

Weekend Workshop at Alabama Chanin



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We had the great opportunity to attend a weekend workshop at Alabama Chanin's design studio called "The Factory" located in the city of Florence, Alabama". Under the guidance of founder and celebrated fashion designer Natalie Chanin, the workshop allowed participants to work directly with her design staff, creating a piece of their choice, using Alabama Chanin's signature hand-sewing techniques. The message is to preserve these old American traditional techniques of quilting and stitching that are a part of the local artisans' heritage, while promoting conservation and sustainability.

I. FLORENCE, ALABAMA



Located in the northwestern corner of the state, Florence, Alabama was founded in 1818 and named after the capital of Tuscany by an Italian surveyor. It is located on Wilson Lake where the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) constructed the Wilson Dam in 1925 on the Tennessee River, producing the largest power capacity of any TVA dam.



As we drove toward our hotel, we noticed that Florence's landscape consisted mainly of woodlands (leafless in early March), fields with the dark reddish tint of rich clayey soils (ideal for cotton growth), churches, gas stations, small rural homesteads and sometimes lavish residential areas, and the majestic Tennessee River with its stately bridges.



At one time, in the mid-1860's, Alabama was known as "The Cotton State". Back then, cotton was king and almost four million acres were planted. Today, only 1.3 million acres remain and are devoted to all agricultural crops. This is partly due to the boll weevil (insect from Mexico) blight of 1911 and the outbreak of the Civil War which left Alabama devastated, physically and financially. The state's cotton production has dropped to about 4% of the nation's total cotton crop production.



With a population of about 38,000, Florence was once called "the T-shirt Capital of the World". It was home to mega-size T-shirt manufacturing companies like Tee Jays Manufacturing, Salem Screen South and Lexington Fabrics. These companies used mostly locally grown cotton to produce their merchandise. Many of these T-shirt and jeans-wear manufacturers closed after 1994, when NAFTA lifted trade restrictions and allowed open-door trade policies, laying off thousands of textile workers. Today, most of the cotton grown in this area is actually shipped to China, where T-shirts are manufactured and shipped back to the U.S.

In 2008, Alabama Chanin was offered space in one of these former T-shirt and textile manufacturing facilities. There, they set up The Factory which encompasses Chanin's design and production studio, along with her flagship store.. Alabama Chanin only utilizes the skills of local artisans who inherited their knowledge from generations above them. Many of their employees are former seamstresses and textile workers that were once laid-off by the previous T-shirt manufacturers.



Home of Project Alabama



The Factory

II. ALABAMA CHANIN

Upon our arrival at The Factory, we were warmly welcomed by Natalie Chanin and her staff to a comfortable and “homey” work environment. We found ourselves surrounded with exquisitely and awe-inspiring hand-crafted clothes, books, soft music, shelves and shelves of neatly folded solid-color jersey fabrics, comfortable chairs and tables with crafty country flair, tidily stacked clear boxes filled with notions, and the wonderful smell of good old southern cooking on a beautifully decorated table. That is where we ultimately gathered and shared our backgrounds with the rest of our group. This kind of welcome and atmosphere is a testament to Natalie’s commitment in preserving the idea of people and the community coming together through their work.



Participants admiring Chanin’s new line



Shelves of dyed !00% Organic cotton ready to cut



Boxes filled with beads, threads



Enjoying southern cooking



Various supplies available

After taking a closer look at the rows of garments hanging on racks, we were completely stunned by the meticulous craftsmanship and beauty that was

involved in the making of each of these one-of-a-kind pieces. One could get a sense for the intensity of the work involved by simply lifting one of the dresses and feeling its weight. The pieces are all made-by-hand using a combination of new, organic and recycled materials that consist of 100% cotton jersey. Most pieces involve two layers of a medium weight jersey that is delicately embellished with thousands of beads, embroideries and thread knots that cover appliquéd or cutout patterns, creating breathtaking images on the fabric. The pieces are so beautifully finished and impeccably fitted that once tried on, it becomes very difficult to take them off and part with them.



How did such an inspiring concept begin?

The creative force behind Alabama Chanin is Natalie Chanin. Born and raised in Florence, Alabama, Chanin learned how to stitch at an early age by watching her mother, grandmothers and aunts utilizing these age-old techniques. She received a degree in Environmental Design from North Carolina State University and subsequently spent 22 years traveling and living abroad in Austria, working as a stylist and costume designer. In 2000, Natalie returned to her southern roots, and started working on the concept of creating a sustainable clothing line, employing the stitching and quilting skills of local artisans.

