REVISITING

A Quiet Manifesto

FOR THE PRESERVATION OF CRAFT

A 30-YEAR JOURNEY WITH MAIWA

Thirty years ago Charllotte Kwon formed a company and opened a shop. The shop was located in a new community of artisans that had formed on Granville Island. The Island, through its concentration of fine artists, printers, bookbinders, papermakers, potters, theatres, retailers, students, and industry, redefined itself as the cultural heart of Vancouver. The company was called Maiwa. In Cantonese and Mandarin "maiwa" is a word used to name the language through which art speaks. Maiwa. Beautiful language.

Halfway through our journey, in 2000, we published *A Quiet Manifesto for the Preservation of Craft*. The ideas that appeared in that tiny book have matured and blossomed. Our thirty-year anniversary seemed the perfect time to revisit those ideas.

MAIWA.COM

PRINTED IN CANADA
THIRD PRINTING 2019

DOCUMENT EVERYTHING

"Stare. It is the way to educate your eye, and more.
Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop.
Die knowing something. You are not here long." - Walker Evans


the glories of
Oregon
CANADA
CENTRAL RAILWAY
INDIA 201


MAIWA
DYE RESEARCH
DYE: Logwood Chips @10% DATE:
DYEBATH: time 1hr temp 95°C container
FIBRE: Cotton mordant as below tannin
PH OF TAP WATER: NOTES:
covered entire dye stuff and is boiling water March
march 9 divided equally into 4 pots. N.B
1) 8% Gallnut
2) 20% Alum + 6% Soda Ash
1) 8% Gallnut
2) 15% Alum + 5% Soda Ash
1) 20% Alum
2) 8% Gallnut
3) 20% Alum + 3% Soda Ash

OUR NATURAL

DYE OBSESSION

Colour is unlike anything else. As an artist, to make colour with natural dyes is to experience a direct connection with your materials. And each of these materials, each dyestuff used, can be a doorway to a new world.

Putting natural colour on cloth involves the use of leaves (such as indigo and henna), barks and woods (logwood, osage), roots (madder, aal), flowers (chamomile, marigold), fruits and nuts (walnut, myrobalan, pomegranate), minerals (alum, iron), and insects (cochineal, lac). These are just some of the classic materials that have been used for thousands of years.

The aromatic steam that rises into the air from the dyepot, especially when working outside on a cool morning, is one of the most compelling aspects of the dyer's studio. Indeed, working with natural colour is such a sensual experience that many artisans work with natural dyestuff for the sheer pleasure of making the vat. The saturated colours of the immersed materials are also highly photogenic—as is the entire dyeing process.

> Throughout the world and as far back in time as archaeological discoveries allow us to glimpse, it is clear that women and men involved in dyeing have always selected a relatively restricted number of plants from the abundant vegetable environment around them. The most recent phytochemical studies have revealed how extraordinarily percipient their choices were when judged according to criteria combining beauty, brightness, intensity, and durability.
>
> Dominique Cardon (*Natural Dyes*, 2007)

Maiwa's obsession with natural dyes is well known. What is less well known is the work that we do behind the scenes each time a shipment of natural dyestuff arrives in our warehouse.

Our role is a bit like that of a master vintner who evaluates multiple grape harvests to make an exceptional wine. We do a complete set of sample tests to evaluate the shade and strength of our shipment. Dyes from natural sources will change with each season. If there has been only little rain one year, the concentration of dyestuff in the plant will alter. So we often combine and blend stocks from multiple years to ensure that the raw dyestuff will yield consistent results.

At Maiwa our policy is to acquire the raw dyestuff in its most elemental form (wood chips, roots, petals) so that we can ensure purity. We then process it into the form (usually a powder) that works best for the artisan dyer. We use natural dyes extensively in our own production, so we can ensure that each package contains a product we would be proud to use ourselves.

In 1999, I recognized that in the world of natural dyes Turkey is not the hub. Further east is the Indian subcontinent with a rich and still very lively textile tradition and a multiplicity of natural dyes. Following a DOBAG symposium, Mrs. Charllotte Kwon, the widely travelled owner of Maiwa Handprints, a company in Vancouver, Canada, that specializes in naturally dyed textiles, invited me to accompany her to India on one of her trips with local experts. The abundance of what I saw and experienced there led to an expansion of the concept for this book.

Harald Böhmer *(Koekboya*, 2002)

THE INDIA STUDIO

The quality of artisan cloth. The quality of an artisan's life. Two reasons we have been making slow clothes for decades.

