
Stitching Stories

MIRNA RAMIREZ

Weaving takes time: one strand over the other, stitch after stitch. Exhausted fingers and tired hands are normally the result of the dedication and patience of a textile artist. Even the smallest projects can turn into weeks of slow progress, but they culminate in the satisfaction of an original hand-crafted creation.



Sarah Castellon is a mother, an artist, a storyteller, and an MFA candidate. She was introduced to textiles, specifically sewing, at a very young age. Since she was 8 years old, Castellon has been working with this media,

and she has always had a deep passion for the creative aspect and learning process of sewing. She was born and raised in the small rural town of Danville, Kentucky, only an hour away from her current residence.

Many families have special traditions they like to pass on for generations. For Castellon's family, it was sewing. Castellon says, "My grandmother, Louise Reynolds, was a school teacher, and when she was younger her job in the family was to make everyone's professional wear . . . she would make these incredible, perfectly tailored garments and whip them out like it was nothing . . . we had to take classes while we were living at her house, and one of those was sewing."

It is beautiful to nourish a skill you were taught from a young age as Castellon did. "Me and my sisters had to learn to sew. They learned it and it was fine, but for me, I never stopped sewing." She was able to grow her abilities, which has allowed her to be successful in her professional career as a designer. She has been inspired to continue her education and she would like to hone such skills and apply what she has learned to her career. Castellon notes, "For my grandmother it was suits and garments and my mother was more of a textile artist who would make the craziest quilts, really out there . . . I feel like I am somewhere in the middle."

There are multiple types of artists out

MIRNA RAMIREZ

there who create in different mediums. A textile artist is someone who uses their technical and design skills to create a variety of designs for fabrics that may be knitted, embroidered, woven, or on patterned surfaces. These artists are able to combine textiles to create different textures that demonstrate their creativity. Most fabrics are then used for toys, packaging, furniture, and carpets. In the fashion industry, artists create fabrics for clothing, accessories, shoes, and handbags, among other things. From personal experience, I can say that embroidery requires a thoughtful process, from picking out which colors and threads to use to choosing stitches that would work best for the project.

Similar to her grandmother, teaching is a major motivation for Castellon. She's been teaching workshops for children and adults so that they may also learn to sew. Soreyda Benedit Begley, her dear friend and colleague, praised Castellon for being super talented in her work and having an amazing work ethic. Begley says, "Sarah is very driven and motivated for her family and herself." Castellon has been teaching her own children to sew. She says, "From the time they were in preschool, they have been learning to hand sew with paper needle and thread." Her next plan is to teach them how to use the sewing machine. Plushies have been an encouraging motivation for her five-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son.

Begley is from Honduras but has lived in Lexington, Kentucky for many years. She has known Castellon since 2008, after they met at a "Fairtrade Week" event. At the time, Castellon was an undergraduate student. Since then, their professional relationship has turned into a wonderful friendship. Even when they went on separate paths, they have made it possible to reconnect on multiple occasions. They combine different strengths, which is why their teamwork is very successful. Begley says, "Sarah has the vision and dedication, and a wonderful work ethic". When you combine that with Begley's past experiences in the work field, her public relations skills, and the passion she shares for the craft, you get an unbeatable team.

Begley shares that there has never been a sense of competition; in fact, they have taught each other different aspects of the



STITCHING STORIES

art. They also help one another by sharing opportunities, contacts, networking, and showings, which are very important in this career.

Begley mentioned that when her three children were much younger, Sarah used to help her watch them backstage when she had showings. Now that Sarah has children of her own, the roles have swapped and Begley helps Sarah babysit her two beautiful children.

Another child of Castellon's, figuratively speaking, is The Storyteller Studio, a home decor and custom shop where Castellon creates blankets, quilts, scarves, socks,

beanies, pillows, and much more. She began this project in 2017. During the Covid-19 pandemic, she kept her business alive through social media, mainly Instagram @thetorytellerstudio. Presently, Castellon has been more focused on her education and the art focus of her business.

The name for the business came from Castellon's main goal; storytelling through her textile pieces. She puts a lot of thought and specific details into the storytelling component to it. For example, she is very purposeful with the materials she chooses and how she builds everything together. Castellon tries to emphasize a sustainability



MIRNA RAMIREZ

message that she likes sharing with her audience. Similarly, the family dynamic is very important to weave in as well, including the passing down of sewing and quilt making as a beautiful tradition centuries-old.

Castellon believes there has always been a storytelling element to it. She says, “My grandmother is from Olive Hill, Kentucky, which is also the hometown of Tom T. Hall. He is a musician who is known for his lyrics that are very storytelling driven. He is nicknamed “The Storyteller.” All these small connections motivated her business name, The Storyteller Studio.

