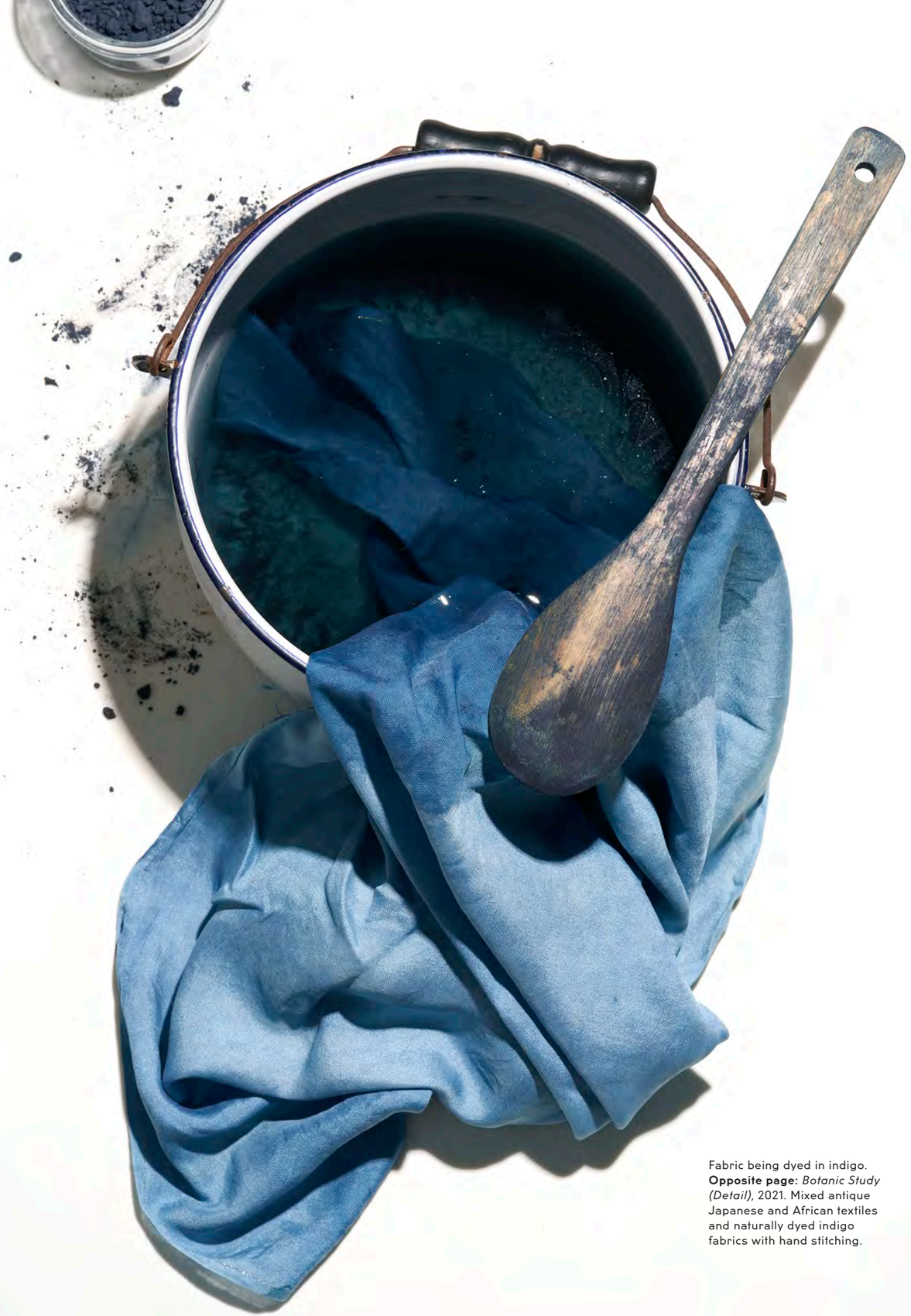
ART & CRAFT

Kiva Motnyk harnesses nature's bounty to create her kaleidoscopic textiles

Words Sabine Hrechdakian

Photography Carlton Davis



Fabric being dyed in indigo. **Opposite page:** *Botanic Study (Detail)*, 2021. Mixed antique Japanese and African textiles and naturally dyed indigo fabrics with hand stitching.

