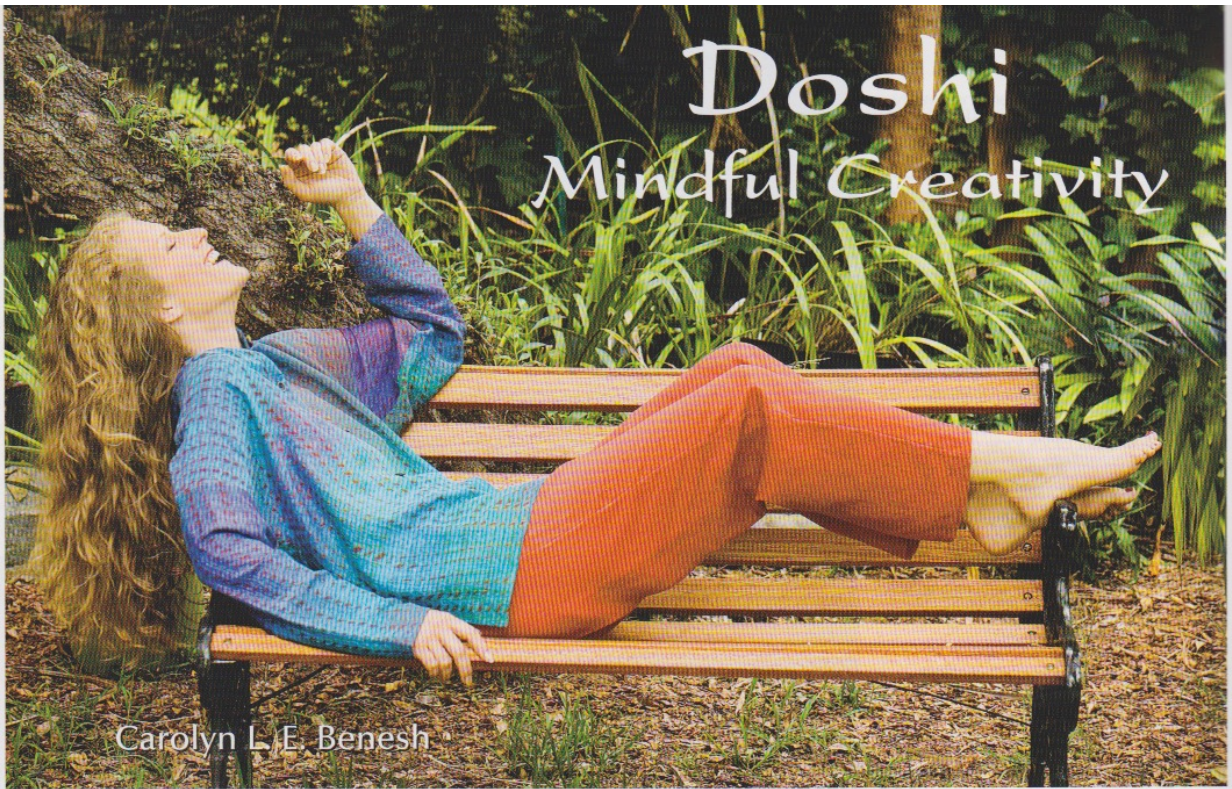


Doshi

Mindful Creativity



Carolyn L.E. Benesh

A purposefully driven life has brought Nancy Jo Smith to yet another level of creative resolution in the fiberarts; her considerable artistic energy reignited by propinquity or planning, such as a recently built studio, tucked behind her comfortable, personalized home, on a quiet but neighborly Leucadia street. Nearby are the remaining nurseries of a once flourishing center for beautiful flowers and plants sent throughout the country for enjoyment. Now luxury housing and commercial developments, a golf course too, consume more of the landscape, situated within minutes of the Pacific Ocean, atop a temperate, wind-caressed mesa in northern San Diego County, California. This area is not totally overrun by a surge in economic investments but still home to free spirits: it attracts many artistic, spiritual and therapeutic practices. Deepak Chopra's The Chopra Center is a mere ten minutes away, as is English clothing designer Zandra Rhodes's American studio, in another direction. The acclaimed Indian sitarist Ravi Shankar has lived locally for many years. Evidently this place, along butterflies' migratory pathway to Mexico, is a kind of nourishing cocoon for even human chrysalises, a perfect protective spot on the planet, especially for someone who has become nominatively and spiritually transformed into Doshi.

As much as is possible in a post-twentieth-century world, Doshi balances a spontaneous, yet conscious, state of mindful creativity to affirm and inspire her artistic desires. For this, one needs to practice one's work with a clear heart and mind,

united as it were, uncluttered by the impediments we so often bring to our lives. Her spiritual advisor Gregory Penn named her *nirdosh* (without guilt or shame) *sadau* (a wandering monk in whose wake beneficial and good things happen without his knowledge or awareness). Choosing innocence and simplicity to illuminate what he saw innately within her, Penn helped inspire her personal rebirth. So Doshi is now a name more natively, inherently hers, a delightful lesson in living more purely and honestly, without premeditation. This is a very good place to occupy while living the artist's life.

