

THE MODERN

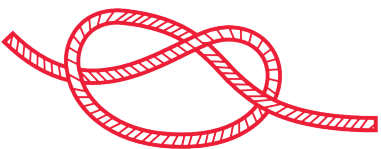
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MAKER



FEATURING **JULIE MAESELE**



Behind the glass garage doors of her home in the Vestavia Hills suburb of Birmingham, Alabama, Julie Maesele sits at her sewing machine stitching bits of fabric into shirts, pants, dresses, and jackets. She creates each piece of every garment in her emerging fashion line herself, from conjuring up and cutting out patterns to making and remaking samples until they match the designs in her head. It's painstaking work, but her studio feels like anything but a sweatshop.

Inside it's airy and inviting, with sunshine streaming into the room, French pop music playing through a speaker, and birds chirping through an open window. Brightly colored furniture, potted plants, fashion books, and crayon drawings mix with spools of lace, bins of leftover fabric, clothing racks, and an industrial steam iron.

"Making things makes me happy," says the Belgium native, who launched her first fashion collection for women a few years ago after moving to Birmingham with her husband, Antenor Lodewyck, and their children.

Their home in the tranquil neighborhood of Cahaba Heights is a world away from the bustling streets of Belgium, where boutiques and fashionistas cover every corner, but Julie finds that freeing. "It's liberating to be away from all the trends, because there is more room to use my imagination and less pressure to compare myself to others," she says.

"I don't want to be this famous fashion designer," she continues. "I'm just a maker, and I really love the whole journey of making. Obviously, I would like for this to be a success, but I don't want to follow the classic pattern of what it means to be a successful fashion designer."

Instead, she aims to make chic, comfy clothes that transcend seasons, trends, and events, and are durable enough to be worn for decades. This principle is part of a growing movement known as slow fashion, which takes a more thoughtful, eco-friendly approach to fashion design. Unlike fast fashion, which churns out heaps of cheap, trendy clothing at the expense of low-wage workers and the environment, slow fashion designers focus on creating limited batches of seasonless clothing that extend the life of garments.

"Going to the mall now gives me a heavy heart, because the fashion industry fools us into believing we need all of these clothes," Julie says.

"All of our clothes are made by hands," she continues. "Think about how many people have touched the clothes in your closet, about how many hands around the world they have traveled through to get there. Even when you throw them out, they're not going to disappear from the earth. They'll

go through another journey and maybe end up in a pile somewhere."

Julie fashions many of her designs from repurposed and surplus fabrics. Her collection features sleek, versatile pieces that flatter all ages and sizes, and that fit an array of occasions from running errands to an evening on the town.

"I like the idea of creating a uniform that you can wear a lot, especially when you want to feel confident and put-together," says the mom of three, modeling one of her favorite outfits—a black linen Western-inspired shirt dress that doubles as a jacket in cooler months when layered with a long-sleeved shirt and tights.

"I've always been fascinated by not following the mainstream, by people who live on the edges of society, by the idea of being wild and free, and by concepts associated with the West and cowboys," she says. She always liked the way Western wear made her feel and the persona it created for her. It was trendy in the Belgium city where she lived because people were fascinated by all things American, including the romance of the cowboy culture and the idea of "being free and living off the land."

She goes on to say that this romantic idea of the U.S. was part of what drew her and her husband here. "We were seeking adventure, and that was our whole purpose for doing it," she says. She has always been a fan of country music because of the "raw sentiment of the songs," and similarly, with fashion she wants to "touch people and evoke emotion or sentiment" through her designs.

Julie's lifelong fascination with Western wear, along with her love of color and detail, factor heavily into her designs. Though minimal in style, her shirts, pants, tunics, dresses, and jackets feature bold, vibrant touches, from hot pink piping on collars and cuffs to decorative snaps and oversized pockets.

"I believe you are what you wear, and whether you care about it or not, what you put on every morning says something about you," she says. "So you should invest in clothes you really like and have fun and experiment with it."

As a kid, Julie loved dressing up—and her mom was her fashion icon.

"She was very stylish, and I always looked up to that," she says. "She had a certain presence, and I saw how people received that. I felt the power of how you dress—it's a way of communicating."

Not only did her mom have a bold and daring wardrobe, but she also encouraged Julie and her twin sister, Stephanie, to experiment with their own styles.





