

AN ARTIST'S DREAM

VERMONT TO SAKS FIFTH AVENUE

BY Patricia Morale
PHOTOS PROVIDED BY Althea Bilodeau



Designer Chris Benz and Althea Bilodeau

PHOTO BY TIM SINK

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY CHRIS BENZ

In a fashionista's dream come true, North Chittenden artist Althea Bilodeau's fiber arts have been embraced by popular New York City designer Chris Benz, and her hand-dyed silks and hand-crafted wool felts have been used in his collections for the past several fashion seasons.



The rack in Chris Benz's studio showcases the felt jacket featured in Saks Fifth Avenue.



Scarf of hand-dyed silk chiffon and merino wool fiber

Her artwork was also featured at Saks Fifth Avenue, a pinnacle for any artist or fashion designer. She exclaimed, "Chris Benz is an awesome designer; he uses all the same colors I love, and I completely relate to his design aesthetic: my life shifted the moment we began collaborating."

Just two short years ago, in a dream story of being "discovered," a member of the Chris Benz team happened to be in Brandon and spotted Bilodeau's fiber art at the Brandon Artists' Guild. She tried to contact Bilodeau. But Bilodeau was in no position to recognize the op-

portunity, as she was consumed by personal hurdles, including losing her home to foreclosure, enduring a painful divorce, and learning the serious medical diagnosis for her teenage son. "I couldn't even answer the phone calls," she said. "I was overwhelmed at the time, and I was getting ready for the New York State Sheep and Wool Festival, but after the third message I finally returned her call." The partner had seen Bilodeau's scarves, but she wanted to come to the studio to see more of the artist's work. Bilodeau was afraid she would not have time to prepare since her studio was in disarray preparing for the show, but Benz's representative replied, "We understand about messy studios — we own a fashion line!"

During the initial conversation, Bilodeau answered questions about feltmaking. "I talked to her like she was another fiber artist planning to make her own felt and garments," Bilodeau explains. "Then she said, 'Oh, I'm not the designer. Chris Benz is the designer, would you like to see his website?'" Bilodeau opened up the website and basically "flipped" realizing how big this opportunity could be. In reviewing the colors and designs, Bilodeau said, "Obviously she had the same



Pieces of silk dyed for Chris Benz

thought I had — that our aesthetic was similar."

During this same time period, Bilodeau received a call from the Brandon Artists' Guild reporting that one of her pieces — a felt bag

— had been purchased by a woman from Alaska.. It was then she felt, "I'm in the vortex." Now she is so busy she rarely has enough back stock because her pieces sell out.

Bilodeau had only a few items to send with the representative to New York. Later, she went to New York City with more samples. The studio was under construction, "so I spread out all my stuff on the floor and I thought to myself, 'this is so cool, such a fairytale opportunity,' and then Chris Benz remarked to me, 'at least I'm not going to have to worry about color.'" This is the ultimate compliment from this fashion designer, who was recently referred to as the "Prince of Color" during a cameo appearance in an episode of the television series *Jane by Design*.

At the time, Bilodeau had a lot on her plate. "I remember telling my friends, 'I'm going to burst,'" she said. She took home some of the studio's fabrics to work on, while at the same time dealing with treatment for her son and her other personal challenges. Then in another break, the company called because some fabric the studio had ordered from France was suddenly unavailable, so they asked if she

could dye some silk for them. "I dyed five pieces of silk and they loved them all," she said.

Benz created three dresses out of the fabric, which can be seen in his Fall 2010 collection. Bilodeau was invited to attend the show, and the dresses made of her silk were a big hit. Benz had so many orders that she dyed 120 more yards in her kitchen! "I knew I had to get it right all in one shot, because they sent me all of their fabric, so I didn't have a second chance," she said.

As a bonus, Bilodeau got to meet and mingle with some stars at the show, including Susan Sarandon and Kelly Osbourne. "This was the moment when it became clear to me; this was the most exciting time in my life," she said.

Next, in his Fall 2011 collection, Benz introduced Bilodeau's hand-felted wool in a blouse, which became the biggest selling piece of the entire collection. In Benz' Resort 2012 collection, a jacket made entirely of her felt was featured; this is the piece that was made available at Saks Fifth Avenue.

Bilodeau grew up in Schodack Landing, New York on a self-sufficient farm, which included a flock of prize-winning fleece sheep, but laughingly explained, "I was not into farm life at all as a teenager; I was into Barbie dolls, makeup and fashion." She added, "My mother is a well-known weaver and fiber artist, and was my first and most important teacher."

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Chris Benz and his design assistant, Martha, and Althea

Bilodeau later studied weaving, garment construction and costume design at SUNY Albany. She has studied felt-making under a series of international instructors from Finland, Germany, England, Australia and Japan. As a parent, her children became interested in sheep, and together they raised sheep in the 4-H program and joined the Rutland Area Lamb and Wool Producers (RALWP) group. She taught both her son and daughter to felt wool, as well as the other 4-H members, and renewed her passion for fiber arts. A fellow RALWP group member encouraged her to apply to the Brandon Artists' Guild. Bilodeau was juried in, and then began to teach felting classes. She joined the Northeast Feltmakers Guild, and now serves as its co-president and Vermont representative. She is also a founding member of the North Chittenden Women's Art Collective.

Bilodeau sells her wearable art designs — clothing and accessories — at regional shows, festivals and galleries, including the Edgewater Gallery in Middlebury. Success has caused her to reduce her hours from her full-time day job at Rutland Regional Medical Center — but she is very pleased about that. “I remember when this all started building, I had a friend tell me ‘you are not an old oak tree; you are not going to break — you are a willow; you can bend,’ and I have been bending ever since.”

Patricia Morale has been writing since her days as an editor at her high school newspaper. She lives in Pittsford and freelances for regional monthly publications, mostly in business and Vermont-related subjects. She has her degree in Journalism from the University of Colorado at Boulder.




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