Doshi's own life has always been generally on track, unfolding, evolving, and never really diverging from a journey instinctively begun early in life. Her special gift seems to be an intuitive sense of the right moment for embracing certain undertakings that might come her way. Given an active professional life in costume design and as a professor in the Department of Theatre Arts, at California State University at Long Beach, now lasting more than a few decades, she says that whatever her fears, she did not let them keep her from opening a door where opportunity waited; she might greatly hesitate but would nevertheless be willing to take that first step across the threshold into a new adventure.

By the age of six years, Doshi was accomplished in embroidery. She inherits her interest in handwork from her maternal family, with her grandmother, Doshi's mother and her mother's sister, as well as their sister-in-laws, always engaged in a beehive of activity, whether it was their skillful

ability to beautifully knit, crochet or embroider, and not unexpectedly for Italians from Lucca, to cook and enjoy the bounties of the table (one day a week was baking day for their breads and pasta). Their handmaking diligence, in essence women's work, was, as she puts it: "just what they did in the evening."

Her father, who died in 2004, served as an Air Force psychiatric nurse, and the family moved to wherever he was transferred, New York, Washington, D.C., lastly to Wichita Falls, Texas, where Doshi spent her adolescence. The family did not accompany him during the Vietnam War when transfers meant moving to the Philippines, then Vietnam itself. Upon his return, her mother joined him in California but Doshi, who was entering her senior year in high school, stayed in Texas. Awarded honor scholarships to Midwestern State University, she received her undergraduate degree there, before continuing to graduate school at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where she earned a Master of Fine Arts, in 1980. Doshi had one brother who died, at forty-one, some eleven years ago, after being in a coma for three years. Her mother, also a registered nurse who Doshi has always considered artistically talented, still lives in Wichita Falls, recently moving into a retirement community.

Her memories, like a kind of dream, are of how often she sewed, little knowing that this passion would lead her into costume design. "I had a sewing machine and made garments all the time. My mother would take me to a fabric store after school; I'd get some cloth, cut it up, make something that night, and wear it the next day to school." Initially in theater at Midwestern State, stipulated by her scholarships, she suddenly changed course one night while performing as Titania onstage in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. Making the costumes as well, she worried more how the ass's head of character Bottom would fit, than about her own performance. "My stomach was all churned up about Bottom's head. I realized that I wanted to be out in the audience seeing the costumes rather than being onstage. From then on, I decided that's what I am going to do."

It was hard to leave Texas for Michigan, but she did on August 15, 1977, still remembering the ninety degree weather, in which she luxuriated, and three days later on August 18 pulling into Ann Arbor, with a temperature of seventy, which she alone thought was freezing. "I was cold for three solid years, but I loved Ann Arbor so much; it was a great place to go to graduate school," she laughs, appreciatively. After those three years in Ann Arbor, Doshi stayed another two in the Detroit area, which she liked far less, but received invaluable training as a freelance designer in dance costume, as well as continuing her experiments in dyeing, begun in graduate school. "We had an eight hour workshop on how to dye. It was very basic but in essence it was how to change color. So I loved it; and



Top: TANGO TOP of silk chiffon, *itajime shibori*; LOTUS PANT of silk georgette, 2005. Jewelry: Heather Carpenter. Model: Tina Washburn.

Bottom: SANTOKA JACKET of kiwi silk-linen; ASNA BLOUSE of silk-linen, *tesuji shibori*; PUNJABI PANT of cassis silk-linen, 2004. Model: Liv Kellgren.

SAMBURU JACKET of wool flannel, *arashi shibori*, 2006. Model: Tina Washburn.

what I found fascinating was taking a multiple-weave fabric and dyeing the two fibers, so that you could buy a drapery brocade in white, then dye it to get multiple colors. So dyeing started before I professionally started designing. Eventually all of the shows I designed professionally were also hand-dyed."

There were no years of aimlessness, wandering or being unfocused? "No," she replies, "I went straight from high school to college to work. I was supporting myself, but my parents sent one hundred ten dollars a month, that sticks in my head, which paid my rent." A brief marriage ended in divorce as her husband headed to an academic position in Virginia and she to one in California. "I said that I studied to be a costume designer and that's what I want to do. And it seems to me that the place to do that is California." With even tenuous contacts that had moved on to the Golden State, the result was a lecturing position in theater at the California State University at Long Beach. Doshi acknowledges her many lucky moments. "I have always felt that things have been handed to me." Then even more affirmatively, she says, "very much so, very much so."

Now a long established professor of costume design at the university, Doshi's teaching methodology has melded over the years with her other professional and personal interests. "Being a costume designer taught me organization because of the constant deadlines. I was almost always designing three shows at one time. I usually did nearly twenty shows a year and was always integrating a lot of my freelance work into my teaching. And now that work has shifted, so my teaching has



shifted with it. Instead of the specifics of designing specific costumes, it has moved more into accessing your creativity, and then using that to become a designer. When I was younger I taught by doing. I would assign a show for the students to design; we'd design the show; we'd critique it; and then move on. Now I focus on a particular element, like the use of texture to express emotion. Anger. Fear. Joy. What types of textures can we use to express those different emotions? My mode of teaching students has changed so that the whole focus is about exploring very deeply an element of design, whether it is line, shape, mass, color, or texture, and being able to tap into that exploration so that it comes out in their design work."