Since the time of the industrial revolution, cultural critics have claimed that mass manufacturing destroys a fundamental connection between life and meaning. Today, many don't know how cotton grows or who farms it; few understand how it is dyed, woven into cloth, and sewn into something to wear. To fill this void modern clothing is heavily branded—and the story of the brand fills the space that used to be filled by the voice of the cloth itself.

Handloom is a remarkable technology. Paradoxically, the world's most complex weave structures are created on very basic looms. It is the simplicity of the loom that permits the weaver to intervene at every throw of the shuttle. And it is this intervention that transforms the weaver from labourer to artisan and gives the cloth its own voice.

But cloth that can sing is just the beginning. At Maiwa's India Studio we work to extend our philosophy of artisan cloth to all aspects of clothing production.

If we can choose between a printed piece of cloth and a plain one—we will choose the printed. If we can choose between handloomed cloth and mill-made—we will go for the handloom. Every time we make these decisions, we keep a group of artisans working at their craft. These are often multi-generation artisan families who are beginning to enjoy an international reputation. Craft is about trade. If there is no demand, even the most skilled craftsperson must abandon their work.

We seek to turn modern clothing upside down. We don't want to raise outputs and cut costs and build factories. We want to work alongside artisans in a village setting. We think such partnerships are the only truly sensible long-term business plan. Do we believe in combining work and pleasure? Absolutely. We want to create a work environment that we would be happy to live in for generations to come.

Only do not let us suppose that love of order is love of art. It is true that order, in its highest sense, is one of the necessities of art, just as time is a necessity of music; but love of order has no more to do with our right of enjoyment of architecture or painting than love of punctuality with the appreciation of the opera. [...] Never encourage the manufacture of any article not absolutely necessary, in the production of which invention has no share.

John Ruskin (*The Stones of Venice*, 1853)

Did you know: at Maiwa we hand-cut all our fabrics? Because we work with natural dyes, our stock cloth cannot be longer than 5 meters. Our dye studio is right beside the sewing studio. Bicycles and hand carts are used to move cloth from place to place.

For the cooler months of the year, Maiwa's India Studio hosts a number of staff from Vancouver. During this time our two worlds come together. Long days are spent in the company of block printers, pattern drafters, sewers, tailors, weavers, and craftspeople of all kinds.

The staff also hit the road to do research and to connect with more remote artisan communities. When staff return to Canada, the stories are inside them. Part of their work will be to share these stories with the rest of the company and with the customers in the shop.

Maiwa is more than just a store, though—beyond scarves and blankets, Kwon is in the business of selling stories and selling pieces of art that are labours of love, not labours of necessity. Each dye pattern or set of stitching is its own dialect; the textile pieces are statements from the hands of their makers. The items sold at Maiwa are love letters written in cotton or sealed with indigo, while Kwon and her team take the role of the postman, delivering each precious message faithfully to the homes of those ready and eager to listen.

Maya-Rosin Slater (*Montecristo* Magazine, 2016)

HOW MUCH CHANGE

CAN ONE SMALL COMPANY MAKE?

DID YOU KNOW THAT MAIWA SUPPORTS:

- three communities of block printers using natural dyes working in the ajrakh, dabu, and kalamkari traditions

- three groups of embroiderers in Rajasthan working in appliqué and kantha stitch
- seven tribal embroidery communities located in Kutch working in traditional styles
- one Banjara embroidery community located in South India reviving traditional work
- two communities of kantha embroiderers located in West Bengal and Bangladesh

- three weaving communities located in Odisha working in traditional ikat
- three weaving communities located in Kutch producing traditional weaves
- one weaving community located in Uttarakhand working on new wool-silk innovations
- one weaving community located in Madhya Pradesh working on new innovations
- three weaving communities located in Assam working with wild silks and linen
- five weaving communities located in West Bengal working in jamdani and khadi
- three weaving communities located in Telangana working in traditional ikat and plainweave

- two groups of bandhani tiers located in Kutch and in Rajasthan
- one community of leatherworkers located in Rajasthan
- one community of bellmakers located in Kutch

- communities of silk, cotton, and natural dye farmers

Maiwa's orders of organic cotton keep a wide network of farmers working throughout India. Did you know that to buy organic cotton Maiwa must purchase the crop before it is even planted? Each year we order an average of 60,000 metres of organic cotton.