Like artists who set up portable easels to capture the splendor of nature's shifting moods, Thompson Street Studio's founder, Kiva Motnyk, draws inspiration from hours spent walking the twenty-acre property outside Delhi, New York, she bought with her husband ten years ago. The rural landscape not only informs her palette but is also the source of her pigment.

Depending on the season, much as humans have done for centuries, Motnyk will forage goldenrod, sumac, indigo, blueberries, even harvesting onions from her garden, boiling the berries, flowers or skins in water until their color is extracted to her liking. She likens the variability inherent in the natural dying process to be similar to a painter mixing colors. "You are creating your own colors by controlling saturation and using fabrics that each absorb differently. If you want a particular result, there are recipes you can follow, but I find it more interesting to accept imperfection."

To illustrate, Motnyk shows me linen and cotton samples she has dyed with marigold, each one a different tone on a spectrum, telling a story expressive of place. Chemistry is chemistry whether it comes from a flower, insect or lab, yet Motnyk insist the difference is real. "The energy of fabric really changes when you use natural dye," she says. "They smell better. My animals are more attracted to them. It's like being in the garden instead of a factory. Isn't it more fun to create things in a garden instead of a factory?" she adds.

She also clearly enjoys photographing her textiles outdoors, in conversation with the landscapes that inspire her designs.

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At the time of this writing, the first image I see on her website is of a quilt suspended in field of dry, golden grasses, framed by a stand of flaming orange maples trees. Hand-sewn patches in burnt umber, gold ocher, moss green and varying shades of blue render the autumnal landscape into a lattice of earthy colors reminiscent of an abstract *plein air* study.

Motnyk describes her approach to color as more instinctual than analytical, a sensibility no doubt nurtured at the Waldorf Schools she attended and at her father's painting studio where she spent many hours mixing paints, stretching canvas or working on her own projects. Although she chose not to become a painter, her approach to composition and color combination is painterly: hanging her works-in-progress and stepping back to examine how tones and textures respond to one another. "A lot of design and art is about trusting your intuition. You have to trust your inner voice, otherwise, you can easily get lost in too much theory. Ultimately, there is no wrong way to create color," she says.

If having a high degree of creative control and freedom is a characteristic of how we define fine art, then shouldn't textiles — often lumped into a category called craft or decorative arts — be capable of expressing as much imagination and emotion as a painted canvas? Painting, after all, is no longer limited to pigment on canvas, nor is sculpture made solely out of stone or wood. What ultimately defines art is an ability to intuit a pattern out of the ether and express something original.

"Art is about creating something new," Motnyk says, pointing as an example to the Gee's Bend quilts, which are major source of inspiration. A practice handed down by generations of black women in rural Alabama, their astonishingly innovative designs, created from scraps, did not prevent these humble artifacts, once "discovered", from being considered some of the finest examples of modern art in America.

Yet, despite the tremendous artistry of applied crafts like tapestry, quilting, and weaving, they were not regarded as one of the traditional fine arts because of their association with women and domestic labor. True art, it was believed, should have no practical purpose. It exists for its own sake, to be admired in museums, an object of contemplation, not a skill you learn. Thankfully, this moment of reckoning with centuries of entrenched patriarchy that excluded women, people of color and entire categories of art has led to a major reassessment with global exhibitions and publications finally acknowledging the significance and merit of applied arts.

Exhibition's like The Whitney's *Making Knowing: Craft in Art 1950-2019* with pioneering works from their own collections, and MOMA's retrospective on polymath artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp, whose fluid interdisciplinary practice combined painting and sculpture as well as beadwork, textiles and costumes (to name just a few); along with the proliferation of design fairs like Smithsonian Craft Show, Design Miami, and Object and Things (where *Upstate Diary's* creative director, Kate Orne, first saw Motnyk's work at the Luss House in summer of 2021) are a testament to the fluidity between craft, art, design and the decorative.