Castellon has constructed multiple beautiful, textile creations. Her favorite piece is “The Mountain Quilt.” She says that this quilt was made out of denim and recycled blue jeans. In fact, when looking at the quilt closely, you can see how she was able to piece both clothing textures together. It is beautifully put together and we can see why it is named the mountain quilt, as it reproduces the landscape of mountains and a clear blue sky. She exclaimed, “it will always be my favorite because it took a lot of time and dedication and it’s a very special piece.”

Castellon has also created multiple pieces for *The Tusculum Review*, which will go in hand with the 2023 Poetry Chapbook Prize winner Kelly Gray’s brilliant poems. This was a really neat opportunity that

Castellon wanted to be part of because, “I love writing, and I love poetry, so I was very excited to be part of it, but in a different way, being able to bring my part to it.” Most of her pieces for the chapbook were inspired by California landscapes. She included her ideas for a water design, an embroidered prairie piece, and two abstract designs that were knitted, focusing on how the texture and color convey emotion. It was a mutual agreement of Gray and Castellon to focus more on natural landscapes: Castellon wanted to let the colors and textures do the work of evoking comfort and warmth. She really enjoyed working on these pieces because she was able to be creative about how to approach each work.

Embroidery can be a challenge; it requires much focus and time to make multiple stitches work together in unison. After many accidental needle sticks and pokes, it is mesmerizing to see the final products of embroidered pieces that include landscapes, portraits, and flowering details. Different types of stitches have different levels of difficulty. In one of the pieces Castellon created for Gray’s poetry chapbook, *The Mating Calls of a Specter*, she used embroidery to make the setting a prairie. She used a chain stitch to illustrate the sun and birds flying by. She also uses a stem stitch technique to create the prairie grass. The background of the piece gets a blue color from the jeans scraps that are

STITCHING STORIES

pieced together to create the blue sky.

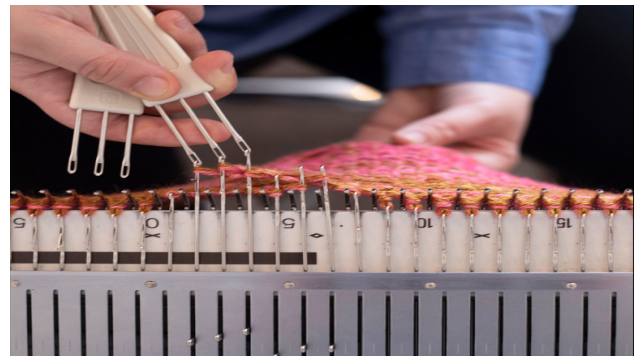
Through all of the celebrations and struggles, her husband Adalberto Castellon has been there to support her. His family is from Chihuahua, Mexico and Nayarit, Mexico. She and her husband own a barbershop in Louisville, Kentucky. “It’s his brainchild and Storyteller is mine but we both have helped each other through the process,” Castellon says.

Castellon’s main goal with her artwork is to advocate for those artists and crafters who are unaccounted for. There are multiple textile artists that are not recognized for the work they do. She said, “Many are brushed off as a hobby or a craft, when there is an insane amount of talent to show.”

Castellon and Begley have a reoccurring event called “Future Fashion.” The first event took place back in 2009. According to Begley, it came from a vision of wanting artists to support one another, with no room for competition. “We were trying to go against the common stereotype of jealousy in designer fashion.” The event is an attempt to change the culture to something more along the lines of mutual help, hence the name Future Fashion as an advancement in the field of being inclusive to all artists of different backgrounds. Begley envisions this as not just for appearance but to showcase the beauty of diversity. This past year, Begley and Castellon celebrated the seventh anniversary of Future Fashion, the fruits of

twelve years of work and dedication.

Currently, Castellon is in her first year of the Masters of Fine Arts program at the Hite Institute in Louisville, Kentucky. Since she lives in Louisville, it has been convenient and accessible for her. She has high hopes of getting through her program and accomplishing many great things while taking the time to focus on her art and practice. Castellon plans on pushing herself out of the box of commercialism. She truly believes she will always be a designer but she would like to venture out and see what other amazing things she can accomplish. She would also love to continue teaching and work on her art advocacy.



Mirna Ramirez is a '23 Tusculum alumna researcher of Environmental Science. Her nonfiction piece “Blessings Upon Blessings” was published in 2022 in the first volume of *Sit Lux* and won the 2022 Curtis and Billie Owens Literary Award for Nonfiction. “Injustices: Big and Small” was the runner-up for the same award. In 2023 her poem “Tio Chemo” was published in the latest volume of *Sit Lux*. Her future plans are to publish her works in progress.