Maiwa encourages weaving communities to maintain or adopt natural dyes. Working with a network of artisans in India and procuring dyes for resale places Maiwa at the centre of one of the largest markets for natural dyes in the world.

[JMW Turner] had at least twelve kinds of madder—an extract from the root of the rubia tree—but [...] by 1900, less than fifty years after Turner put down his paintbrush for the last time, there were only two varieties commercially available to London artists.

Victoria Finlay (*Colour*, 2002)

As common crafts grow scarce and die out, it occurs vividly to some people that here is something precious; though hitherto it has always been taken as a matter of course, and of little consequence to any save those whose living it had been.

Thomas Hennell
(*British Craftsmanship*, 1948)

FOR THE LOVE OF INDIGO

Decades ago, Maiwa began looking for blue. The word "indigo" was everywhere, but the legendary dyeplant proved much more elusive. It had been a little over one hundred years since the German chemist Adolph von Baeyer had discovered the chemical formula for indigo and worked out a way to synthesize it industrially. During that time farmers who grew indigo and those who knew how to extract it became increasingly rare.

Indigo has great longevity: archeological evidence of its use dates back to Indus valley civilization in the third millennium BCE. Ancient cultures—Greek, Roman, Chinese, Japanese, Indian—all created distinctive textiles based on indigo blue. Remarkably, indigo was also used in Central and South America, where it was independently discovered. Blue seems to be both universal and at the same time deeply tied to the culture that uses it.

Indigo is the first dye we use at Maiwa. When exploring a new relationship with block printers, or scaling up a weaving or dyeing project, indigo is first. In contrast, when we are teaching, indigo is last. The experience of working and dyeing with indigo is so powerful, there is such magic in the process, that if we began with indigo, the students would never move on to the other colours.

It took us years to trace indigo blue back to the fields where it was growing. Each year we would get a little closer. One day, fifteen years ago, someone recommended that we make a trip to Andhra Pradesh in South India. We arrived at a farm and—there it was. There were the fields, the oxcarts working early in the morning to bring in the fresh cut indigo plants. There also were the cement extraction tanks. Decades of processing indigo had stained them a deep blue—as dark as the tropical night.

Maiwa, after thirty years, has formed an intimate relationship with indigo. We have worked with historians like Jenny Balfour Paul, researchers like Dominique Cardon, and botanist-chemists like Michel Garcia. We've brought together block printers from Rajasthan and the Kutch desert and placed them in the same natural dye studio as ikat weavers from the south and eri silk farmers from Ethiopia. Indigo connects them all.

We've always thought of ourselves as merchant traders sailing into the unknown to find something.

THE MAIWA SCHOOL OF TEXTILES

At the confluence of ways of learning is the Maiwa School of Textiles: workshops, lectures, events, exhibitions; a place where knowledge is shared. It is, we have been told, a well stacked buffet for the hungry mind. It is also a chance to meet makers in a hands-on, intimate environment.

In 2004 we launched the first symposium. We invited international collector and author John Gillow. That first meeting has led to a lasting friendship. We also partnered with world-class chef John Bishop to host a fashion show and fundraiser for the Banjara Project. The wheels we set in motion in 2004 are still turning.

We are astonished that with the passing years textile programs are cut back and closed down. To fill this absence we want to run a textile school ... and we feel we are just beginning.

When I thought about how to address an auditorium of graduates, I thought: each person is like a length of cloth. As a cloth ages, it records a narrative. Like a person, its best qualities become more pronounced with time, and like a person, it can be stained or tainted. Like a life it can unravel, or be torn apart. But it can also be mended, cleansed, renewed, embroidered, patched, and ultimately coveted.

Charllotte Kwon (Honourary Doctorate acceptance speech, 2014)