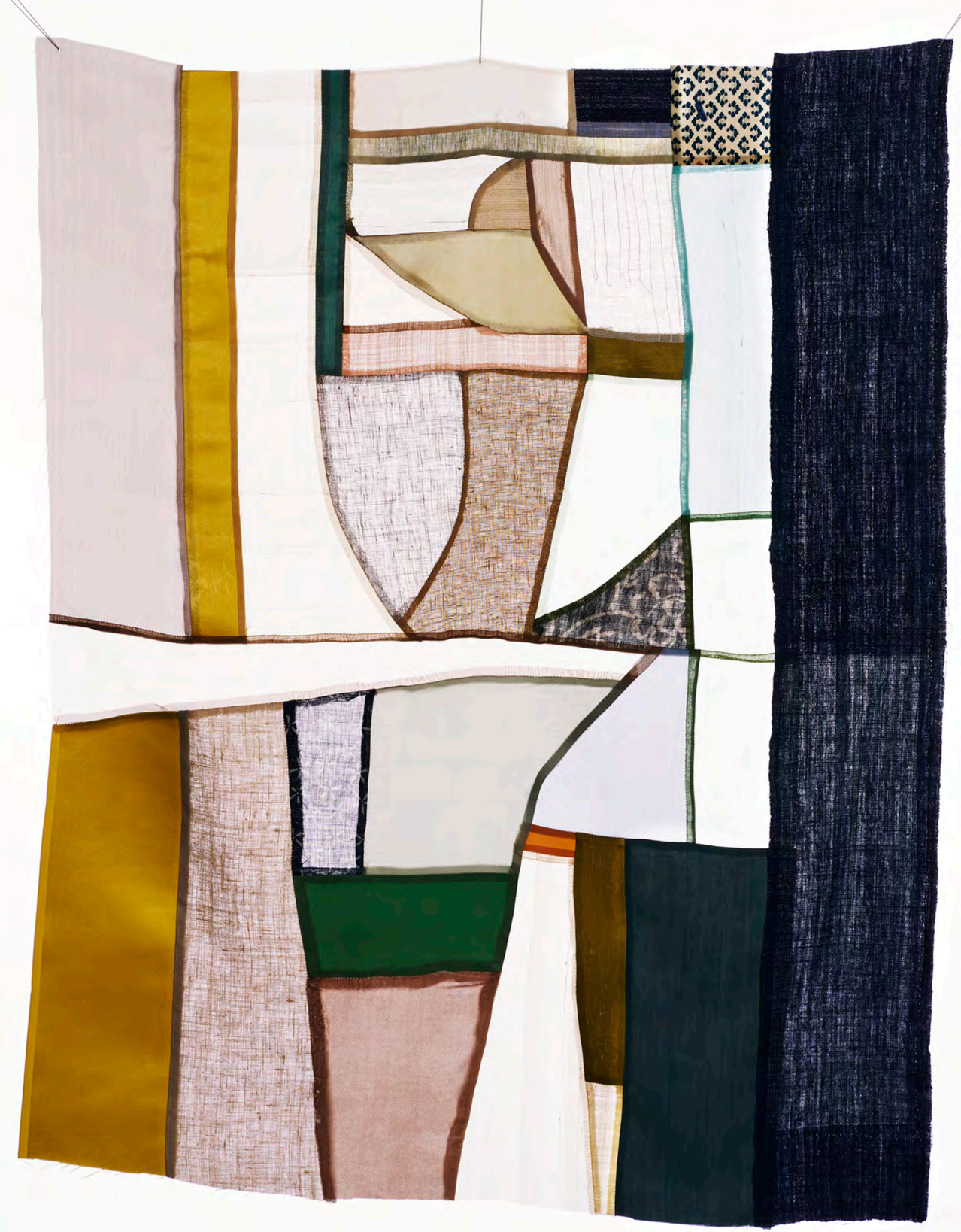
Case in point, Motnyk sees herself as neither an artist nor a craftsperson, but both. "I feel like I have two practices. One is more of a fine-arts focus that allows me time to be creative and experiment, and the other is more about production and figuring out how to make beautiful objects of value more democratic and accessible. The practices are not separate, they relate and inform one another."

