

# OF FLIGHT AND INDIGO

*An Interview with Danish Fibre Artist Grethe Wittrock by Titilayo Ngwenya*

**Between the sky and the sea on the island of Omø in Denmark, a stone's throw away from the island's bird reserve, Grethe Wittrock provides a visual commentary for her artistic work. Just as the white birds dot the blue sky, and the dark blue sea rises in white crests of foam, the relationship between these colours, and their place in the natural world shapes Grethe's art, and a more perfect setting to discuss her upcoming exhibition at Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, Massachusetts could hardly be imagined.**

**Titilayo Ngwenya:** Tell us about the inspirations behind your exhibition *Nordic Currents*.

**Grethe Wittrock:** Over the years I have become fascinated with the interplay of the sea, the sky, the wind, the birds, and the sails. Since Denmark is surrounded by these elements and I love to walk along the shores, I have observed all these things. I wanted to incorporate them into my art.

**TN:** The pieces for the *Nordic Currents* exhibition were created during your residency at the Danish Art Workshops. Can you tell me about why you chose to work with old sails?

**GW:** The sails make boats fly. It was a good material for me to use for this project because both birds and sailboats are flying. I have been working with these weather-beaten sails as a medium for some years now. The first sails I worked on were taken from a Danish training vessel that was used to take young people out on the sea, to find out if life at sea is something

for them. Those sails were incredibly heavy.

**TN:** How did you come across the sails that you used for this particular project?

**GW:** For this project I used sails given to me by experienced yachtsmen – they were not easy to find. It requires a lot of work and research to find yachtsmen who are willing to donate their sails. The sails cost thousands of dollars, and they are not changed very often, so scarcity of sails is one thing. Another challenge is the actual handling of the sails. They are very large and require space to unfold. That is why I needed to work at the Danish Art Workshop, because they have a large studio space where I can unfold the sails on the floors.

Once I have them all laid out, I then have to “find” the birds or the sculptures in the sails. Where are they? I need to have an overview of all the birds from the start, before I start cutting and designing. Once I can see what will happen, I use the seams and bands in the sails to form the birds' backbones. In a way, you could say that I sculpt the birds out of the sail canvas.

**TN:** Do you think that the yachtsmen have a nostalgic connection to their own sails?

**GW:** Yes, I think in fact they do. They can remember how a big storm broke out and made that big scar on the sail there – scars that have been sewn or stitched back together. The sails have a story to them, like they have a story to me. That's why I love them. Working with huge weather-beaten sails gives me a lot of stories,

stories that I do not find in a completely new fabric. Like a face gets wrinkled over time, the sail is also full of lines, wrinkles. The sails' characteristics are incorporated into the designs for my bird sculptures. Working with used materials opened up new doors within my work.

**TN:** Do you feel that your craft or approach to making developed significantly during your residency?

**GW:** Whilst at the Danish Art Workshop I learnt a new way of using my Japanese stencil knife. When I lived in Japan, I studied to make Katazome, where you learn to cut big patterns out of stencils using a stencil knife. I studied and trained with this particular technique in Japan, but for this project I ended up using the knife in a completely new way and making very large movements with it.

**TN:** There is such a strong feeling of spontaneity and lightness in your work, how did you achieve this?

**GW:** In short, preparation and hard work. I think that over the years, through my work as a textile artist, I have mastered certain techniques and methods in order to obtain the results I want. I have lots of sketchbooks, and I have filled many pages on my journeys both in Denmark and abroad. In particular I learnt and gathered a lot of material when I travelled in Japan, Iceland and when I walked along the fjords of Kalundborg – my hometown in Denmark. When I begin a new project I make a number of actual sketches and experiments, which go through a merciless

internal casting until I find the exact look I want. The process can go on for several years, so in fact that spontaneity and lightness does not come easily or rapidly at all!