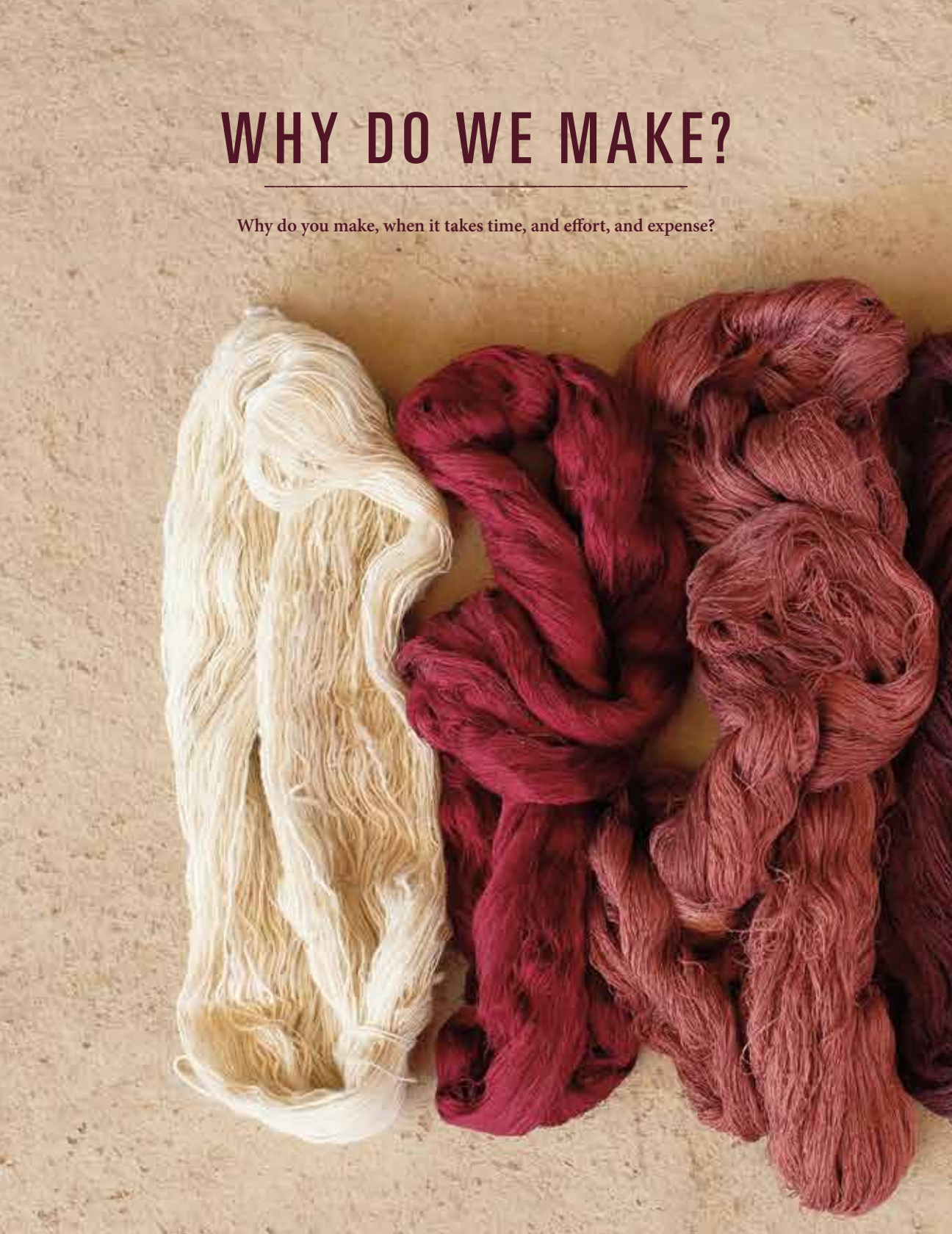
CREATING

A FOUNDATION

For almost twenty of our thirty years Maiwa has run a foundation. The foundation gave assistance to blockprinters after the 2001 Kutch earthquake, helped build a tanning facility for the Jawaja leatherworkers, assisted weavers in getting out from under predatory lenders, collaborated with engineers and students at the University of British Columbia on kiln design and water purity, helped deliver corrective eyewear to embroiderers, and most recently, delivered bicycles to female schoolchildren of the Artisans' Alliance of Jawaja. Projects are big and small—and each one makes a difference.

WHY DO WE MAKE?

Why do you make, when it takes time, and effort, and expense?



