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Art & Craft, Profiles

## THE CREATIVE WORLD OF AROUNNA KHOUNNORAJ

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By Michelle Woodvine

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Evidence of the maker's hand is present in everything Arounna Khounnoraj creates. The organic shapes and soothing, saturated colours of her work—prints, bags, tools, books and more—embody a sense of serenity that recalls the dappled sunlight of a quiet summer afternoon, when, just for a moment, life seems simpler.



Arounna studied sculpture in art school; her husband, [John Booth](#), studied painting. But making a living in the art world isn't easy, so in the early 2000s, they decided to create [Bookhou](#), a business and retail platform that would allow them to combine their evolving art practice with handmade goods. It wasn't long before Bookhou (both a portmanteau of their last names and a playful nod to the French word *beaucoup*) evolved into a showcase for their multidisciplinary talents. Today, in a world fixated on mass production, Bookhou takes a slower, more deliberate approach to making.

*“We wanted to create a business that focused on the handmade—things that aren't mass produced, things that were designed differently, uniquely, so that you really sense the maker in the pieces.”*

(This interview has been edited and condensed for length and clarity)

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**Michelle Woodvine:** I first encountered your work through your popular social media posts where you share detailed process videos in a diverse range of creative crafts and mending techniques. What inspired you to share your work in this way?

Arounna Khounnoraj: I first started blogging in 2005 as a way to express my daily process—I figured that if it was something I was interested in, then other people would probably be interested as well, so I got into the habit of working and making and then sharing that process—and people really enjoyed it.

When I went to art school, it was almost like you were forced to stay within a certain niche, like, if you were working with sculpture, you shouldn't be drawing or printing, and I thought that was restrictive to my creativity. I like the idea that we can express ourselves in whatever medium we want and however we want. That's why I started doing the videos—to show that all these different processes are interesting and that you don't have to put yourself in a certain niche.

**MW:** You describe your work as “mark making.” What is mark making and how did it capture your interest?

AK: Mark making dates to prehistoric times. It's the idea of expressing yourself with your body and not your mind. You're either using a tool that creates certain marks or you're doing certain actions to create lines and drawings without sitting there trying to replicate something that you see. So it's not drawing with what you see, it's drawing with how you feel.

Artists like [Brice Marden](#) create amazing work this way. He used things like branches that had been burned—like charcoal—and he did these big drawings with them. It's a lovely way of working because you get marks that are not so conscious, you know? You don't have any kind of expectation of, "Oh, this has to look like this," or, "It should look like that." You're not thinking about it. It mimics that idea of how children and babies draw—they're not thinking about things. They're just moving their hands and going with their gestures. That's why we are always so attracted to kids' work, because they're so free; they're not self-conscious about it.



**MW: Who were your creative influences as a child?**

AK: Growing up, my mother was always making textile goods. When we came to Canada [from Laos], she worked as a seamstress, and we didn't have a lot of money, so she made all our clothes. I remember she crocheted these little sweaters for me—she made pretty much everything except shoes. Unlike the consumerism of today, it wasn't about making to show off your creativity or to run a business; she was making things out of necessity. So for me, growing up it wasn't, "Let's go buy this," it was, "Let's make it." Growing up like that, you naturally make things because it's an extension of who you are. Also, when you're a kid, you get to express yourself in different ways because you're not feeling the pressure that you have to make a living out of it. I feel that sometimes now, and I think that's why I create the videos on Instagram, because it's something different—a break from plugging away at what I'm doing every single day.

It's like... I eat a lot of Altoids mints, and they come in these great little tins. I wanted to do something creative with the tins, but everybody sticks things to them and covers them, you know? Then my husband had this idea to drill holes into the lid and cross-stitch it. I thought "Well. That's kind of crazy...[yeah, I'll do it!](#)" I'd never make that as a product, but it was nice to take a break from production work and do something like that—to challenge myself.



Arounna's book [Visible Mending](#) (2024, Quadrille Publishing) combines practical mending techniques with creative embellishments in an easy-to-follow and lushly photographed guide to repairing, renewing, and reusing textiles.

