



BREEDING CULTURE

ERIKA DALYA MASSAQUOI:

+ THE OULA COMPANY

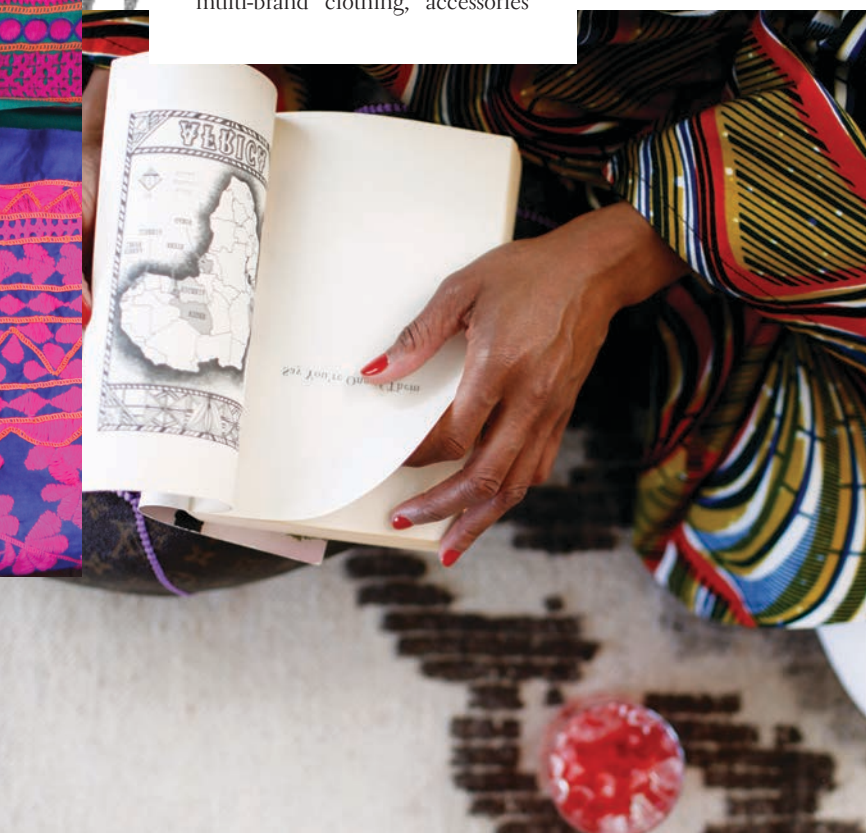
BY KERI BRIDGWATER





“Driven by intellectual curiosity and creative interests, I’ve always walked to the beat of my own drum,” says Erika Dalya Massaquoi entrepreneur, designer and founder of The Oula Company. Determined to tell the rich story of African wax fabric while staying true to her own style, OULA is a genuine reflection of Massaquoi. “Born and raised in Miami I consider myself a true Florida girl so the brand’s resortwear concept – kaftans, ball skirts, and flip flops – really reflects my kind of ‘dawn-to-dusk’ lifestyle.” Specializing in small-batch global textiles, OULA (named after her great-grandmother, means will and determination) is Massaquoi’s multi-brand clothing, accessories

and homeware line designed and produced in her current hometown of Seattle, Washington. Heritage fabrics and modern batik prints from West and Central Africa are used across the coveted collection of kimonos, dresses and tunics—silhouettes are inspired by American sportswear from the 50s, 60s and 70s—each garment a piece of wearable art. “I love African textiles and have collected them for a while. My grandmother, mother and mother-in-law also gifted a lot of traditional fabrics to me... I always said if I was ever going to start a business I would do it differently, so here we are!”



With a deep-rooted appreciation for the arts and global culture Massaquoi’s background is equal parts creative and academic—she enjoyed a glittering career in New York, earning a Ph.D. from NYU and working as an on-air correspondent at Oprah’s *Oxygen Media* and commentator at *NPR*, in addition to curating shows at museums including *The Whitney*, *List Visual Arts Center*, and *Studio Museum* in Harlem. The self-professed “academic creative” also lectured at Yale on the film studies program and as an Adjunct Professor at NYU before relocating to the Pacific North West with husband Joe and daughter Luba in 2012. “By the time we came to Seattle I’d already worked in a wide range of disciplines across the creative spectrum—visual presentation, exhibition design, photography, fashion. This foundation meant I wasn’t afraid to take on the challenge of starting a company. I had the chops to run the show from a business standpoint, but also direct creatively with my own vision.”