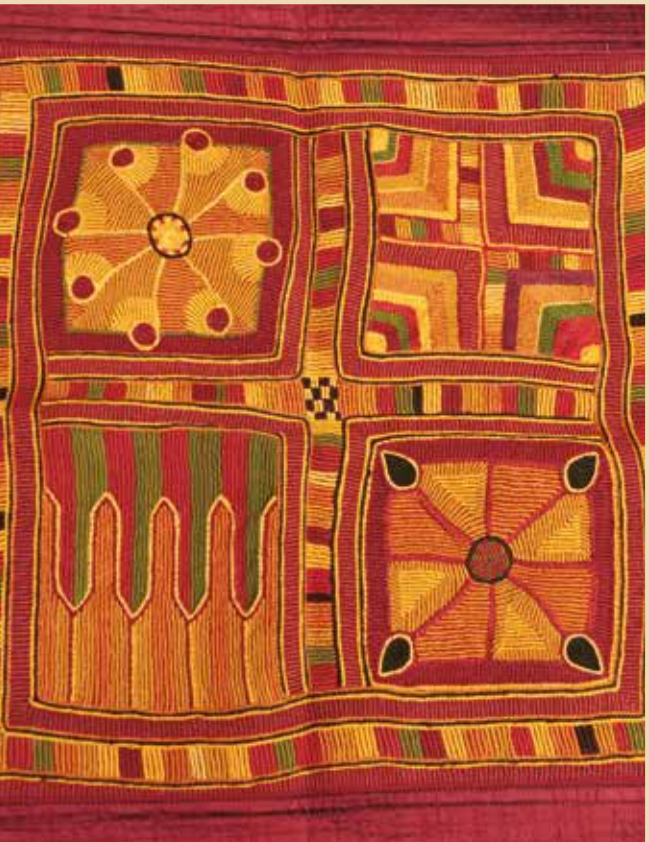
Because all acts are creative acts. We make and we tune our making as we go along, like tuning a violin string, tightening it so much, maybe a little more ... and if our judgment is off and the string should snap, we restring the instrument and start again. We make because instead of tuning an instrument, we begin to dream of creating one: shearing hardwoods, mixing varnish, designing the smooth lines that will let the music out. We make because it is what hands have always done, because life is a creative act, and because the only meaning that truly exists is the one we make for ourselves.

A THIRTY-YEAR MILESTONE:

OUR LATEST PUBLICATION

A lot of what we do at Maiwa involves storytelling. We tell stories about how subtle fibres are wound round and round each other until they become threads, at times so fine a whisper might snap them; and about other fibres, dexterous and true, like the silks which are ounce for ounce stronger than steel and much more beautiful. We tell stories of cloth, its genius and character. We relate also the stories of surfaces, of pattern and embellishment, how it is embroidered, printed, and stitched. And all our stories are told because to us these things are as alive as the people who made them

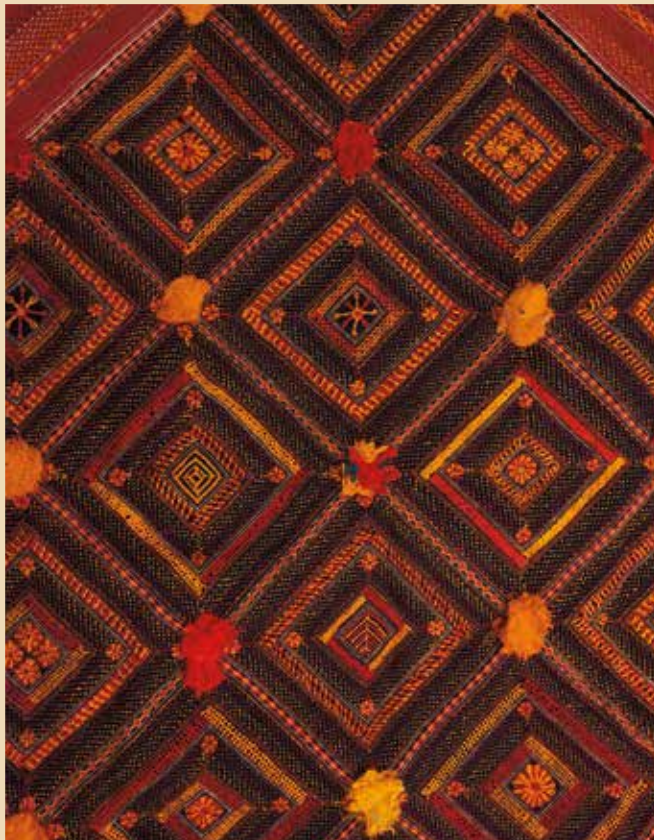
So many of our efforts are to elevate craft to its rightful place of prestige on the global stage. In 2002 we mounted the *Through the Eye of a Needle* exhibition of Kutch embroidery. In 2003 we published a book to accompany the exhibition. In the following years we produced four documentary films to promote traditional craft techniques and natural dyes. 2016 marks the first year that Maiwa authors have been picked up by a major publisher. Charllotte Kwon and Tim McLaughlin took more than ten years of field research and produced *Textiles of the Banjara: Cloth and Culture of a Wandering Tribe.*