Her descriptions of a frenetic professional career as the fulfillment of endless fantasy must have influenced the equally profound changes that have since taken place over this last decade. Concomitant with her academic life, she designed costumes for theme park entertainments at Universal Studios, Sea World and the Wild Animal Park, with other designs utilized by ballet companies (including a *Nutcracker* and a *Firebird*), Shakespeare festivals, and once a *Cosi fan tutte*. A time came when she found herself designing six shows a year for a San Diego repertory company, spending three nights a week in San Diego and four nights a week in Long Beach, and life was headed for even more of an overload. Driving in from Long Beach early one morning, she veered off the freeway at Leucadia Boulevard, headed to the 101's beach route, and then in short order reached her decision. Smiling broadly, she says: "I stopped to eat at Roxie's, fell in love with Leucadia, and that was it."



PARIS SMOCK of silk-linen, *crystal tesuji shibori*; STRAIGHT PANT of mist silk-linen, 2005. Model: Liv Kellgren.

KIYO JACKET of mango silk tussah, *arashi shibori*; HARA SKIRT of cinnabar silk-linen, 2006. Model: Liv Kellgren.

Lucky moments led to other decisive moments, like the day she decided to take a local workshop taught at Common Threads by the internationally renowned Zandra Rhodes, and like Doshi also notable as a workaholic. “Her energy,” Doshi appreciates, “is phenomenal. Zandra said, ‘Why are you doing this for the theater? Why don’t you do clothing?’ I paused and said, ‘Well, I never thought of it.’ And I had honestly never thought of it. Zandra had me do some shibori slip dresses for her caftans. And that was kind of the start of it.”

Doshi did not really know anything about wearable art, she says, but recognized that a gradual movement was taking place, from designing for the theater to more personal ventures, with dyeing the vital centerpiece of her experiences: “I have always loved dyeing, exploring its myriad qualities, mixing color and creating texture.” Once more, just at the right moment, Doshi received professional support, from Lynn Noble of La Jolla Fiber Arts and Barbara Lanning and Jill Heppenheimer of the Santa Fe Weaving Gallery, and she began her most recent incarnation as a contemporary clothing artist. “I didn’t plan any of this. That is why I think many gifts have been given to me because everything has always just flowed.

“I never planned to be a theater major. I never planned to be in costume. I never planned any of it, and I tell my students this all the time. I got hired at Sea World and didn’t know what I was doing, but I knew I had the skill. I trusted in my ability. And it’s the same thing when I go to mix a color. I now have an incredible amount of technical knowledge, but it’s always just about letting go. I trust that my hands already know what to do if I just allow them to do it.”

Her experiences in fiberarts reflect ongoing transformations in her personal and spiritual life. “I use my work,” she says, “to explore the forces of nature and the mysteries of the soul.” It is not that Doshi has stopped trying to create outcomes. “I still hear all of the voices going off. I was taught to be hard on myself. ‘Good. Better. Best. Never let it rest. Till your good is better and your better is best,’” she ruefully recounts. But Doshi’s spiritual practice, she notes, not only helped her stop driving herself to be the best but gave her the confidence to make clothing and to access more of her creativity. “I remember thinking, ‘What are you doing at this age, changing your career? Are you out of your mind?’ I was a costume designer and had tons of work and loved it. But life is also serendipitous and I received so much encouragement from Lynn, Jill and Barbara, who all started carrying my work.”

In her shibori and *tsujigahana* techniques, now applied to clothing, Doshi turns to the word joy to reflect their emotional effect on her. “One of the things that I love about shibori is that you don’t see the piece until you have untied it, so all of these magical things are happening, as you apply the dye to the fabric because of the areas that you have resisted. And when you pull the cloth out of the pot, it is a solid color until you start untying it. So for me, there is this constant, ‘Oh my god,



look what happened.’ And it doesn’t matter how many times I repeat my work, it is never the exact same thing but always with its own nuance.” Not surprisingly, Doshi does not weigh the dyes or do chemical formulas, because that would make the process too precise. In order to make the dyework visually compelling, her clothing is based on the Japanese use of square shapes and folk clothing, in general. The silhouette of the garment is as important as a particular style of dyeing. She favors silks, linens and, currently, wool flannels. An ongoing collaboration with designer Laurie Schafer induces more experimentation and design challenges, each plays with the other’s favorite methods.

Given the dyeing techniques that Doshi favors, her patterning is visually reflective of the natural world and she wonders whether she is struggling for a feeling rather than an absolute statement. And that is probably where her talent best expresses itself. Her work exists to remind the men and women who wear her clothing that they are sentient beings and part of an intricate organic whole. Doshi’s mindful creativity is a graceful lesson in giving and receiving, of enriching others and thereby enhancing oneself. The fulfillment reached when one lives a conscious, artful life can be huge. “You have to constantly fill the metaphor of the well,” she says, “if you don’t fill the well then there is nothing to draw on.”