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OULA's first micro-collections, born of R&D trips to Ghana where Massaquoi studied authentic wax fabric and batik, sold out instantly at pop-ups around Seattle in 2015. "I knew exactly what the silhouettes would look like, the prints, and the colors," she explains, "the great thing about being here — because I'm old school and scrappy, New York style—is that I called around to seamstresses and factories myself to get things set up." For Massaquoi it's a passion and a joy to create for OULA. "I live 20 minutes from the factory and go there every day working on designs, pattern making, cutting, and overseeing production." With her megawatt smile, Massaquoi's radiant personality shines through in each collection. Massaquoi says the

beauty of OULA is its versatility: she up-styles with luxury pieces (think Marni, Prada and faux fur) or pairs-down with velvet Pumas and a Comme des Garçons jacket for an edgier feel. An avid viewer of *Style With Elsa Klensch* at 12 years old Massaquoi knew she wanted to experience all these things first hand. "Growing up poor in a large family I didn't start traveling until graduate school and came to a lot of stuff late in life, but always knew I wanted to be an entrepreneur and feel blessed I now get to share all these experiences with my daughter. Traveling to New York, Nairobi, Mexico, taking her to shows, watching her grow into this global citizen is incredibly rewarding and empowering."



An Aquarian and keen yogi, Massaquoi also enjoys channeling her creative sensibilities into family time. "In my next life I'm coming back as a chef! I learned a lot from my grandmother and mother-in-law, who wrote a cookbook on African food, so I make dinner about four nights a week. I've been a bookworm all my life too, so when I'm not working I'm reading." An early riser, she works before her family wakes, meditates, makes lunch or does homework with Luba, before heading to yoga. "I miss and thrived off the New York energy, but there's more balance in our lives since moving to Seattle. There's a very different approach to living and it's been a blessing to raise a family and build a business here."

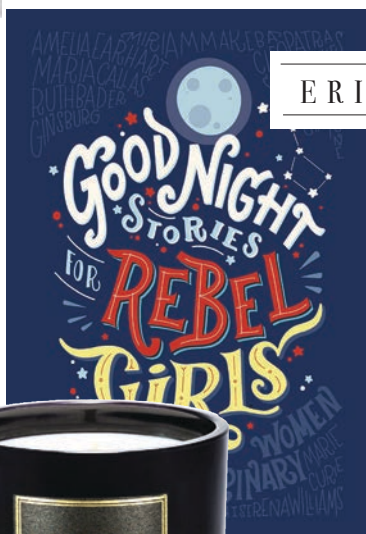
Commercially, Massaquoi says she her biggest challenge is learning how to balance time when she can't be everywhere at once. "I spent a month studying textiles in Guatemala last summer but need a great sales rep who can go to trade shows, and be on the road building and maintaining relationships with vendors." Massaquoi, who just returned from a long-anticipated family and business trip to her husband's homeland of Sierra Leone, plans to diversify production with newly printed fabrics, designs and repeats based on textiles from her own collection, plus new finds from West Africa. The trip also marked the start of a partnership with *Schools For Salone*, a nonprofit that works with local com-



munities to construct schools and improves education in Sierra Leone. As an accomplished and passionate academic, wife and mother, incorporating education, innovation, and health for women and girls through her work with The Oula Company is Massaquoi's most valuable mission.

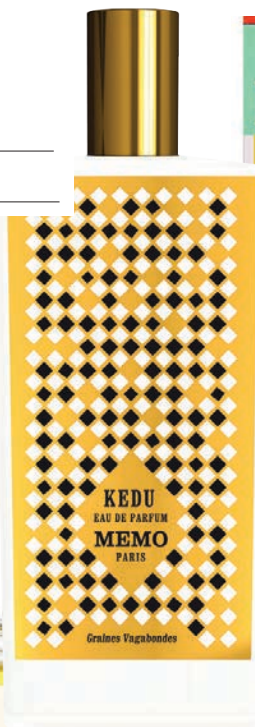
ERIKA'S FAVES

Right now I'm reading Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls



Candle burning in studio is Arabian Oud by Lumira

My go to scent is Kedu by Memo Paris and 1000 by Jean Patou



My favorite music is by Michael Kiwanuka