BANJARA

In a street in Bombay in 1979, an elderly lady in a torn sari hissed to me as she undid a dirty cloth bundle with trembling fingers. What fell out was a Banjara bride's whole trousseau: from the case for the neem sticks that would serve her as a toothbrush, to carrying-cloths, babyslings and cot-blankets, all woven from the same coarse cotton dyed indigo blue and madder red, tasselled and fringed with worn cowrie shells. There was plenty of Banjara-style work in the tourist shops, but this was old, chaste, geometric and so subtly beautiful that I could hardly believe I might come to own such things. This was not work to sell, but the old lady pushed it towards me. "Please, please," she said. I pulled out all the money I had in the pocket of my salwar and put it in her thin brown hand. My driver snorted with disgust (here was yet more evidence that the memsahib was an idiot). I made cushions from them. They have been part of my life ever since. The cushions are faded now, and the cowrie shells keep dropping off, but only death will part me from them.

Germaine Greer (*The Guardian*, 2010)



We've been bringing textiles into view for a long time. Our 2002 show at the Vancouver Museum turned out to be one of the highest attended exhibitions that institution had ever mounted. It was held over for an additional season for a total run of one-and-a-half years.

The collaboration was also remarkable for its impact on the embroiderers. They asked, "Why do westerners want to put our needlework on the wall for strangers to see?" The answers to this question are vital to the continuation of cultural traditions.

THE LEARNING CURVE

Be bold. Share knowledge. Attempt to revive and encourage work with value.

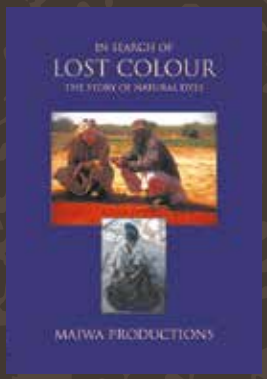
Our most ambitious revival projects have involved weaving communities. In Nagaland, for example, traditional weaving was being done with synthetic yarns. The resulting weavings take considerable effort to produce—yet have no competitive edge in the market. An acrylic weaving—even one made by hand in a traditional style—has little value.

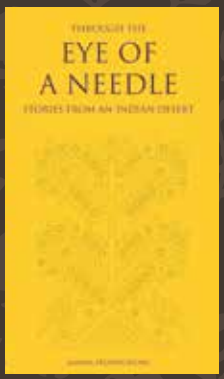
Our first step is to replace acrylic yarns with natural fibres. Weaving with acrylic deskills weavers because they lose the knowledge of how to properly tension their looms. Once a group has returned to natural fibres, we begin to work on the dyes. The first step is to introduce a dye facility and encourage the artisans to dye their own yarns. We actually start with synthetic dyes to get the group going. Once the dyeing is established, we can begin to transition the group to natural dyes. Traditional items, naturally dyed on natural fibres, can take their rightful place as the proud expression of a culture.

