



LEFT: **Wool Artist Coat**, 2011; hand-dyed itajime shibori on locally-sourced wool, stitched, pieced.  
 TOP RIGHT: Amy credits much of her business and creative development to the strong partnership she has with her husband, Ky.  
 BOTTOM RIGHT: Tea is served gracefully and simply at Amy Nguyen's home and studio.



On a recent breezy Boston afternoon textile artist Amy Nguyen gracefully served tea and sweets in hand thrown cups and plates, each movement carefully constructed, simple, beautiful. Amy's life path of meditation and intentional action is borne out in her life's work, which is the design and construction of handmade clothing.

Amy Nguyen's textile work is marked by high contrast, a chiaroscuro of light and dark, clear and obscure. Her artwear is the product of a construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction process. She designs and dyes the silk, using one or more methods. Most of it is dyed using the shibori method. At times she employs rozome or katazome, depending on the nuance, texture, and effect she hopes to achieve. She then bravely cuts the dyed yardage into pieces, only to sew them back together as an extraordinary garment. "Construction is a major part of my work. From

# HIGH CONTRAST: the Wearable Art of Amy Nguyen

BY **MARCIA YOUNG**



dyeing, designing, and pattern making to cutting and constructing, it is all quite work intensive, much like weaving."

Amy's years of learning and honing her craft began with a degree in studio art from the College of Charleston, South Carolina. She's held positions in the costume shop at the College of Charleston and New York University's Department of Design for Stage and Film. She has also sought out and worked with mentors, including intensive shibori study from Yoshiko Wada and Joy Boutrup, followed by continued studies with Jason Pollen, former Surface Design Association president; Akemi Cohn, katazome master; and most currently, Kiranada Sterling Benjamin, rozome master, thereby establishing herself in the wearable art world, and finally culminating in a trip to Japan over this summer. There she was able to meet families who have been making kimono for hundreds of years, and spend time immersed in the culture that is the birthplace of her craft. "Japan's respectful and nuanced atmosphere gave me space to think and to feel a sense of quiet. That inner calm is essential to me—and likely to most artists."



Nguyen elucidates, "I spent time in Kyoto, visiting rozome artists, who had such a different way of working. They work on 12 meters at a time, and I only work on 3 yards. To see the fabric for an entire kimono being made all at once was amazing. I was stunned by the respect given to the textile process itself. Imagine, in Japan, people pay upwards of the price of a car for a kimono that will be passed down through generations."

Amy paid visits to kimono companies, meditated with a Buddhist priest, participated in a tea ceremony, and hiked in the mountains outside of Kyoto, among other fascinating side trips and adventures. "It was unrushed and calm. It allowed me to 'see' more—more patterns, more nature, the streets, signs, just everything. When I returned home, I was both inspired and overwhelmed by all of my recent experiences. Japan

HERE: Amy Nguyen Textiles studio in the Fort Point area of Boston, MA.  
 TOP RIGHT: **Layered Kimono: worn upside down**; 2011; hand-dyed itajime shibori on silk chiffon, hand-cut layers stitched together, pieced.  
 BOTTOM RIGHT: The artist taking time to browse Kyoto's Tanakanao, a world-renowned seller of plant-based dyes, chemical dyes, and fabric.



See more of our visit to Amy Nguyen's studio in our online gallery. [www.fiberartnow.net](http://www.fiberartnow.net)



opened up things for me that were all there already, but in a certain way, I think my creativity and ideas are all spilling out now. It's incredible."

Amy's impactful experience in Japan was offset by the pain of her mother recently losing a battle with cancer. These two events painted a chiaroscuro of their own, between clear-cut and uncomplicated, yet somehow impenetrable and oblique.

"One afternoon after my return (from Japan), mourning my mother's passing and struggling with work in the studio, I wrapped myself in a quilt that she had made for me. I was missing her so much on that day. I laid back and gave in to sleep. The moment I woke, everything had changed. I realized, 'This quilt has a soul. It continues to comfort and sustain me, just as my mother did during her lifetime.' That was the moment at which I knew. I knew that this is my life's work. Creating, dyeing, constructing, sewing, is what I'll do for the rest of my life."

Amy's creations reflect a lifestyle more than a single product. Methodically ushering the cloth through each step is one more example of how she lives her life and the kind of community that she would like to foster through her work. Along with her husband Ky, who regularly works in the dye studio, she hopes to enlist others in this undertaking. "Just as each craftsman in Japan participates in his part of the kimono process, I would like to engage others in the community that is naturally forming around this work."



#### JAPANESE DYEING METHODS

Rozome is the Japanese version of the wax-resist process known elsewhere as batik. The earliest rozome examples date from the eighth century CE. For a wealth of information on rozome see *The World of Rozome* (Betsy Sterling Benjamin, Kodansha International, 1996).

Shibori is a term for several methods of dyeing cloth with a pattern by binding, stitching, folding, twisting, compressing it, or capping. Some of these methods are known in the West as tie-dye. The technique used in shibori depends, not only on the desired pattern, but the characteristics of the cloth being dyed.

Katazome is a method that uses a resist paste applied through a stencil. With this kind of resist dyeing, a rice flour mixture is applied using a brush or a tool such as a palette knife. Pigment is added by hand painting, immersion, or both. Where the paste mixture covers and permeates the cloth, dye applied later will not penetrate. Besides cotton, katazome has been used to decorate linen, silk, and fabrics that are all, or partially, synthetic.

Source: Wikipedia.org



Currently two part-time seamstresses work in the studio, both of whom have creative and technical skills—one is a musician and the other sews for the Boston Ballet. This summer they took on their first intern, from the Massachusetts College of Art (MassArt), and hope to add a second one in the fall semester. Amy and Ky are looking forward to engaging more people, not only in their process, but in the slow cloth movement that they foster at Amy Nguyen Textiles. "I want to be involved, to share what I know, and find out how to apply it to a real-world setting."

Amy Nguyen Textiles brings into this world textiles to wear that become treasures for their owners. Learn more by visiting [www.amynguyentextiles.com](http://www.amynguyentextiles.com).

*Deanna DiMarzio* is a professional photographer who works in the Boston area, and specializes in capturing the personality of her subjects. [www.deannadimarzio.com](http://www.deannadimarzio.com)

*Marcia Young* is editor in chief of *Fiber Art Now*. She loves learning about and telling the stories behind contemporary fiber arts and textiles. [editor@fiberartnow.net](mailto:editor@fiberartnow.net)