

Lifestyles | Fashion Culture Podcast

CYNTHIA ALBERTO Transcript

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City. Welcome to our Fashion Culture Podcast Series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion.

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES OUT]

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

The morning you open your eyes, you have to be thankful that you can open your eyes and see, "What's in my closet today. What is my joy? What am I feeling?" And that for me is how I create my style and be in that joyful place every single day.

[GROOVY MUSIC FADES IN]

I'm Tamsen Young, digital media manager at The Museum at FIT, and this is our special podcast series, Lifestyles. In this series of interviews, I am speaking with people whose distinct expression of style is outside conventional fashion trends.

We have images of our guests on our website. Follow the link in the show notes.

[GROOVY MUSIC FADES OUT]

[CALM MUSIC FADES IN AND THEN OUT]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Today, our guest is Cynthia Alberto, a multidisciplinary artist and designer and the founder of Weaving Hand, which is a Brooklyn based weaving and healing art studio and cultural center. Cynthia's interdisciplinary practice engages traditional and contemporary weaving techniques through socially engaged, community centered work. Drawing from textile histories and collective making traditions across Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa, Cynthia approaches weaving not only as a material process, but also as a framework for care, resilience and collective experience. Her work emphasizes sustainability through a zero waste ethos and spans sculpture, performance and large scale participatory installations that have taken place in cultural institutions, civic organizations and public spaces. Cynthia has received numerous awards and been exhibited nationally and internationally, most recently at the Museum of Modern Art in conjunction with the exhibition *Woven Histories, Textiles and Modern Abstraction*, and she has a forthcoming fellowship at Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens.

Welcome, and thank you for joining me, Cynthia.

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

Thank you Tamsen. I'm happy to be here. Thank you for having me.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Can you describe the outfit you're wearing today?

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

Today I'm wearing a black MoMA sweatshirt, which is very comfortable over black tights paired with Manitoba Mukluks boots. I love the pompoms hanging on the sides and a long indigo blue kantha quilt jacket, which is one of my favorites that I wear with practically everything.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

It's really striking and beautiful.

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

Thank you. It's indigo and it's made of recycled sari. Kantha is an embroidered technique in India and they make them into blankets. But I buy this from my friend who has a Tibetan store in Brooklyn. And so they recycle the blankets into jackets and what... quilts? Pillows? Yeah.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Lovely. So is this look that you have today, would you describe it as similar or wildly different as how you dress on other days?

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

For the winter, it's really more comfortable. I love the slouchy sweatshirts over tights or jeans. I like to add a flair with different jackets playing with color, shape, and texture to bring the look to a more popping fire.

[CYNTHIA CHUCKLES]

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

For spring, I'm feeling drawn to vintage denim, jeans, skirts, jackets, and worn-in pieces that carry some kind of sense of history. I just saw a lot of jean jackets downstairs at the exhibition, so that was really inspiring. So I'm bringing a lot of that out of my closet.

I'm really into neon colors right now: pink, yellow. I wear a lot of Dansko clogs and they just came out with this neon, what do you... collection, that I'm so in love with. And I'm feeling for the spring a lot of poncho. I have an incredible big selection of ponchos from the '70s and '80s, and I think I'm gonna take that out. And it's very easy to wear, you just put it on. So yeah, it varies actually day to day, but mostly at the moment I'm mixing comfortable with a little flair to it.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Do you think you have a distinct style?

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

I love the '70s, '80s, and '90s together. It's almost like when I'm putting my style together, I am layering different layers. It's mostly like a metaphor for weaving. I'm adding one color on top of the color.

One garment that I love the most, I have a big collection of Mexican pueblo dresses that I've been collecting for the last twenty years. So I wear it all throughout the season. Winter, summer... I layer it with jackets, sweatshirt. I love the embroidery, of the feeling. And I'm also on top of that embroidery and the Mexican pueblo dresses, I really love the disco era. For me, I caught a little bit of it. I was very young, but I've been to Studio 54.

[CYNTHIA CHUCKLES]

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

Like the late, late '70s. So I love sequins and gold lamé. Anything shimmering in gold, little silver becomes a staple in my wardrobe. Mixing eras feels natural to me. The past and the present weave together to create something new, which I'm very familiar with.

Comfort also lives in my everyday style. As I mentioned earlier, I wear a lot of Dansko clogs and Teva sandals. In the summertime, I live in Teva. Manitoba boots for the winter. I support a lot of indigenous communities. They are made in Canada and are very warm, very sturdy. I'm also, as I said earlier. I'm drawn to a lot of denim. Denim for me is the staple and there's so much great vintage denim. I go a lot to L Train Vintage and you can get so much stuff there for like eight dollars, six dollars. And I'm like, "Oh my God, it's treasure hunting!"

