Interview with Paola Anziche

Where did you grow up, and where do you live now?

I grew up in Milan, Italy, and later moved to Frankfurt am Main, Germany, to study. I'm now back in Italy, dividing my time between Milan, Turin, and my studio in the countryside.

Moving between these places is an important part of my practice. I'm interested in the different ways we inhabit a territory, from the density of the city to the slower rhythms of the countryside. Each environment offers a different perspective and influences the way I observe and work.

Were textile crafts passed down in your family?

My mother and grandmother were both tailors, so textiles have always been part of my family history. For almost twenty years, however, I deliberately kept them out of my artistic practice. I needed to distance myself from a world that was so familiar to me in order to find my own language.

At the time, I didn't see textiles as part of my artistic research. Only later did I realise that I could return to this family heritage and approach it differently, connecting it to my interests in natural materials, ecology, and traditional knowledge.

My practice is not exclusively textile-based. I also work with ceramics and ecological photographic processes. I'm interested in materials not only for their physical qualities, but also for the histories and relationships they carry.

My research often begins with journeys and encounters. I explore how people work with the materials available in their surroundings and how craft traditions evolve over time. I'm not interested in reproducing techniques exactly as I encounter them, but in understanding what they can reveal and how they might inform my own practice.

Ecology is central to this approach. I try to avoid synthetic and polluting materials, paying attention to their origins, transformations, and connections to the environments we inhabit.

You studied at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts in Milan and at the Städelschule in Frankfurt. Was textile art part of the curriculum?

Not at all. I knew very little about artists working with textiles as an artistic medium. It was something I discovered on my own, by following my curiosity.

I began travelling to South America for artist residencies because I wanted to learn more about weaving. Meeting Indigenous artists and encountering different textile traditions made me realise that techniques cannot be separated from the people who practise them, their histories, and their relationship with the environment.

When I returned to Europe, I began researching the Lausanne International Tapestry Biennales, among other things. I discovered how artists had challenged the boundaries between textiles, craft, sculpture, and contemporary art.

Discovering this field independently allowed me to approach it without a fixed idea of what textile art should be and to develop my own perspective through research and experience.

Your research often begins with journeys to places where traditional textile practices are still alive. What do you look for during these encounters, and how do they influence the way you work when you return to your studio?

I don't travel simply to learn a technique and reproduce it in my studio. What interests me is the encounter itself: meeting people, observing their gestures, and understanding their relationship with materials.

You cannot fully understand a traditional weaving technique by observing it for a few hours. You need time to ask questions and, whenever possible, share part of people's everyday lives. I'm interested not only in how something is made, but also in why a particular material is used and what knowledge is embedded in the gestures involved.

When I return to my studio, these experiences rarely translate into a direct reproduction. They remain with me as questions and new ways of looking at materials, sometimes influencing my work only much later.

I prefer to work without planning everything in advance, leaving room for unexpected developments. I also exchange ideas with collaborators from different disciplines, including anthropology, archaeology, and botany. These conversations help me discover connections I might not have noticed otherwise.

My practice develops through an ongoing relationship with material culture, ecology, and the territories we inhabit. Rather than following a rigid long-term plan, I prefer to remain attentive to what happens around me.

You describe your approach as a "personal, reinventive process" when reinterpreting traditional techniques. How do you negotiate the balance between preserving inherited knowledge and transforming it through your own artistic language?

I wouldn't say that I'm trying to preserve these techniques. Sometimes I transform them, sometimes I use only certain aspects, and sometimes I decide not to use them at all.

Although my mother and grandmother were both tailors, I never learned to work in the precise, methodical way they did. Tailoring follows specific rules, whereas I tend to look for shortcuts, alternative solutions, and different ways of doing things. I like experimenting with the tools and materials available to me.

Perhaps I needed this freedom in order to return to textiles. Because they were so closely associated with my family, I first had to establish some distance from that world. Only then could I approach it on my own terms.

I'm interested in what happens when inherited knowledge meets my own experience and curiosity. For me, tradition is not something fixed that must be reproduced exactly, but something we can question, reinterpret, and transform.

Before discussing your work with textiles, could you tell us a little more about the different materials and techniques you use in your practice?

My practice includes textiles, ceramics, and ecological photographic processes based on chlorophyll. I move between different materials because each offers a different way to investigate a subject.

In recent years, I've become particularly interested in what I call *micro-worlds*: small ecosystems and the ecological relationships that develop within them. I'm drawn to the

interactions between living organisms and their surroundings, and to the complex connections that often escape our attention.

Observing these small worlds allows me to reconsider the relationship between humans and nature. It encourages me to look closely at processes and forms of life that may seem insignificant but are part of much larger ecological systems.

I don't see materials simply as tools for producing objects. They are part of the research itself, and their qualities often guide the direction of my work. For me, making art is also a way of observing, discovering connections, and developing a deeper awareness of the environments we inhabit.

Natural fibres are central to your practice. What attracts you to these materials, and how do their qualities shape the sculptures you create?

The first raw material I worked with was sheep's wool in Azerbaijan. I was struck by its strength and resilience, and by its structural qualities before being processed by the textile industry.

This experience made me think about how humans have transformed materials found in nature to meet their needs. From plant fibres to animal products, these practices reveal much about the cultures that developed them and their relationships with the environment.

When I work with natural fibres, I try to understand their qualities before deciding what they should become. I pay attention to their resistance, flexibility, and structural possibilities, allowing the material to guide the process rather than imposing a form from the beginning.

The sculpture emerges through an exchange between my gestures and the material's response. I can guide the process, but I cannot completely control it. This unpredictability is an essential part of my work.

You use the expression "seeing with the hands" to describe your approach. Could you explain what this means to you?

For me, "seeing with the hands" means understanding a material through touch, observation, and experience. It is a form of knowledge that develops through repeated gestures and sustained attention.

My mother has worked with textiles for sixty years. She can recognise a fabric simply by touching it, and by looking at it, she immediately understands how it should be cut or sewn. Her knowledge is embodied in her hands and eyes; it comes from decades of experience and an intimate understanding of materials.

I find this fascinating because it is a kind of intelligence that cannot be acquired simply by reading about a technique. You need to handle the material, observe it, and learn from experience.

I think many of us, especially those who have grown up in cities, have become disconnected from this kind of knowledge. We often encounter objects only when they are finished, without understanding the processes behind them.

This is one of the reasons I enjoy organising workshops for students. I encourage them to experiment, make mistakes, and try again. The goal is not necessarily to master a technique, but to rediscover a direct relationship with materials and understand that working with our hands can also be a way of thinking.

Repetition and manual gestures play an important role in your work. What happens through the repetition of a simple gesture, and when does a technique become an artistic language of its own?

For me, the material generates the work and the sculpture, rather than the other way around. I don't always begin with a clear image of the final result; often, the form emerges through the process itself.

Repetition allows me to become familiar with a material, but the result is never entirely predictable. Even when I repeat the same gesture, small variations occur, and unexpected structures begin to appear.

I'm interested in the relationship between intention and unpredictability. A simple gesture can gradually generate a complex form, and the process itself becomes a way of exploring the material.

At a certain point, the technique becomes inseparable from the artistic language. It is no longer simply a means of producing an object, but an essential part of what the work expresses.

This approach reminds me of Bruno Munari and his interest in experimentation and the relationship between process and design. I'm drawn to the idea that making something is also a way of discovering it: you don't always need to know the outcome before you begin.