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“As a teenager, we had all of these subcultures, like grunge, goth, and punk, and how you dressed was part of your identity,” she says. “I loved it. I tried them all.”

With dreams of becoming a fashion designer, Julie enrolled in a fashion university in Belgium after high school, but the pretentious scene intimidated her so much that she decided to transfer to an art and design school. There she specialized in textile design and worked in nearly every aspect of the field, except for fashion.

“It taught me to think like an artist about what story I wanted to tell,” she says. “And I always played with that. I enjoyed making rugs, because I thought it was more interesting than creating something with no function at all.”

After the birth of her first daughter, Gloria, Julie felt her old childhood dream stirring inside her again, so she signed up for a government-sponsored program to train as a seamstress.

“I knew after the first day that I really enjoyed it,” she says. “It showed me how much work it actually takes to make something. I realized the skill involved and how much you use your brain when sewing. I’m a restless person by nature, so I enjoy doing something repetitive because it calms my mind.”

Julie was shocked by the craftsmanship it took to bring designs to life—and the lack of appreciation for workers who make it happen. Working part-time as a seamstress for a nonprofit organization in a Turkish neighborhood exposed her to even more intricate types of hand-sewing, such as crochet, knitting, and embroidery. The women she worked with dressed conservatively in layers and wore hijabs, but she found that their modest sense of fashion had its own allure.

“It inspired me a lot,” she says. “They taught me this crocheting technique they use on their hijabs called oya that looks like hand-made lace, and I still experiment with it in my clothes.”

When her husband got an offer to move to Birmingham with his banking job, Julie felt like the time was finally right to pursue her dream of designing clothes. She learned about Birmingham Fashion Week and made it her goal to win the 2016 Emerging Designer competition. Her creative approach to casual wear landed her top prize, but she felt like she needed a mentor to hone her skills further.

She reached out to 86-year-old world-renowned couturier Manuel Cuevas, known as the Rhinestone Rembrandt for the iconic outfits he has created for stars from Johnny Cash to Lady Gaga. Julie asked him via email for an internship and he agreed, welcoming her into his downtown Nashville shop and teaching her the art of Western wear and embroidery, while her husband cared for her daughter and newborn son twice a week.

“Manuel is a living legend who has accomplished so much, but he still sews every day, because he loves it so deeply,” Julie says. “On days when I felt tired and ready to complain, all I had to do was to look at him. He taught me to work hard and push myself even harder.”

The experience boosted her confidence in her design instincts, in her skills, and in her resolve to launch her first clothing collection.

“Manuel used to say, ‘Sí, se puede,’ which means, ‘Yes, you can,’” Julie recalls. “I try to think about that when I sew. It means there’s nothing you cannot do or solve, so go for it.”

Today Julie juggles motherhood—her youngest daughter was born in February—with her burgeoning fashion business. Her kids are fixtures in the studio in the summer, happily working on their own creative projects and providing inspiration of their own while she sews.

“My daughter enjoys dressing up, and I love seeing how she puts clothes together and plays with all of these elastics in her hair,” Julie says. “Even my son likes to change outfits a few times a day.”

One Saturday a month, she invites customers into her studio so they can watch how she makes clothes and peruse her latest creations. Julie makes all of her pieces in white first, using them as “soft sculptures” for designing different versions of each outfit in various colors and lengths. More than making cute clothes, she aspires to create meaningful garments that customers can connect with emotionally. Meshing her passion for upcycling and storytelling, she recently kicked off a garment revival project that deconstructs outfits customers no longer wear but still love or feel sentimental about into revitalized pieces.

“They can pick a style from my collection, and I make that exact piece using fabric from a garment that has a story or significance to them,” she says.

She’s also teamed up with local stores, such as Basic, the Birmingham boutique, to create exclusive pieces for customers using leftover inventory. In keeping with her commitment to what she likes to call “compassionate fashion,” Julie hopes to eventually expand her use of recycled fabrics (seersucker is her newest favorite!) and draw more attention to the value of garments and those who produce them. That’s why all of her clothing tags include a “Made in Alabama” label with the name of the person who sewed it.

“Fashion design can feel pretentious, but it helps to know that it’s not about me,” she says. “I’m just using the skills God gave me to bring glory to Him. Having that perspective gives me the courage to be bold about it and put myself out there.” □