**TN:** How would you describe Nordic sensibilities?

**GW:** I guess I started to uncover what Nordic sensibilities are by living abroad. I lived in Kyoto, and I saw an aesthetic in Japanese design similar to the Nordic tradition. You could say that there is an agreement that less is more, or as they say in the Nordic countries, 'even less is even more.' To me, Nordic sensibility streams from a reverence for simplicity that is perhaps rooted in the Nordic interpretation of Protestantism. Both in our Protestant society and in design, I can see rawness and purity, the absence of boasting, and a kind of discretion.

Similarly there's an absence of overt sexuality, unlike what I see, for example, in beautiful Italian design, tradition and art. Instead, in the Nordic countries we strive to highlight the beauty of the material itself. Whether it's wood, a weather-beaten sail, or a ceramic bowl, it should not be highly elaborate in decoration. I strive to let the material itself speak as much as it can. I want to convey a feeling of rawness and purity.

**TN:** Tell me about the colours you use in your work.

**GW:** In this project it was a very natural thing for me to work with blue and white. They are simply my absolute, absolute favourites. I love watching the sea, the sky, and the many variations of blue and white of the stones on the Danish coastline. ▶



Previous page: European Magpie (detail), indigo dyed sailcloth 457 x 100 cm

This page; The Black Swan, weather-beaten dyed sailcloth 200 x 55 cm

Following page: Greenland landscape with White Swan, weather-beaten sailcloth 368 x 177cm



These blues and whites are also a part of the birds that inspire me: the swan is a white bird, the European magpie and the Greenland snow goose are both blue and white.

I studied dyeing in Japan, and I just fell in love with indigo and all of the shades and variations you can achieve by going from white to blue. I did indigo dying in Kyoto and studied with a very famous teacher, Shihoko Fukumoto. Recently she exhibited a beautiful indigo tea-tent in the *Unravelling Identity: Our Textiles, Our Stories* exhibition at the George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum in Washington.

**TN:** Why are you interested in birds and collecting feathers?

**GW:** As a fibre artist, I'm always interested in structures in nature. Many of my previous works consist of numerous individual elements, which together make up a whole unit. For example, my wall hangings consist of thousands of pieces. I see the same design in feathers, which consist of hundreds of fibres. So the idea of taking inspiration in a bird feather to create new sculptures from used sails was a gift to me.

One of my favourite paintings is Leonardo da Vinci's *Annunciation*. It is an angel with a huge wing kneeling in front of the Virgin Mary. I found out that Leonardo da Vinci actually spent a lot of time studying bird wings. I had always liked that painting and somehow wanted to take inspiration from it. Similarly Albrecht Dürer studied the anatomy of birds very closely: I've

collected many images of his paintings and his work has become an important reference point within my work.

**TN:** What about your own migrations?

**GW:** My husband says I suffer from an incurable wanderlust. I have lived in five countries: Denmark, Japan, United States, Egypt and Switzerland. Japan is especially close to my heart, perhaps because I studied there and learned about Katazome, indigo dying, and papermaking. One of the things I will exhibit at Fuller Craft Museum is a kimono that I made there many years ago. I will be living in Washington DC for the next two years, while my husband works at the Danish embassy as a senior advisor on climate and energy. Although it's great to be closer to my American audience, I prefer to create my projects at The Danish Workshop of Art in Copenhagen, it is my absolute favourite. In Copenhagen I am close to my home, materials and colleagues.

Fortunately I have always been fascinated by flying – it involves a lot of white and blue! I love looking down at the landscape of Greenland when I fly from America to Denmark. I've been observing that landscape, and I want that presence to be in the room. I hope that when you enter the room at the Museum, it conveys the feeling of the sea and of flying above the Nordic countries. ●●● **Titilayo Ngwenya**

**Nordic Currents is on until 31 January, Fuller Craft Museum 455 Oak Street, Brockton, MA 02301, USA [www.fullercraft.org](http://www.fullercraft.org)**

