

MWG Do you think that people’s values regarding sustainability have changed in recent years?

UP Yes. Education is definitely changing people’s values more and more. Sustainability has never been such a big topic. It matters to us, our children and next generations. I am full of hope for the future! I am very, very hopeful.
MWG Will they ever have the potential to compete with big fast fashion conglomerates such as H&M or Zara?
UP There will always be a market for both, as they address different target groups and meet different individual needs. I am sure that there will be more of a change but I can't predict to what extent. There will certainly always be a place for people who want to promote an ethical lifestyle. Niche markets will always exist and find people who support them.

MWG In 2012 the second largest fast fashion retailer H&M launched its first conscious collection. Could sustainable fashion finally be going mainstream?

UP Not really. This idea sounds kind of utopian to me. We should see the world in many shades of grey. Nobody is perfect. And diversity is a beautiful thing. Let's stay optimistic and say that although big companies will always exist, they may change their ways in order to become more successful in the coming years. People start to think differently, even if only at a slow pace.

MWG You are already working with many organizations and designers in India. Are there any other organizations or designers in your mind that you would like to work with?

UP I am impressed how big the ethical fashion market in Europe is. I would like to work with the European sustainable design market.

MWG Which social development project are you most proud of?

UP The little Tsunamika doll is still our most successful project. She is a darling. She is more than a living symbol. She is hope. She is love. It is impressive what a huge impact a small doll like her can have on people all over the world. In 2004, I wanted to help people who were affected by the devastation of the tsunami. So I employed women to make female dolls that are made of recycled waste that remained of the devastation. The doll cannot be bought or sold but only gifted. More than six million of them made it to eighty countries across the globe. And the Tsunamika story is told in schools ranging from Spain to Singapore.

MWG Where do you see Upasana in the next five years?

UP Upasana has already inspired many students, organizations, designers, brands and people. We will just keep on designing for change. I want to do as many things as possible: Going international without going too crazy and breaking our neck, keep being financially sound and take baby steps to reach our goals. I see Upasana as a shining star.
Towards the end of the interview, the fashion designer suddenly jumped off the couch. Apparently, she was no longer in the mood to answer questions. “Let’s have more tea. We need a break.” After she persuaded me to try some vegan honey nut balls, (Prajapati’s lactose intolerance means one cannot find any diary products in the household), she offered me a ride back to my hostel for the night. Once I arrived, I posted a photo on Instagram and did some work for university while I kept my friends updated on Whatsapp. She was right. I was back. Back on that high-speed train.

By Mia Windisch-Graetz

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The Impossible is Possible

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By Mia Windisch-Graetz

Three dead bodies carried away by a bunch of six-legged murderers – in India one can have interesting encounters in the bathroom. I will never forget the moment when I discovered an ant colony that evidently split into three small groups in order to carry away three (still living) wasps. Attracted by the light in the sanitary facility, the wasps apparently got tired and while having a rest, they offered the perfect opportunity for an ambush attack by a hungry ant family.