In 2001, Natalie Chanin founded a fashion phenomenon in the clothing industry named Project Alabama. The company boasted handmade one-of-a-kind

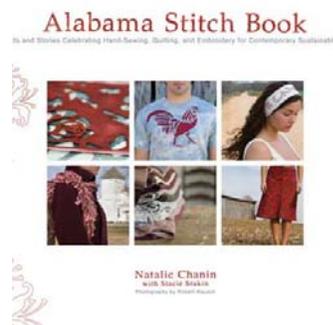
T-shirts and garments often made with recycled and earth-friendly materials. Their garments were sold at exclusive stores such as Barney's New York, sold at prices that could easily top \$1,000 for one piece and could be seen worn by many of Hollywood's A-list. But in 2006, the company shuttered production in Alabama and finally shut down and the owners parted ways.

But her commitment to sustaining the rich traditions of her community where she was born and raised, pressed Chanin to carry out her original concept once more. In 2006, she launched Alabama Chanin. The new company was founded on traditions and community-based culture. It includes not only clothing, but also accessories and house wares.

"We took what we had learned [from Project Alabama], took the best parts of it and got rid of what was wasteful and unimportant," she says.

Rather than sourcing their manufacturing abroad, the company chooses to utilize the skills of local artisans in order to **preserve these "living arts"** or "domestic arts" of quilting and stitching that have been passed down the generations. Currently, Alabama Chanin uses approximately 30 skilled craftspeople, ranging in age from 25 to 80, living either in or around the Florence area. These craftspeople include stitchers and weavers who are former textile mill employees, seamstresses, retired school teachers and single mothers. They act as business owners, purchasing raw materials from Alabama Chanin. They work from a location of their choice, setting prices they will charge for completing each item and then sell the completed product back to the company. Each item comes back numbered in one-of-a-kind or limited edition series and signed by the artisan that made it.

In addition to her clothing line, Chanin is the author of a book, *The Alabama Stitch Book*, where she shares "projects and stories celebrating hand-sewing, quilting, and embroidery for a contemporary sustainable style."



Chanin also produced a short film, *Stitch*, which shows how old traditional quilt-making techniques in the south truly brought the community together. Locals that have long lived in the area and experienced the Depression of the 1930's, were interviewed in this film. They recounted their similar memories

of "ladies gathering... quilting for one another... laughing... enjoying... having a ball... having a good covered-dish lunch... talked about everything in the community... always talked about the one that wasn't there... stories that are forgotten... when this generation is gone, all these stories will be forgotten and lost..."

Alabama Chanin designs can be found in Barney's New York, in local specialty boutiques and at many Trunk Shows held throughout the country. Dates for their trunk shows are available on the website www.alabamachanin.com.

III. THE FACTORY

All participants were given a tour of the facility and how it operated before our work had begun. The setup was structured by assigning an area to every step of the process, from cutting, stenciling, stitching, piecing together to shipping.

Chanin's staff normally consists of five members, but since the workshop was held on a weekend, we had the pleasure of meeting three of them: an assistant designer, a production manager, and an air-brusher.

The process began with selecting a body – and size - of our choice from one of their existing patterns. We chose a shawl and a corset top, two items that could possibly be finished within the duration of the workshop. We then had to select the color combination we desired from her wide array of available colors in 100% organic cotton jersey fabric.



Next came cutting of the piece we had selected. Our fabric was neatly placed on the cutting table, paper patterns placed on top of the fabric paying attention to keeping the correct grainline, traced around with tailor's chalk and hand-cut one by one.



Reverse Appliqué where patterns are cutout



Appliqué where the pattern is stitched over base fabric.

The third step was difficult because it involved deciding which stitching and appliquéing pattern we were going to select from. With over 500 different choices of meticulously cutout stencils, we settled on two different placement stencils (vs. an all-over) that were going to be air-brushed over our cut pieces.



Vine pattern used on Sumi Lee's shawl



Daisy pattern used on Mitra Rajabi's corset

Steven, a former plant manager at Tee Jays Manufacturing, is a specialist in the field of air-brushing textiles and placement of stencils over the fabric. He first places the cut fabric on a flat working surface. Then the stencil is lightly sprayed with a light adhesive to prevent shifting and placed over the fabric.



Steven laying out cut fabric pieces



Airbrushing stencil pattern over fabric



Mixed Textile paints ready for use

Using a latex based textile paint of our color choice, he expertly air-brushed a perfect floral pattern through the stencil and onto the fabric. The painted areas served as a guideline for our appliquéing purposes. They would be stitched over and either cut out (for a reverse appliqué) or cut around of (for an appliqué). The end product will always show an outline of the painted pattern, which becomes a part of the design. The painted pieces are hung to let dry for about 30 minutes.



