



Meet the Maker: Sara Berks from Minna

BY KEITH FLANAGAN
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In the eight years since Sara Berks launched MINNA, our expectations of businesses and business owners have turned on their head. It's no longer enough to be a source of goods: the bottom line is, oftentimes, to be a source of good.

MINNA, a homewares brand based in Hudson, collaborates directly, and respectfully, with master artisans in Central and South America to create goods that support craft preservation, job creation, transparency, and everything in between.

"To me, ethically made means considering the entire process," says Berks. "From how things are made, but also before they are made: the thread, the colors. To packaging it and sending it to our warehouse, to my team who packs and ships and sells it. The whole process and every touchpoint needs to be considered."

Consideration is key to MINNA's story as a queer led business. Berks spent years in digital design, an environment she considered at times homophobic and hyper-male. She quit, went into freelance, and revisited her art practice — eventually stumbling onto a weaving class at Brooklyn's Textile Arts Center that would change the course of her professional life.

"I found weaving and became obsessed," says Berks. She began producing one-of-a-kind textiles, which sold well on Instagram (MINNA is among those early successes on social media; any attempt to find its original posts feels like digging for ancient scrolls). "I knew weaving was something I wanted to pursue, but knew I didn't want my art practice to be my means of financial support," she admits.

One by one wasn't the business model of Berk's dreams; she wanted to craft functional textiles that were equally precious, but she didn't want to be a factory or work with a factory whatsoever.

"I looked into artisan production because I wanted to make bigger pieces that I knew I couldn't make," Berks recalls. "I took two trips to Central America during that time — Mexico and Guatemala — and met the first groups who would become some of our longest standing partners."

In Mexico, where much of MINNA's collection is crafted outside of Oaxaca City, a family workshop of weavers turns Berks' designs (often inspired by Feminist art and the Bauhaus, but also traditional crafts and vintage textiles) into items like cotton throws, tea towels, and runners. In Uruguay, the country's largest network



of women-run co-ops produces hand-spun yarns for MINNA's fine wools; meanwhile, a family-run co-op of weavers and knitters crafts Alpaca wool high up in the Bolivian Andes.

MINNA's latest collaboration, in Guatemala's western highlands, is with a cooperative of women who've upended a history of male pedal loom weavers in the town of Cajolá; here, women were traditionally backstrap loom weavers, a less commercially viable craft, but have taken up pedal loom weaving to level the field.

"I think being queer creates the opportunity to ask 'why' more often," nods Berks to her approach. "It's made me look at what running a business means and sometimes flipping it on its head. It's challenging the status quo and making sure even if it's 'always been done this way,' we're trying to find a better way to do it."

Berk's first product samples arrived in spring of 2015 to a Brooklyn apartment that, in no time at all, bursted at the seams with fabrics. It wasn't long before she set her sights on Upstate, and in 2016, she made the move to Germantown. "It was definitely a big change but something that I'd been talking about for years," she recalls after a decade in Brooklyn. "Nothing about it felt hard, except maybe the lack of food delivery options!"

In the summer of 2017, she opened up a small storefront and studio on Warren Street in the town of Hudson. She eventually expanded, taking over an old gas station to use as a warehouse, letting the showroom focus on introducing the collection to customers and testing out new designs.

Today, Berks has her sights set on creating new designs and finally traveling in order to inspire product development. For her, it's about finding ways to work on her own terms while creating equal terms with her network of artisans. "We are providing a platform in which artisans are able to continue their craft with a promise of sustained employment," says Berks. "And thus, the craft practice is preserved through their own volition."

It's the type of work she proudly and literally wears on her sleeve — she has a tattoo of a weaving pattern on her forearm to prove it.

Find @oh_minna in Hudson, New York. www.minna-goods.com