So yeah. So I think my style have definitely went up and down depending on how I feel because I also wear a lot of kaftans during the summer. I have an incredible collection of kaftans. But at the moment I'm not really wearing a lot of that. I like comfort, easy to wear. Put it on. I don't think about it. Yeah.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Can you describe the jewelry you're wearing and a little bit of the background of the jewelry?

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

Yeah. So my piercings are all 24 karat gold and they are from India. So the gold – there's a difference between 24 karat and 14 karat. So the gold is much more shinier. So I pierced my ears, like for a while now, for the last ten years from the top. So I don't take them off. I sleep with them. And then I started piercing my nose. Like every time there's like a big event in my life, I would pierce my nose. So I actually have four right now and they're all very significant.

It's the same thing as getting my tattoo on my face, and it's like a marker. The tattoo on the side temple is the crab motif from my mother's province in the Philippines. So we and my friend Ilona, she's a tattoo artist, she tattoos the Filipino community, we researched this particular place, Nueva Ecija in the Philippines, and we saw the crab and we decided we're going to do the crab. The one on my chin is really the arrows pointing to eliminate my lung cancer.

[CYNTHIA CHUCKLES]

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

So every time she's in town or I go to see her in Canada, we add an arrow on the chin to make sure that we are giving a message that, "Okay, there's another addition to the arrow." So it's always a work in progress with the chin, but I think I'm not going to put any more on the top. It's just the chin. And the one on the forehead is really a reminder of the grace that I keep on going every day to heal and thankful for my life. Yeah.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Can you talk a little bit about style and healing?

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

The healing... Well, when I started piercing myself, it was more of a decoration and the decoration of loving this piercing that is a self-expression of myself. Like this is something that I want to do. I'm not following any trend. But then, when my mother died, I wanted to remember her. So I pierced a second nose piercing. And then I come to a realization that like, "Oh, okay, this is not just really self decoration, but more of like a marker of what's going on in my life."

When I turned sixty, I pierced another part of my ear— another part of my nose. So it's really the nose that I'm adding on. So I have five now. When I got diagnosed with cancer, I pierced another one and I'm waiting for my remission to pierce...

[CYNTHIA CHUCKLES]

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

Another one of my nose pierced. So yeah, I think the piercing and the jewelry really comes hand in hand, like they are markers of my life. And my life is not really... I'm not waiting for it to happen. It's happening. And every time I touch them and I see them, it's a reminder that I'm still here.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

As you describe the jewelry, the tattoos, your clothing, what becomes apparent is a tapestry of global cultures, of clothing and techniques and traditions from all over the world. Would you agree with that sentiment? Is that deliberate?

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

The Museum at

Yeah. I think ever since I could remember, I love all the representation of different cultures all over the world. Just starting with the Philippines and the textiles, the craft, and that crosses in different cultures, be it in traveling to Panama or going to Mexico or going to Europe. There's definitely a tradition of crafts and their dresses, their jewelry, and the indigenous people or the clothes they wear. I've always been attracted to that. Yeah.

There's like— when I was younger, it's always, “Oh, okay, I'll buy this.” Never really an understanding or like realizing that it's been around for a long time. So there's a lot of talk and me, a better understanding of appropriation. So when I wear things now, I am very conscious and very aware, like where it's coming from. So when somebody asks me, I could explain to them, these are made by women from India. They are kantha jackets, this has been around for a long period of time. There's a history to it. Yeah.

So I like that I am more aware of where things are instead of just picking something and adorning myself without re... just like taking. So I have become more aware in the last ten, fifteen years of putting things and [being] respectful of other cultures that I really love and want to put on myself. Yeah.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Do you think that comes out of your lifetime of weaving and learning about weaving techniques?

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

Yeah, definitely. I think realizing... Well first of all, I graduated from FIT in 2000. So this is where I learned how to weave. So, there was definitely a process where you learn how to. But I didn't learn much that there are so many weaving traditions all over the world. So I have to research that for myself. So when I finally started doing it, I realized that like, “Oh my gosh, this is big. This is not just like learning at an art school or at FIT. It's a livelihood that people are doing.”

It's all over the world, you know, all the continents. Africa has their own weaving tradition. So I think that it definitely have influenced me into respecting cultures and traditions.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

How did you come to weave? Did you just discover a class here at FIT or...

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

No. When my daughter was about a year and a half, I decided to go back to school and I always wanted to become an artist. I always say this. I wanted to be an artist, but I didn't know how to get through the door. And I also wanted to get a degree because I feel like I— back then, I couldn't say I'm an artist without any degree. There's that distilled gatekeeping element.