DOCUMENTARY

TRADITIONS

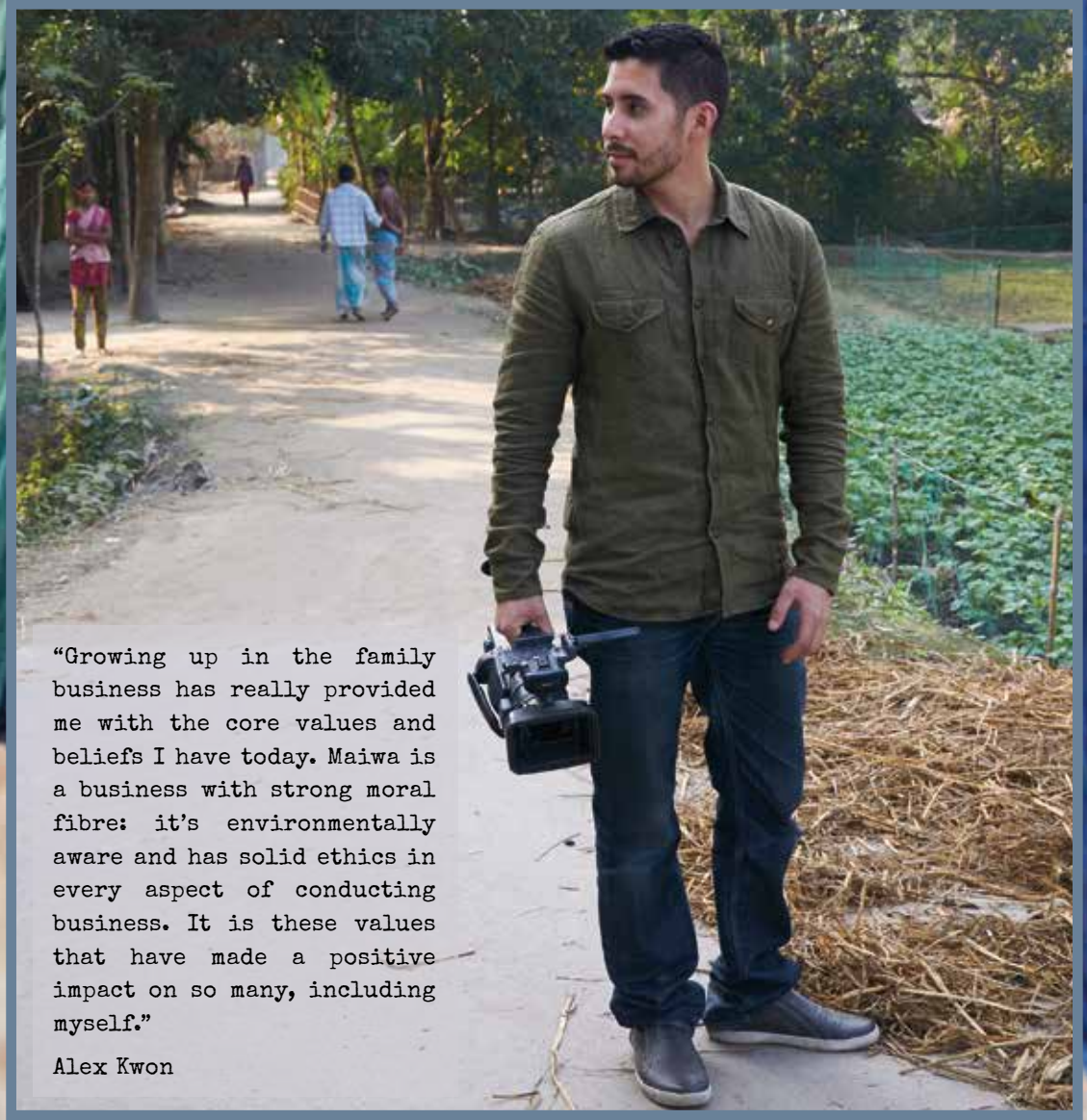
In 2000 Maiwa added video footage to its photographic documentation and note-taking. This rich source material has been mined to produce four documentaries. Our archive is extensive, reaching back to record a time that no longer exists. The combination of sound and image communicates the essence of hand production and the flowing vitality of textiles.





THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Maiwa was started in 1986—the year Sophena was born. Staff often say Maiwa is a family, but for Alex and Sophena, Maiwa has been so much more ...

