

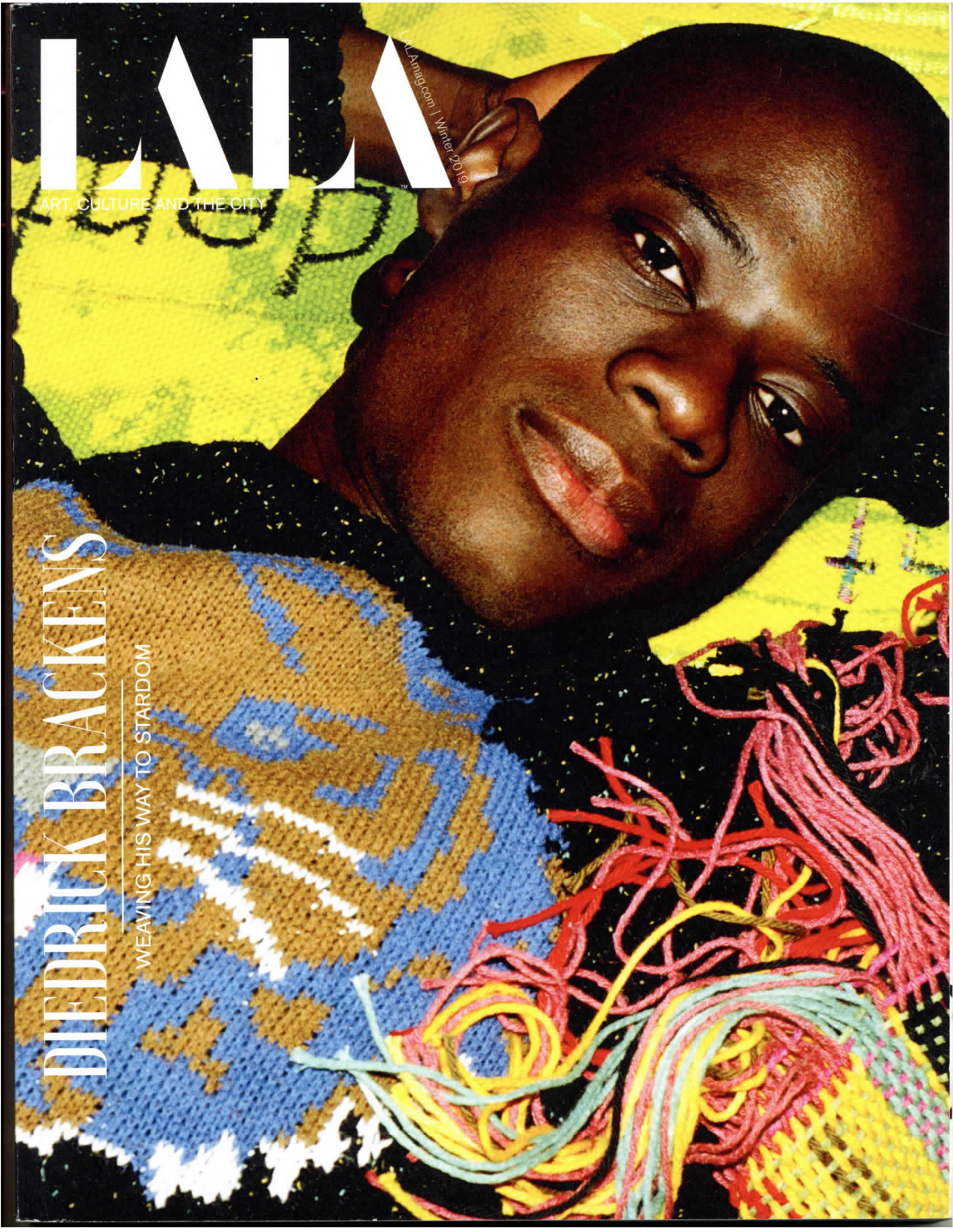
AMAG

ART, CULTURE AND THE CITY

AMAG.com | Winter 2019

DIEDRICK BRACKENS

WEAVING HIS WAY TO STARDOM



Luminaire Apparent

Nasir and Nargis Kassamali take their design mecca from Miami to LA.