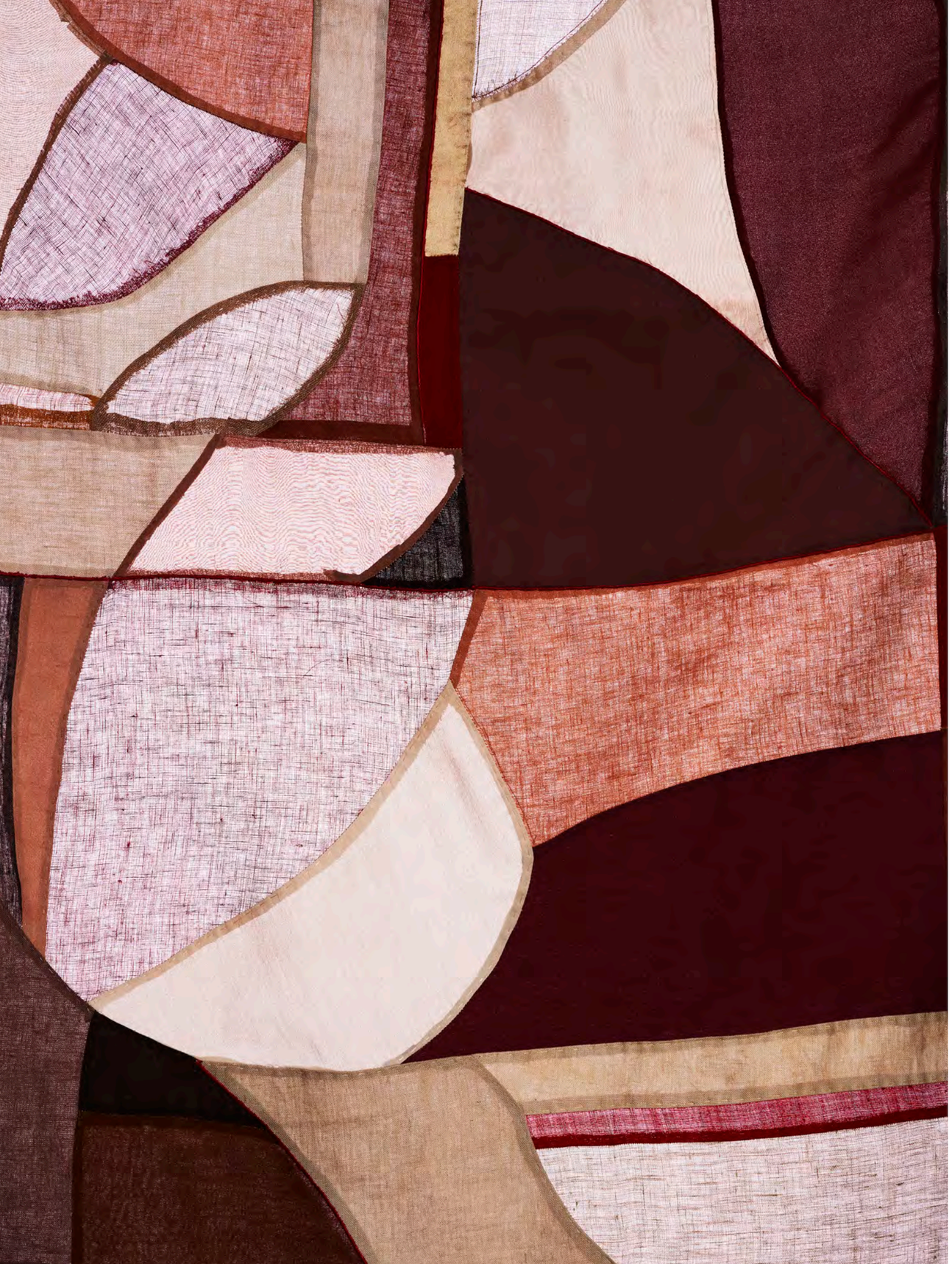
Motnyk's studio, named after Thompson Street and based out of her childhood home, has the feeling of SoHo's bygone era, when the neighborhood and its loft buildings were used by artists as live-work spaces. In this case, the paints and palettes scattered throughout the large and light-filled space are actually bits of cloth, each one telling its own unique story.

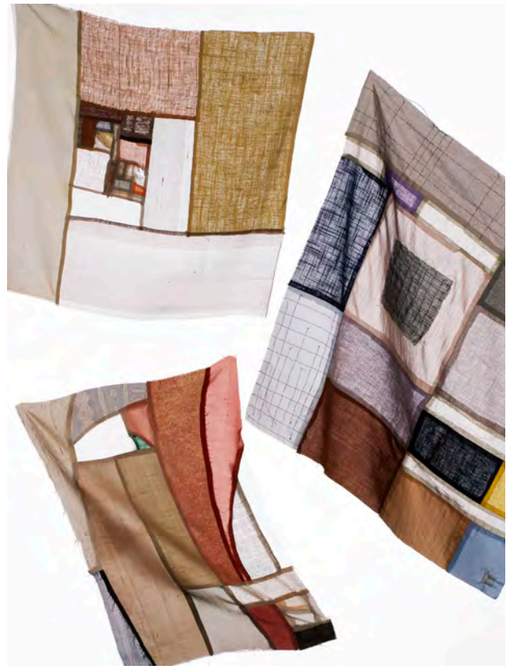
Fabrics collected from travels or found treasure hunting in upstate antique stores fill glass-fronted cabinets and overflow from baskets. African mud cloth, Japanese *boro*, antique quilts, embroideries and other remnants for pieces in progress are laid out on tables. A wooden loom sits in front a bookshelf filled with books on fashion, art, beadwork and textiles, an example, like the varied cloths Motnyk collects, of