Once dry, the stenciled fabrics were taken to the stitching area of The Factory, where two large wood tables painted in white were decked with embroidery scissors, different color threads, pins and needles, and embroidery books. The tables were surrounded by one-of-a-kind recycled chairs that Chanin had restored using leftover scraps of fabric or old recycled neckties. The setting had a warm and comfy feel and opened the door to the next few hours of stitching that were going to follow.



Natalie Chanin explaining various techniques



Participants at work during stitching phase



Chanin explained some basic stitching techniques, like tying off our knot, always doubling our thread and what tension to use while sewing, but what caught everyone's attention the most was her description of "loving your thread" before threading the needle: by continuously running our fingers along the thread, from the needle to the end of the loose tails, we were to say "This thread is going to sew the most beautiful garment ever made; the person who wears it will wear it in health and happiness; it will bring joy and laughter." While going through this process, we were actually working the tension out of the tightly twisted thread, and the natural oils in our fingers served as smoothing the thread to avoid knotting during sewing. At the same time this process helped us to calm the tension in our minds and to concentrate on the task at hand.

The next eleven hours were dedicated to stitching around the stenciled patterns on our fabrics, slowly and meticulously, trying to prevent the thread from knotting, keeping the right tension in the thread, and keeping the width of our stitches as uniform as possible. Each cut panel of fabric had to be stitched and beaded first, before they were sewn together. But during this process, we experienced what generations of stitchers had experienced before us: women bonding, sharing their stories of sadness, of happiness, of their diversified origins, sharing recipes, laughing at each other's jokes, singing to some familiar country tunes softly playing in the background and gaining a better understanding of this great community we were in. We reluctantly left the stitching tables for only a brief lunch break, where we enjoyed delicious homemade southern cooking with sweet tea, while Chanin shared stories from her childhood and her career with us.

When all the pieces of our garment were finished being stitched and decoratively embellished, it was time to sew them together and to finish the sewn piece by binding the exposed edges with a matching color cotton rib. This binding was secured to the garment with either a cross-stitch, or a zigzag stitch which can stretch with the fabric. This proved to be yet another tedious and time-consuming process.



Sumi Lee's shawl being sewn together



Mitra Rajabi's corset front sewn together

The final results were far greater looking than what we had originally expected as novice stitchers. Each piece came to life as they were receiving the last finishing touches and have been worn with pride ever since. The craftsmanship on these unique quality garments is so strong and durable that they can easily be passed on to the next generation and beyond. Even though very few of Alabama Chanin's designs utilize button, hook & eye or snap openings, one never hears the cracking sound of the thread breaking while pulling on even the most fitted piece. As Chanin explains, "from farmer to fiber to artisan to home, our products are *grown-to-sewn* in USA."



Sumi Lee's finished shawl



Mitra Rajabi's finished corset top

IV. OUR STITCHING PROJECTS: STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE



Trace patterns on right side of fabric



Cut around traced pattern pieces



Choose stencil and placement



Lay cut pieces flat on spray board



Place stencil over cut pieces



Textile paint used for airbrushing on fabric



Mix pigment with textile paint and use air brush to spray stencil patterns over fabric



Lift stencil to check placement.



Hang cut pieces to dry.



Natalie Chanin demonstrating a straight stitch



Pin or baste the two layers of fabric together:
Back side of top layer should lay on top of face side of bottom layer.
First, stitch around stenciled area to bond two fabric layers together (see Sample 1), using double thread. Then, cut out painted stencil area of top layer to show under layer color (see Sample 2).



[Sample 1]

Pin 2 layers of fabric together to secure.
Use Button Craft Dual Duty thread. Rub threads using natural hand oils to align two threads and avoid thread from knotting. Start with double knots and end with double knots for extra strength. Above sample is with extra threads exposed on the outside for decoration purposes. Quarter inch spaced basting around stenciled areas to avoid cutouts from fraying.



[Sample 2]

Leave 1/8" margin and cut inside of stencil area using small scissors to reveal under layer color.

V. FROM RECYCLING TO “UPCYCLING”

As Natalie Chanin explains in her book, “when the fields would die back, the houses would come to life; it was a gathering of the whole community.” She refers to a period when agriculture played a very important role in the life of most people living in Alabama. The making of cotton or corn, involved every family member’s efforts through the planting and growing processes. But once the product was harvested, the creative work began inside the homes, often triggered by necessity.