**MW: Your work has a wonderful freeness to it—a sense of playfulness and curiosity. You mention in one of your videos that you find inspiration all around you. What advice do you have for creatives struggling to find inspiration?**

AK: That's a tough question because everybody's work is different. When I think of freeness in my work, I think that, even though I'm engaged in traditional types of craftwork, I don't feel confined to draw or make things in a certain way. When I draw, for instance, I might be referencing actual botanical samples that I've collected, but I draw in a way where I make a lot of things up, making strange combinations and patterns. I think this comes from adopting the habit of drawing daily, for no purpose other than just to draw—and usually not digitally, so mistakes are part of the end result. Try different things like drawing or making patchwork or embroidery samples with no end goal in mind. Eventually, the work will suggest a possibility.

I feel like that's the thing with creativity: It's not just about feeling inspired. It's also about challenging the different things that you can and can't do. Not everything will be successful, but some things will, and that's the whole point of it. You'll won't experience that if you never try something different.

**MW: With all the demands of a busy life, it must be hard to find space in your day to make room for a creative practice. How do you do it?**

AK: Finding the space is really hard, especially if you have a family and you're trying to run a business. I always have ideas—my mind is constantly working—so it helps to do things like sketch booking. There are so many things around us that can be inspiring. It could be something as simple as watching a movie or looking at fashion or interior design magazines. It could be the colours, it could be the shapes, it could be so many different things. Eventually, you develop a database of information in your sketchbooks that you can pull from.

When I used to teach university, I always told my students, if an idea doesn't work out, shelve it, and then look at it later with fresh eyes. What's great about having that database is that you might not use it at that moment because it doesn't fit with whatever you're doing, but then when you look back at it with fresh eyes, you assess it in a different way. You have to develop a way of processing ideas so you can look back and reference them. Nothing's wasted.

Another problem with creativity for some people is processing—organizing all those thoughts and ideas. It's like decision paralysis. I get that too—I'll be visiting Japan and I'll go to this amazing store, and I want to buy everything, and then I get so overwhelmed with so many choices that I end up buying nothing. I think that's what happens with creativity

—people want to do so much that they end up doing nothing. I always tell people that if they're really stuck, do a daily project, or a weekly project —something small that helps them stay focused and learning something new.



**MW: What sort of work gives you that little extra creative zap?**

AK: A couple of things. I've always been interested in a wide variety of creative directions, and so too, there are plenty of different artists that I find inspirational even though they might do work very different from me. Getting out of my own mindset and contemplating (or stumbling upon) different mediums or ideas can open doors in your own work in ways you might not have foreseen. That happens in a similar way when I'm working on my books, and different projects take me to places I wouldn't normally visit in my daily practice—especially since the books quite often embrace a wide variety of techniques and materials. Also, having to explain steps in a clear manner makes me reflect on how others will engage in the work as well.

**MW: What's next for you and Bookhou?**

AK: I've written six books so far (the most recent, *Winter Celebrations*, came out last fall), and I have four more in the works, so we're thinking of pausing the business for a little while so I can work on them. I'm working on an extension—or continuation—of my *Embroidery* book, then there's a block printing book, a housewares sewing book, and a continuation of my *Contemporary Patchwork* book.

To learn more about Bookhou, shop the retail store, and explore the wide variety of creative workshop opportunities, visit [www.bookhou.com](http://www.bookhou.com). Follow Arouna's creative adventures on YouTube [@bookhousedesign](https://www.youtube.com/@bookhousedesign) and on Instagram [@bookhou](https://www.instagram.com/bookhou).

*All images courtesy Arouna Khounnoraj*

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#### **About Michelle Woodvine**

Michelle Woodvine is a Toronto-based freelance writer and editor on a quest to never stop learning and making. When not wordsmithing for others, Michelle can usually be found working on her trilogy of speculative fiction novels, learning a new skill, or goofing around with her family (including her very own rocket scientist, two teenage boys, and one feisty ginger cat). Follow the weird, wonderful, and wordy adventures [@woodvinewrites](https://www.instagram.com/woodvinewrites) or visit [www.woodvinewrites.com](http://www.woodvinewrites.com)

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