[CYNTHIA CHUCKLES]

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

“What do you study? Oh, you're an artist or you're a self-taught artist. You're not really taking it seriously.” So I said, “Let me go and get a degree.”

So when I got to FIT, I didn't declare my major and they just said, “Well, you're gonna be with the weaving group”. So I decided, “Okay, I'll be in the weaving group!”

And then that's how it kind of started. I'm a weaver and I didn't really think much about it that I would be doing this, like as a livelihood or part of my artistic journey. So it was a beautiful accident.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Love that. How long have you been dressing in this bricolage style?

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

Okay. I mean, I always have loved fashion. I mean, I remember in my teens, we'd go to thrift shops in Hoboken with my friends. Like you could buy something for like, two dollars, the pointed shoe. There's a lot of vintage back in the beginning of the '80s, but I always loved fashion. I'm always interested in it and inspired by it and... but becoming more, what's the word I'm looking for? Not caring what other people say. That's it.

It's like I would... I shaved my head in the '80s, wore a big safety pin in my head, and my parents and my brothers and sisters are like, “You're crazy.” I was going through my punk era, like, really like punk. Stephen Sprouse, neon, Patricia Field, Reminiscence, all of that, like the '80s in New York was so full of inspiration for me. And so, a real collaboration where people are really expressing themselves, like full on without not a care. So from then on, I kind of just moved from era to era and started taking in dressing the way I wanted. So coming from punk and then the '80s where like the big shoulder pads, Norma Kamali, and then the '90s were like tights and like midriffs. So there's always the trend, but then I'm always making sure that it's my own personal style.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Do you think your current style has a relationship to your creativity, to your work, to your weaving?

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

I think so. I think my style... I like to dress the things that I love because I feel like I have my own creative flair. And it doesn't have to be a fifteen hundred dollar pair of shoes.

[CYNTHIA CHUCKLES]

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

Or like, eight hundred dollars! It could be two dollars from the L Train Vintage or like Housing Works and I'll put it on and I feel like a million bucks and I'm just like, "Yeah. This is the creativity."

And I think that in our society right now, there's so much emphasis on the cost of things. Like if you don't have a Balenciaga, I mean, there's nothing wrong with that, you know, and it's not... It's just an observation for me, but I think personal style and creativity goes hand in hand that it doesn't have to be the price, but how you style it yourself and the confidence and the essence that you have as a person would really show that, "Yeah, this is you."

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Do you wear things that you make?

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

I do, yeah. I wear... I started crocheting. So that was really, I'm actually learning how to put more technique in my crochet. I'm crocheting scarves, I weave fabrics. Yeah. More wearable art. Yeah.

I love the fact that I could make something out of my hands. I always say to my students when I teach weaving that it's good to learn how to weave because when the lights go out, you can always weave and make your own clothes.

[CYNTHIA AND TAMSEN LAUGH]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So, do you choose any of the clothing that you wear for any ritualistic or spiritual purpose?

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

Yeah, there is definitely... because I'm an animist. Okay, so there's definitely different rituals that I perform with myself and my healing and also connected to the Philippine traditions of healers. And it's very personal. I don't do it with anybody. I do it for myself and also for close friends. And in my altar, there's definitely lots of textiles and totems and amulets and that's on that table.

But there's definitely one necklace that I wear all the time and a scarf that I wear when I'm performing a safe cleansing, which I do like when I'm feeling something.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Finally, do you have any insights about a life of making things that you'd like to share with our audience of creative people?

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

The life of making things, I think... Just don't be afraid. I think don't be afraid to try things. I think it's a very exciting time for crafts right now, arts and crafts. Arts especially. I think art right now is really important for people to come together as a community, to express one another, and to be in community is really healing right now. So don't be afraid to show yourself because that's your essence. It doesn't matter. Don't care what other people say 'cause I grew up in that... coming up as a young person in that time where we really didn't care what other people say. I do, I wear what I want, I go wherever I want to go, and I think that's something exciting for young people or for everybody to say that your life doesn't start when you go on vacation, but it's ongoing.

The day you open your eyes, the morning you open your eyes. You have to be thankful that you can open your eyes and see, "What's in my closet today? What is my joy? What am I feeling?" And that for me is how I create my style and be in that joyful place every single day.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Thank you so much for joining us, Cynthia.

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

Thank you so much, Tamsen. Thank you for inviting me. Thank you.

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

If you like what you hear, please share your thoughts on social media using the hashtag fashion culture.

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES OUT]

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

Like my, my kids are like, "I'm feeling, uh, something is in the room."

[CYNTHIA LAUGHS]

[CYNTHIA ALBERTO]

And I'm like, "Okay, let's, let's do it. Let's put on the sage and let's just kind of like..." And I would take out that, that particular necklace and that scarf. Yeah.