The Depression brought with it great shortages for simple commodities like fuel for heat, blankets, furniture, toys, clothing, thread for sewing, fabrics dyes and so on. Houses were not well heated; there was a need for quilts and clothing to keep warm at night. In those days people didn’t have much and were forced to think in a practical way. Quilts were literally made from scratch, using scraps of leftover fabrics from previous projects, old clothing items that were unusable, plain or printed flour bags, feed and fertilizer sacks used for the lining of the quilts, old felt hats. Even the thread was recycled. For batting, the quilt makers used cotton bolls that had been leftover in the fields after the harvest. Nothing was thrown away. The term “garbage can” was not known. Everything was used and re-used, even trash.

They used anything they could get a hold on. As a result, they found that “beauty existed within those walls [homes].” It was necessity that fueled creativity.

This philosophy of sustainability and minimizing waste is a strong inspiration for Alabama Chanin’s business model. As a result, every piece of fabric scrap is not only re-used, but turned into something better, giving an increased value to the product: it is “**upcycled**.”

As we walked through The Factory, our attention was caught by pieces that looked familiar, but were cleverly made of recycled materials:

- Scraps of leftover fabric from the clothing line piled on top of each other to create an ottoman
- Straps made from fabric turned into necklaces by adding a silver logo charm
- Old recycled T-shirts cut-apart, sewn back together and embellished
- a reclaimed chair with the seat made from recycled men’s ties
- Another recycled chair, repainted in white with the seat and back made from old car license plates
- Vintage candle-holders repainted in white and used as a group to create an interesting focal point for the home
- Tree branches collected and painted white, then assembled together to create striking decorative bowls

Natalie Chanin carries her strong belief in sustainability and conservation into her environment too. Water, for instance was available for our use in glass jars or pitchers, not in plastic bottles. Food was served in glass plates, not disposable products. Old recycled glass jars were found throughout The Factory, either to serve as cups or to hold beautiful flower arrangements.

The following are additional examples of how recycled items can become “upcycled” (from Alabama Chanin designs):



Reclaimed chair restored using recycled men's ties



Restored chair using straps of organic cotton jersey



Recycled candle holders restored



Ottoman made of scraps of fabric



Twig bowl



Jewelry



One-of-a-kind Chandelier made from found items that have been wired together



Scarf made of scraps of leftover fabric



Sculpture made of scrap iron, shoe string, cotton striping, Glass, wood, paper, aluminum.

It's in fashion to recycle. Clothing designers are finding stylish ways to reuse refuse, turning plastic bottles into fleece, tires into shoes, and billboards into backpacks. Recycling not only keeps trash out of overflowing landfills and from polluting waterways and green spaces, it also provides raw materials to make new products.

Here are some interesting ideas that a few creative designers came up with in their work to help the environment:

SEW CREATIVE

Skirt made from men's ties When Courtney Lange and Molly Kooiman were teens, they got the idea to turn men's old ties into something new. Now the designer duo sells custom-made tie skirts through their online company, Label Me Clothing. "We pick the ties up at local thrift stores," say the girls. Then they sew the ties together, trim off the skinny ends, add a zipper and waistband, and voila: a tie skirt.

RETREAD SOLES

Flip-flops from worn tires Roughly 299 million used car tires are discarded in the U.S. annually. Cliff Drill, owner of Splaff Inc., salvages 5,000 to 10,000 of them every year to create flip-flops and sandals. These shoes have soles made from the wheels' tread and a cushiony foot bed of finely ground tire. The tough treads transform into durable soles that virtually never wear out, says Drill.

RESPUN THREADS

Recycled cotton T-shirt Before clothes even make it onto store racks, they've left behind a trail of fabric pieces on the sewing-room floor. Billions of pounds of these leftovers get discarded each year. But these scraps can be recycled and respun into new threads. This Earth Day T-shirt from Clothes Made from Scrap is woven from 50 percent recycled cotton material.



Handbags made from recycled candy wrappers, juice boxes and recycled fabric scraps.



Handbags made from recycled chopsticks and scraps of fabric that were quilted together

NOVICA
In partnership with NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



Recycled sweaters felted in the washer make a wonderful non-raveling material that was used to create the above brooches.



Bracelets made of dyed bamboo, cinnamon, loro, soita wood beads and coconut shells, threaded on multiple strands of ramie.

Otis School of Art's Fashion Department encourages the concept of sustainability by incorporating projects into the curriculum that involve "upcycling" of used and existing items into their program. Students have worked with mentors from the following prominent companies and got a first-hand experience on how to design with recycled and reclaimed pieces: Yeoh Lee, BCBG, Christopher Enuke, Project Alabama, Roxy, Todd Oldham, Patagonia.