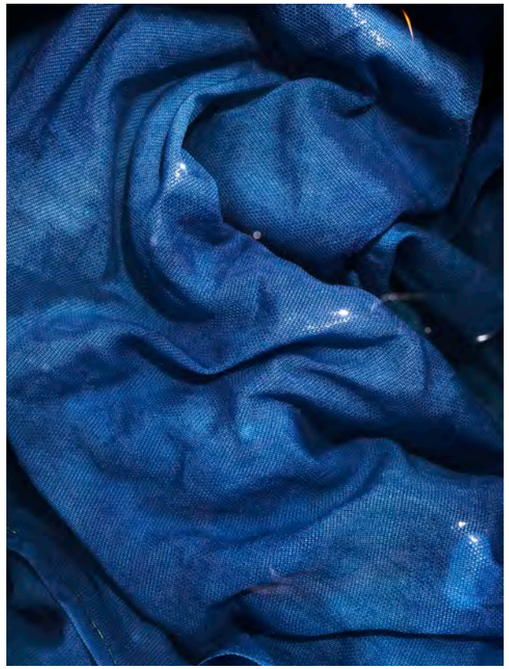
Colors created with natural dye materials. The textiles are all natural fibers; such as silks, linens and cottons.

Untitled, 2022. Naturally dyed textiles mixed with antique Japanese remnants. **Opposite page:** Motnyk's fabric dyes are created from plants she gathers on her land, such as marigold, sumac, blueberry, onion and goldenrod.









the wide-ranging influences that inform her practice.

"What I love about being an American artist is that you can pull influences from so many places. It's liberating to have the freedom not to stick to one specific technique, even though everyone wants to pigeonhole me," Motnyk says. Although equally influenced by the patchwork-style of Japanese *boro* or Korean *bojagi*, as well as the geometry of Ani Albers and color fields of Mark Rothko, her approach, like her quilts, is an assemblage of influences and history.

Motnyk's early interest in textiles, sewing and fabric construction led her to study fashion at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), eventually switching to their more fine-art focused textile design program. While RISD taught her proper technique, like many students in creative disciplines, she had to unlearn most of it when she left school. Fortunately, her first job was as an assistant to '90s avant-garde fashion pioneer, Susan Cianciolo, whose interdisciplinary approach blurred the boundaries between conceptual art and clothing design.

After stints at major fashion houses that took her further away from working directly with materials, Motnyk decided to open Thompson Street Studio, in 2014, to return to her love of textiles and making things by hand. Likely influenced by Cianciolo's collective approach, and partly because she was still finding her voice, her process in those early years was more collaborative. "I would start a piece and send it to a quilter in Michigan who would add something and then send it to someone else. It was good practice for letting go of ego," Motnyk says. "Now, I have more confidence in my vision, in what material to use."

Presaging the growing interest in craft homewares, Motnyk and Cianciolo started a design collective out of Motnyk's studio called Run Home, highlighting ceramics, tapestries and quilts made by artisans using traditional techniques. Their first show in 2014, at the prestigious Ralph Pucci Gallery in New York, led to orders from ABC Home and Primary Essentials, who asked Motnyk for multiples, which is what led her to figure out how to do production. Initially, Motnyk made those pieces herself, but now focuses on design, working with collaborators to produce the pieces, allowing her more time to focus on her art practice.

"It's a pleasure to have the challenges of making individual pieces and working in a small production capacity. You have to use a different part of your brain," she says. It's part of the reason she is also taking on more consulting gigs, which give her an opportunity to do deep dives on color theory because it's a new way to think about things. Despite her current focus on gallery commissions, Motnyk has no plans to give up production. "I just need to figure out how to do it all!" she says. ■

Above, left: Motnyk creates small "sketches" prior to creating the final full sized pieces. **Right:** A detail of an indigo dyed textile before use. **Opposite page:** Inspired by the changing fall landscape in upstate, NY.

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