

By Vera Penéda

German-born Marianne Friese, 48, believes we should take pleasure from where we sit. Sofas, chairs, *chaise longues*, pouffs, cushions of all shapes, textures and colors can be a thrill to the eyes and the hands. Founder and designer of MaLiLian (from her Chinese name Ma Lilian), Friese's cocktail of startling materials with classic lines pushes the boundaries of custom-made upholstery equating it to "architecture in conception and alchemy in design."

Tall and soberly dressed in black, Friese lets her true colors come out on the furnishings. She sits in silk and fur on the top floor of a scruffy dark building tucked away in an old Beijing community where she's a communications consultant and sofa designer. Avid about her design, she discusses the finer

► Upholstery designer gives new meaning to comfy chair

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points of her business and inspiration.

"There was a time when I decided I wanted to cover a wall in fabric. I'm always kind of experimenting," Friese says, in a tour around her den. The bedroom wall is covered in a warm combination of reds and blueish greens. "I wanted to give this jungle feel to a room. It was a challenge to apply the fabric, [it] had to be done three times."

Friese explains why she likes Chinese fabric so much. "I really like that China has a rich history of fabric production with different weaving techniques and ingredients that include cotton all the way to silk brocade," she says. Capes made of Turkish fabric and Chinese silk brocade cover the chairs in Friese's living room. "Chinese patterns [are] very vivid with calligraphy and mythological images, making them especially attractive for foreigners and very explosive in combination with other materials."

Extravagant throne

Soft cashmeres, feathers, pure wool, Indian embroideries, Belgian lace, Mongolian felt, camel hair... Friese favors materials from anywhere in the world seldom employed in upholstery. With MaLiLian, first you want to lay your hands on it, then you want to sit. "The aim is to create a sensation rather than a sofa," she says. Each piece has a name, but the Chairman's Rest sofa made of Chinese silk and Mongolian felt or a Cashmere Kiss seat made of orange Chinese brocade silk flanked by fox fur isn't every one's ideal chair. The designer admits her penchant for contrasts.

"I'm inspired by a surface material and envision it on a piece, which then needs to find somebody who'll love it. Or somebody contacts me and says that would love to have a custom-made piece but doesn't really know how it would fit in her house or office." Friese visits the client to discuss options when people get to see, feel and talk about materials and colors. "It is also my role to suggest breaking cultural and spatial rules. I'm open-minded but the final decision belongs to MaLiLian."

Friese found a place in the furniture design business by chance and she says she learned by doing. "It actually started when I was living in LA in the 80s. I was looking for a sofa for my own apartment, I knew exactly what I wanted and couldn't find anything I liked," she recalls. A friend recommended a Mexican upholstery master to get her piece done by order. "Since then I've been doing upholstery and soft furnishings on a sporadic basis," she says. Although Friese worked with an upholstery master in Munich to learn the craft, she

never formally studied it. "I guess that my studies in advertising inspired a strong desire to apply design and trained me to think about the details that matter to please the eye and create certain emotions."

When Friese came to China in 2001 to work as a communication consultant for a US-based company she was excited about material and production opportunities and ended up producing a full container of furniture that she took to trade shows and exhibitions in Europe. "Then I stayed in China when my posting was finished. I eventually decided that consultancy and sofa designer would be an ideal combination of brainpower and passion." Friese registered the MaLiLian brand both in Germany and China, where she works with independent workshops. "Production is based in Beijing because this is where I spend most of my time. The workforce might be cheaper but project supervision and quality control demand much more time and presence from my side."

Seat cheat

"There's one funny case. A person who worked with me when I first started MaLiLian tried to reproduce one of the pieces that I have in my own apartment. I saw it at his restaurant later on. It wasn't made badly but it looked out of proportion," says Friese. "I've only seen this copy attempt. I guess most people in China think it is too *mafan* (trouble) to make these type of pieces."

Competition is also hard to access, says Friese. "MaLiLian pieces are individually handcrafted; they're one of a kind and make a statement. So I guess buying one is comparable to purchasing a piece of art with a design benefit, something you own and utilize," she says. Production fluctuates from 10-50 pieces a year according to orders and price ranges between 20,000 and 60,000 yuan. Although Chinese clients started showing interest most customers are foreigners living abroad.

Friese intends to step up promotion, concept and orders in China as opportunities arise. "The beauty of MaLiLian derives from not having to live off it. Life has shown me that some things you have to be open-minded about instead of planning strategically." Currently working on a project for an entire apartment in Berlin, the designer says that "expanding from a seat sensation to delivering a full room sensation is exactly how I see MaLiLian's future."

Friese renews her inspiration through traveling. Recently returned from Laos with new handmade fabrics, she plans to visit Vietnam very soon and she'll keep on going back regularly to Berlin. Fond of her lifestyle and keen to improve her Chinese so she doesn't miss out on local culture, the designer says: "It's much more interesting to be in China than in Europe at the moment, but my decision has been easy because it never meant staying here 365 days a year."

Visit www.malilian.com for details.

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