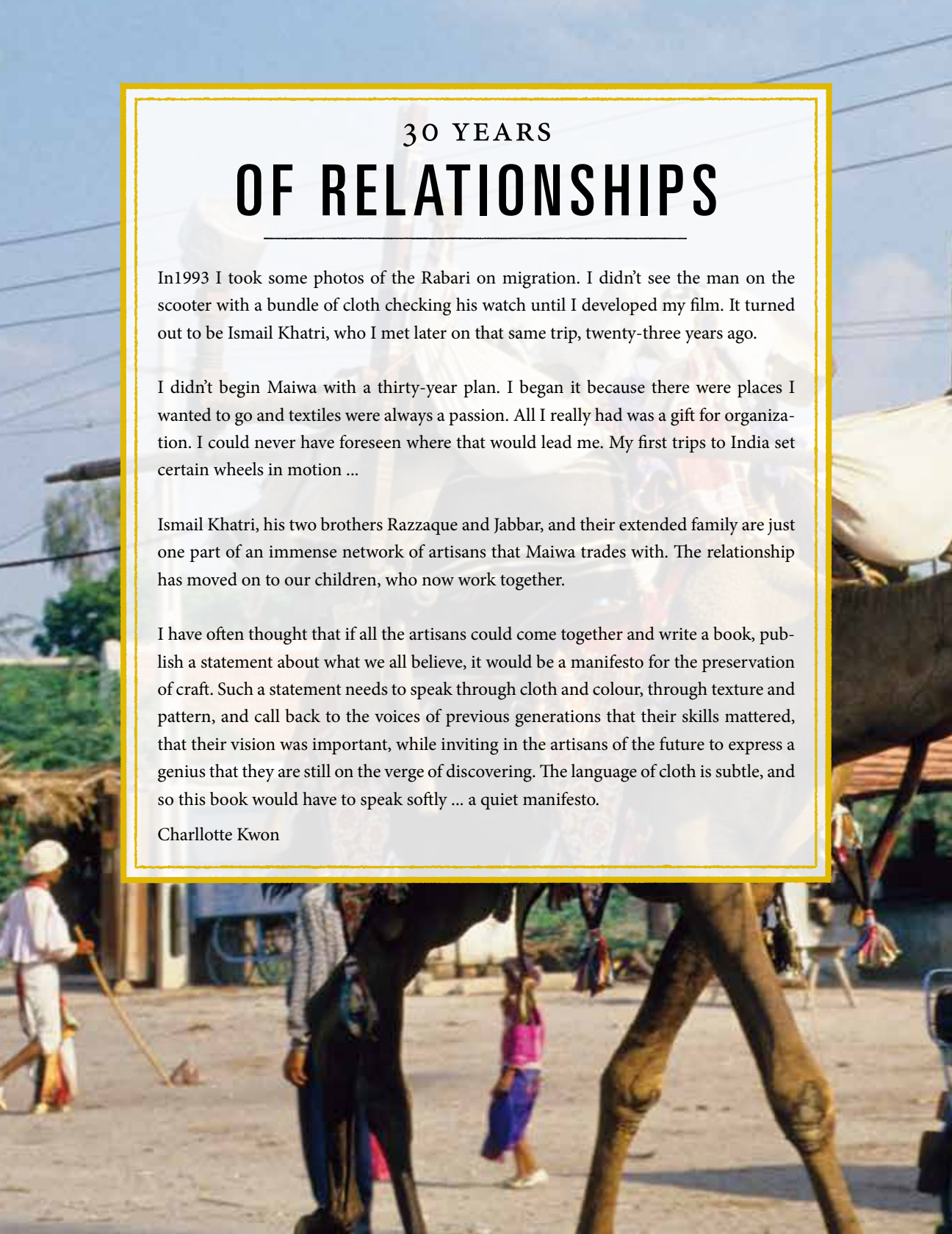


"Growing up in the family business has really provided me with the core values and beliefs I have today. Maiwa is a business with strong moral fibre: it's environmentally aware and has solid ethics in every aspect of conducting business. It is these values that have made a positive impact on so many, including myself."

Alex Kwon

"I first went to India when I was nine, and every year since I have spent a couple of months there. The way we work has permitted me to study alongside master artisans; learn languages, photography, and design; and experience travel and cultural immersion. In traditional schools it would have taken me several lifetimes to get an education with this breadth and depth. Now, at 30, I am fortunate to head up the Maiwa Clothing Line, working together with our talented team. I find myself working with the sons and daughters of the Indian artisans I grew up around—the master block printers, dyers, weavers, and embroiderers who Maiwa has collaborated with for decades. We are all the same age and have had this journey together."

Sophena Kwon



30 YEARS

OF RELATIONSHIPS

In1993 I took some photos of the Rabari on migration. I didn't see the man on the scooter with a bundle of cloth checking his watch until I developed my film. It turned out to be Ismail Khatri, who I met later on that same trip, twenty-three years ago.

I didn't begin Maiwa with a thirty-year plan. I began it because there were places I wanted to go and textiles were always a passion. All I really had was a gift for organization. I could never have foreseen where that would lead me. My first trips to India set certain wheels in motion ...

Ismail Khatri, his two brothers Razzaque and Jabbar, and their extended family are just one part of an immense network of artisans that Maiwa trades with. The relationship has moved on to our children, who now work together.

I have often thought that if all the artisans could come together and write a book, publish a statement about what we all believe, it would be a manifesto for the preservation of craft. Such a statement needs to speak through cloth and colour, through texture and pattern, and call back to the voices of previous generations that their skills mattered, that their vision was important, while inviting in the artisans of the future to express a genius that they are still on the verge of discovering. The language of cloth is subtle, and so this book would have to speak softly ... a quiet manifesto.

Charllotte Kwon


स्टेट ट्रान