



“I think dance and textiles are linked because they both follow the motion of the body,” observes dancer-turned-designer Mariem Besbes. Born in Paris, Besbes’ childhood was divided between Tunisia and Paris where she studied and then taught contemporary dance. When Besbes decided to return to her native Tunisia she began work on what she explains was “the only thing I wanted to do here.” Nearly five years on, and Besbes has unearthed many of Tunisia’s near forgotten natural dye recipes.

The resulting collection of fabrics is based on the haik, a Tunisian version of the sari. Besbes explains that the large, adaptable lengths of cloth that form the haik are heavy, but at the same time transparent. “I like the idea that the haik was usually used to hide women, but (from the inside) women can see everything through it,” she explains. “That’s why I use it as curtains in my home and for clients. Nobody can see you from outside but you can see everything. It also lets the sunlight in.” Besbes works with wool because of its similarly contradictory properties, tough at first, but smooth and delicate when washed and worked between the hands. Sourced locally, she sees wool “as a material to envelop oneself in and live in much like a home”.

When asked what drew her to work with textiles Besbes can only side step the enquiry, “many times I ask myself this question!” Tunisia’s natural dye recipes “are not things that are written” she explains, making her work all the more vital, but also challenging. Initially Besbes had to track down traditional recipes by word of mouth, speaking to the older women in the community who had worked with natural dyes in the past. The rest was learnt by trial and error, from growing the plants in her garden to weaving and dyeing the cloth in her atelier.

“For me vegetal colours are like small stories,” she confides. “Stories which send me towards a memory or something we know from the past and is universal.” Her commitment to this near forgotten tradition is beginning to receive the recognition it deserves. Her textiles met with great acclaim at Maison et Objet in Paris and a small selection of her work is now available at Maiden in London. But to see the full range of her work a trip to Tunisia is in order. ●●● **Jessica Hemmings**

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