BY **MAXWELL WILLIAMS**

“EVER SINCE I WAS YOUNG, I HAD THIS dream about creating a church where people would come to experience design,” Nasir Kassamali says, adjusting his perfectly suited red spectacles. He is sitting on a couch on the second floor of the brand new 15,500-square-foot West Hollywood outpost of Luminaire, a space he describes as somewhere in between a showroom and a design education facility.

“Through education, we will increase awareness about design,” says Kassamali, who co-founded Luminaire with his wife Nargis, touting the 79 leading designers and architects that have lectured or held exhibitions in their design mecca. “When people are aware of design, they make the right choices.”

Kassamali’s desire to educate comes from his own experiences in Mombasa, Kenya, where he was born. The son of an electrical engineer, Kassamali had little access to modern European design except for when his father would bring back books and magazines from his trips with the electric company business. In this way, the Kassamali elder exposed him to new places, experiences, and designs. Soon the enterprising young Nasir was designing interiors for homes, restaurants, and shops in Kenya.

His love for design never waned. After attending university in Nairobi, where he met Nargis, Kassamali visited Denmark, and fell further in love with the holistic sensibility of Danish design. When the newlyweds decided to make a go of it in the U.S., they settled in Miami (after a brief stint in Montreal), and quickly realized there was a dearth of places to buy high-end European design.

In 1974, Nasir and Nargis opened a 500-square-foot kiosk in North Miami Beach. Then in 1984, they opened Luminaire in Coral Gables. There, they discovered a community of like-minded aficionados, hungry for the masterpieces Luminaire had on offer. The design paradise has thrived in the Miami suburb of Coral Gables ever since. Yet, Luminaire only expanded outside of Florida once, when they opened their Chicago store in 1989. When high-end office design company Haworth invested in Luminaire last year, the opportunity to grow seemed right, after years of trying to figure out who would take over the store when and if the Kassamalis are ready to turn it over to someone else.

“Haworth said, ‘Now you don’t have to worry about succession; you only have to worry about expansion,’” recalls Kassamali, “Our

team is still the same, but we’ve added another 15 people here. So the debate was whether to open in New York or to open in LA I had been following LA, and in the last three or four years, there was such a change happening here: new buildings were starting to pop up. You had Herzog & de Meuron and the Getty Museum by Richard Meier.”

Kassamali has even jokingly threatened to move here after 45 years in Miami. He says he loves the energy, the way Angelenos are themselves, and, of course, the milder climate and the light—he even designed a skylight that bathes the Luminaire second floor in brightness.

“You are able to connect the inside and the outside very easily,” he says. “You can extend the interior living and be very comfortable sitting outside. The other thing is the sky—the sky in LA is unbelievable because there are no clouds. In Miami, there are clouds. When you wake up in the morning here, you get the horizontal sunlight. Wow, that’s fantastic.”

Along with the educational aspect of Luminaire, the Kassamalis are bringing the philanthropic arm as well. Nargis Kassamali is a five-time breast cancer survivor, and Luminaire has held four auctions—called Puppy Love, People Love, Design Love, and Glass Love—that have raised nearly \$1.5 million for the Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Research Center at the University of Miami.

The new store is a Wunderkammer of design delights from entire kitchen systems in collaboration with Minimal down to mischievous little clay figure sculptures by French artist Emmanuelle Piquart. And Kassamali clearly delights in the lesser-known designers in the showroom—he picks up a remarkable hand-carved wood bowl by German designer Christoph Finkel.

“Isn’t this great? A major part of my 45 years at Luminaire has been finding young designers all over the world, giving them a platform, and introducing them to factories, and growing them,” Kassamali says.

It is suitable then that the night of the opening featured a juddering performance choreographed by Ryan Heffington. Heffington’s electrifying dancers convulsed between sofas, physically grappling the audience, before bounding up the showroom stairs. In the audience, of course, the Kassamalis looked on, their ever-present sense of wonder twinkling in their eyes, excited for what the future may hold next for Luminaire.

With their devotion to design and philanthropy, Nasir and Nargis Kassamali of Luminaire are illuminating spaces and the people that occupy them.

