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THE FABRIC OF YOUR LIFE: MEND



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## FRIENDS REUNITED

*Sarah Nsikak Unites her Cultural Heritage with Contemporary Style in La Réunion*



**Sarah Nsikak** is more interested in making art than fashion. Her work is made only using textile waste and vintage deadstock, and so carries with it a great wealth of meaning. She is interested in reclaiming beauty, explaining ‘when beauty has been stolen by way of colonisation...it is up to the artists and makers of that place to reclaim it.’

Nsikak’s grandmother was a seamstress in her Nigerian village. A skilled woman, she taught Nsikak her craft when she was nine or ten. ‘We used paper, needle and thread to start, and I eventually worked up to using her machine. I remember foraging my own closet for old garments to transform into new ones, and doing so very badly. I was obsessed with the empowering feeling I got from making my own clothing, even if I was mostly too embarrassed to let them see daylight. I’ve always loved the instant gratification of making a huge textile out of many smaller ones, so quilting came naturally from that creative process.’

Nsikak incorporates mending, upcycling, and repurposing in every garment she makes. Even though she does not consider herself an art therapist, she acknowledges the healing properties inherent in the methods she uses.

Her inspiration comes from African art, film, art books, and through street style. ‘I first read about the Herero tribe (see *Selvedge* issue 52) a few years ago, around the time I moved to New York City. I was doing personal research because I felt a persistent nagging frustration that African art was never a point of focus in my studies. Meanwhile, so

Jim Naughten



many artists and designers are inspired by Africa but many aren't paying tribute in any meaningful way. I looked up textile art by African people, and after some time gasping at the work by the women of Gee's Bend, I stumbled upon images of the Herero women (see *Selvedge* issue 51). I couldn't stop searching for more images of them: enamoured and also offended that their story was so new to me. I read about how the German empire tried to wipe out their tribe in the 19th century, and how they now wear the reimagined styles of their oppressors. It is a sign of resilience and what black people around the world have been doing since the beginning of time. To make emphatically beautiful something that was initially a symbol of pain and suffering is an act of rebellion and a sign of immense strength. Their stories are some of the most powerful and important that I've ever heard in my life. They were transformational for me as an African American woman still searching for a deeper sense of identity,' she affirms.

Nsikak's materials are sourced from cutting rooms in NYC and through small women-owned online vintage sellers. She looks for ways to support women and minorities in her sourcing. Unfortunately, there is a never-ending supply of waste in the New York cutting rooms, though she is not interested in scaling. 'I think upcycling is the inevitable direction that the fashion industry has to go in. There has been so much damage done by the industry, and it's time for the big brands to be given accountability to do things more thoughtfully.'

Katy Berry

Speaking of big brands, Nsikak has recently ▶







launched a collaboration with Madewell, the J. Crew owned denim company with an emphasis on sustainability, producing a limited edition of dresses made with leftover Madewell textiles. 'It felt so natural to tell a circularity story with Sarah, because we have tons and tons of leftover fabric we've either sampled or developed, and unfortunately we haven't been able to use every yard of it,' says Joyce Lee, Senior Vice President of Madewell.

Nsikak models her dresses on the styles historically worn by the women of Namibia's Herero tribe, which was almost wiped out by the colonial wars of the early 20th century. The Herero and Namaqua genocide was the first of the 20th century, waged by the German Empire between 1904 and 1908. The women who survived the war adopted the patchwork dresses worn by their European oppressors; in their hands, they became 'a sign of unbelievable resilience and perseverance,' as Nsikak told Vogue last year.

She created two dress styles for Madewell: a wrap dress and a full, tent-like midi, each stitched with an assortment of pastel stripes, gingham, florals, and textured wovens. Instead of reproducing Nsikak's designs in Madewell's own facilities, the 35-piece collection was made in her factory, where the team is familiar with her aesthetic and process. 'This capsule is super limited in quantity, but for me it was huge,' Nsikak adds. 'Our factory was really happy to have the work. They're like family, and I'm really grateful they've been open to my funny ways of working.'

Richie Jo and Puka Jambuka / Alamy



Right; Namibia Herero women, Sesfontein

Regarding the name of her brand, La Réunion, Nsikak explains: 'There is a lot of layered meaning to the name La Réunion that goes deeper than my love and admiration for La Réunion the island. As a first generation American, I had one culture at home and one at school and the two were at odds. In my adult years, I've found the beauty in reuniting with my roots and reconnecting with my ancestry. This is the place that my most authentic and meaningful art comes from. Though that story is specific to my journey, I feel many of us can relate in some way to the idea of turning inward and reconnecting with the purpose that's been there all along.'

La Réunion is a brand doing things differently, 'I think there's no reason we shouldn't try to make a positive impact on the world without adding harm. Fashion has the potential to empower, employ, and inspire, so why not use it for those things?'

Rooted in that philosophy, Nsikak is also realistic yet full of hope for the future. 'It's challenging doing just about anything at first. I started the company with no money or help, so it all felt like one big undertaking. A more tangible challenge for me was being taken seriously as a woman of colour, and standing my ground on pricing. People often assume black-owned means 'free' or 'cheap'. My work is very labour intensive and intentional, and it's important that I stand firm on these values no matter how challenging it is. I'm looking forward to providing more opportunity for artisans in Africa and working with them both in Africa and from afar.' \*\*\* **Marcella Echavarría, [www.lareunionstudio.com](http://www.lareunionstudio.com)**

Alamy

