



LOVE, ZEN, & ARUBAN-INSPIRED DESIGN WITH ELISA LEJUEZ

Silkscreen artist and painter Elisa Lejuez has built her life the same way she creates a piece of art – from scratch, with curiosity and passion.

— By Amie Watson

Her paintings and silk scarves are stunning collages of bright colors, shapes, symbols, words, and numbers. Inspired by her life on Aruba, her handmade silkscreen designs often incorporate the country's sand beaches, wind, and famous rock paintings in Arikok National Park. Hints of baby blue waters, green mandalas, and terracotta figures peek out from the folds of her scarves, making them seem like a new scarf each time you wear them.

The internationally renowned artist grew up in the Netherlands with a Dutch father and a mother from Curaçao. She never thought that after completing a Master's degree in fine arts and textile design in the Netherlands and spending a year building her career in Europe, she would leave it all behind and return to her Caribbean roots. But when she married her Aruban husband, in the Netherlands, they decided to move back to his home, bringing nothing but a 14-year-old dog, two bicycles, their clothes, and a couch.

At first, Lejuez went from designing fabrics and traveling the world to waiting tables. But she re-started her career after her manager asked her to decorate the restaurant's empty walls with her brightly colored paintings. Now her career is flourishing. She exhibits her work in galleries and museums around the world, sells her paintings and silk scarves at hotels and boutiques throughout Aruba, and teaches art classes for visitors and locals. And her husband's business (the ubiquitous *I Love Aruba* brand) has since become a great success.

At her home and studio, surrounded by paintings and memories, she walked me through her collections, inspirations, and plans for the future.

How did you get your start in Aruba?

The restaurant I was working at, *Délifrance*, bought some of my paintings, and customers were asking me who the artist was. Then a local magazine did an interview with me and this businessman wanted me to put ten of my large pieces in this big restaurant called *Amazônia* that was all concrete and had no color inside. My bright blue and green pieces were really popping out. Then some people asked me to do an exhibition in Holland. And after that, I got more and more assignments.

Which hotels and buildings exhibit your works now, on Aruba?

The Marriot Hotel has a lot of art pieces, as do the Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort. Aruba Bank has another one of my pieces.

How would you describe your style?

In the beginning it was very abstract. My father was and is an artist and he painted circles, so that's my trademark. Later my style started to be more of a combination of my self-made silkscreen prints. Andy Warhol used to work a lot like that and he was a big influence for me. I use acrylic paints, but in the beginning my abstracts also had oil. I also love to work with metals, gold, silver, and copper leaf. And I love to work with things that are found, like records or pieces of books.

How do you choose the various signs, words, numbers, and symbols that you incorporate into your work?

When I paint, I often play loud music and get inspired by the words in a song. And I always



Photography: Kenneth Theysen



count in my head before I go to sleep. That's just me: spontaneous, colors, numbers, words – totally mixed media.

What else inspires your work?

I love to work in themes. My last exhibition in New York was about Zen Buddhism, about walking your own path in life. So I had some art pieces about labyrinths, I had the Buddha, and I had meditation. Zen is my inspiration in life. Here in Aruba, I go to the beach, I meditate. I often go to Grapefield Beach, because the houses are so colorful and they are built from a mix of recycled woods. I have one piece, made of driftwood, where almost everything was found on the beach after a storm.

How else does Aruba influence your work?

I did a wall piece in Aruba's Historic Museum as part of an exhibit called "Weaving History." In Aruba there was a big weaving industry that had to do with the Panama or Aruba hat. Traditionally, the mother of the family would weave those beautiful hats. In the first room of the exhibition, you see pictures that have to do with that history. In the second room, there's modern weaving, like a hammock – hamaka, as we call it in Aruba. And the third room features weaving done by four modern artists in Aruba, including myself. I don't do traditional weaving, but I weave patterns into each other. My piece is

called "We Only Weave the Surface" because you needed the ocean to have your industry of Panama hats and 95% of the ocean is still not discovered. So I tried to show only the surface. For me, the ocean has different meanings, so I painted one hundred and fifty to two hundred wooden boxes, one by one and placed them like an installation against the wall and on the floor. Every box has a little piece of the ocean: found objects, silkscreen pictures that I took at the beach.

How long will the exhibit be open?

It opened in March 2016 and it will be on for a year. It is open to the public.

How do you design your silk scarves?

I treat fabric like I'd treat a painting. I use my art piece on the scarf or I use paper sketches that I made. I used to make tank tops, dresses, skirts, bikinis – very tropical things – but now I'm more into silk scarves, which I sell at T.H. Palm & Company at Playa Linda Beach Resort, the Ritz-Carlton, Aruba and the Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort. The silk is digitally printed in very limited editions. For my first collection, I designed ten scarves and printed ten repeats of each. So there were one hundred scarves in Aruba. After three months, they were already sold out. I did a repeat of the collection and it sold out as well. I just uploaded my latest collection.

It's going to be about Aruba. I'm really into the native rock paintings that you can find in caves, like the Guadirikiri Cave. You walk in and see all those beautiful paintings in white or terracotta colors. They're from a thousand years ago and they were the first Caribbean art form expressed by natives who were living here in those days.

Do you offer workshops or special events?

Yes, sometimes. For example, I had this art dinner in my garden. The tables were full of art, they had a private chef, and I had a private fashion show during the dinner. The company that had asked me to do it was so excited that they asked me to do it again. It gives me a lot of satisfaction to see how people can appreciate working on an art piece. Some people have never held a brush and they really relax and enjoy it. In the future, we want to do something in my garden where people can meditate and paint.

Have you ever worked with your husband?

Not on art pieces, but we help each other. The basic thing in our relationship is that we both love art. He used to be a graffiti artist, many years ago, here in Aruba. He was paid by a company to do it with some friends. I dedicated my first art piece to him. I have another one in our kitchen that I dedicated to him after twenty-five years together. It's our whole life: our three dogs, two kids, his first love letter, the day we met.



Locations

Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort | Lloyd G. Smith Blvd. 55B | Eagle Beach

T.H. Palm & Company at Playa Linda Beach Resort

Juan E. Irausquin Blvd. 87 | Palm Beach

New York City | www.sohotelartspace.com

www.elisalejuez.com