

FASHION

# MIND *and* MATTER

Rita Nazareno's handwoven accessories are known for their robust build. But their tough exterior only scratches the surface of their construction. What gives the objects their true depth and breadth is their full-bodied shape reflecting Nazareno's lively imagination that remains unfettered by convention.

By TIN DABBAY





## On Stillness

Atop a tree house, 10 minutes away from Waikiki, Rita Nazareno is brimming with vitality as she breaks her year-long quarantine in the Philippines. "I would've never thought of spending almost a year [in the Philippines] with my parents or my nieces because I was always traveling. And, my god, it was such a gift to be able to do that!" she chimes.

She has no plans of returning to the big city yet—not while the virus is roaming unattended. Instead, she's staying in Hawaii to empty all that was and take in what's new with little regard for what-ifs. Her life has always been punctuated by alternating residencies and short pilgrimages—from spending her formative years in the Philippines and Hawaii to moving to Los Angeles and London in pursuit of her ambitions.

In between her meanderings, she always meditated. In 2018, she visited Hiroshi Sugimoto's Enoura Observatory in Japan to engage with art and spirituality. "That time was actually full of contemplation for me," Nazareno confesses as she shares an image from that trip where she's bald-headed and garbed in a black robe. "I usually shave my head off in certain moments of my life. In my twenties, after a breakup, during my chemo [for breast cancer], and during my sister's chemo." Once, Nazareno even joined a self-guided silent retreat in San Francisco where she struggled to restrain her speech for three days—an ordeal she recreated during the lockdown. "It was kind of driving me crazy, so I did this self-guided three days of silence in my room... I was studying the Abundance Meditation and reading *Stillness Speaks*... I think that gave me a different direction for the rest of my quarantine."

## On Design

Blending industrial design and philosophy has stamped her work with a seamless and genderless allure that still feels evocative and personal. The ZACARIAS 1925 "Be bags," for instance, are visibly feminine with their swelling curves that approximate the fleshy folds of the vulva or a tropical fruit that's ripe for eating, but their spheroid structure held by sturdy walls also suggests qualities of virility. All things considered—the bags invite people to form conjectures, which makes the buying experience generative.

Nazareno's meditative approach to creativity extends to her leadership. This manifested when she confronted the economic downturn brought by the pandemic. "I think that's where awareness and mindfulness really helped. Things were changing and it's okay. You need to adapt to it, and you need to be flexible. Even if we have a deadline—certain factories were not even working so we need to give time to people... and also hope," she says.

When she found herself in the right headspace, she resumed her collaboration with Gabby Lichauco called *ITIM: Material Manipulations in Black*, which was originally intended for Milan Design Week. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the presentation was canceled, but the show went on in Manila through a physical event in Aphro Living and an online gallery at [fameplus.com](http://fameplus.com). Together with other designers, Nazareno expressed how the absence of color can highlight texture and form. Her entry used black to visualize a monolith-inspired bag made from wicker, steel, and leather.

She believes the principle that good design should be universal and unburdened by preachy intellectualization; it should be experienced, not explained. "Provenance comes secondary but is also very important," she says. For ZACARIAS 1925, it means creating something personal out of her grandmother Segundina's workshop, S.C. Vizcarra. After careful planning, she built a new company named after her grandfather, Zacarias, whose wood carvings, embroidery,



and calligraphy spurred the brand's inception. "There are similarities between the two, but ZACARIAS 1925 is its own voice," she says.

## On Life

Interesting stories riddle her pronouncements, like how the immigration officer from her last flight asked, "Where do you live? You travel a lot." It's a question she struggled to answer because she could list a number of places she calls home including Los Angeles and San Francisco. As an Emmy Award-winning television producer, she could've even chosen to retire in L.A. But as Milan Kundera wrote: "life is elsewhere," and Nazareno is the kind of person to chase every elsewhere.

This gives her creative practice diversity. "It's very personal, and I think that's why I travel so much. I don't think I could see being stuck in wherever I was. That's why I was always moving and had this nomadic view in life." Usually after zigzagging, she connects the dots and comes full circle. Case in point, she collaborated with Korean artist Haegue Yang after seeing her installation in an abandoned train station years ago. It resulted in the exhibition, *The Cone of Concern*, which was recently held at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design. It explored the notion of solidarity among those facing difficulty through Yang's anthropomorphic sculptures.

It's an apt metaphor for the present especially that Nazareno has learned to cope with the pandemic by connecting with loved ones, and most importantly, with herself. She says, "I find that I'm more... it's not even relaxed, but I'm more playful. I'm just okay with life. You know what I'm saying? I'm hoping that there's always that wit and playfulness in the bags that I do," she notes.

She quickly mentions some books (e.g., *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* by Dan Millman), films (e.g., *Provenance* by Amie Siegel) and chants (e.g., Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō from the *Lotus Sutra*) that I jot down as if they're prescriptions. "I don't want to say it, but there's this energy that I get from things," she laughs. Despite her sheepish admission, the message resonates—thoughts become things so she sought a path that honors the union of mind and matter.