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SUPER YAYA — Beirut

FASHION

PICKING UP THREADS

After Beirut's devastating port blast, Rym Beydoun has returned with a new collection and established her own atelier, even more determined to make the most of the city's skilled artisans and vibrant creative community.

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The steep, wide roads of Dohat el-Hoss, an elegant neighbourhood to the south of Beirut, are dotted with family homes painted in the same shade of dusty pink as the sky at sunset. It is here, away from the hustle of the Lebanese capital, where you'll find designer Rym Beydoun's top-floor apartment, which looks out at the neighbouring Doha Hills. The young creative, who was born and raised in the West African city of Abidjan before moving to Beirut, has turned this light-filled space into a creative sanctuary. Having suffered injuries during the blast in the port of Beirut in 2020, she recently returned to the city to press restart on her fashion business, Super Yaya. After convalescing for nearly a year, it was time to reconnect with Beirut's creative community, work with its skilled artisans and debut her new collection.

"Beirut has changed following the blast and the financial crisis, so I found more balance by taking some distance from the centre of the city," says Beydoun, who used to live in the lively Gemmayze neighbourhood. She now wakes up to

views of the Mediterranean from her balcony and spends time sketching new designs from a modernist wooden desk covered with Japanese sketchpads, personal memorabilia and design literature. "I can draw inspiration from books, old photos I keep on this desk or what I want to wear myself: it's very intuitive," says Beydoun of the deeply personal design process behind the Super Yaya collections.

Like the brand, her new home reflects her creative interests. Items sourced from Ivorian artists stand next to oil paintings that Beydoun created as a child, while floor-to-ceiling bookshelves feature everything from literary classics such

1. Rym Beydoun and collaborator Makram Bitar
2. Pictures that Beydoun keeps on her bedroom mirror for inspiration
3. Sketches on the walls of the Super Yaya studio
4. Memorabilia from inside Beydoun's desk drawers
5. View of Beirut from the designer's home
6. Large, whimsical bows, a Super Yaya signature

as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* to copies of *Marfa Journal*, the avant-garde publication that Beydoun's friend, Alexandra Gordienko, founded when the two were studying fashion at London's Central Saint Martins almost a decade ago.

It was in London that Beydoun began shaping her identity as a designer. But a decision to spend a year doing work experience in Abidjan's local factories and small tailoring studios (rather than following the more common path of an apprenticeship at one of Paris's heritage houses) is what paved the way for her own venture. Having spent much of her early childhood there, her family has had a base in West Africa for more than three generations. Returning as a student felt like a true homecoming. "That year also made me realise that I wasn't so interested in just designing garments," says Beydoun. "What I wanted to know was the purpose and meaning behind them. This is why Super Yaya pieces are now always connected to Ivorian craft traditions or my own lived experiences."

Beirut has also inspired the brand. "Here, you are surrounded by so many people who have such refined taste," she says. "You never feel overdressed because it's part of the culture to dress up. I can wear whatever I want without feeling self-conscious."

Super Yaya's aesthetic is defined by elegant signature pieces, such as Capri pants, shirts and twist dresses. Beydoun always adds new dimensions to these silhouettes with bold touches, be they large satin bows appliquéd on draped evening dresses or ruffled trims added to the hems of slim trousers. "Every country has a dress code; it's less about climate and more about the spirit of each place," says the designer, thinking of an Ethiopian aunt in Abidjan who blends traditional dress with quirky, contemporary items such as brightly hued Crocs. "I've been able to draw from my travels and create an aesthetic that a lot of people from different backgrounds see themselves wearing."

The traditional West African *bazin* cotton is at the centre of every Super Yaya collection. It would have been easier to

source luxury fabrics from European mills but Beydoun is committed to handpicking rolls of cotton from Abidjan's markets as a means of introducing her international audience to Ivorian traditions and starting cross-cultural dialogues. "I've always been interested in the way that local people used this fabric to convey different messages," says the designer. "If a woman in Abidjan thinks that her husband is cheating, there's a print to suggest, 'I'm watching you'. Or if you attend a specific church, you would wear a trend associated with it." With more than 60 ethnic groups living in the Ivory Coast and so many different languages, fabric is something that can unite people.

She goes on to redevelop the *bazin* fabrics in her Beirut atelier, using handcrafting techniques that she adapted by trial and error to create textured garments. By employing a smocking technique and inserting elastic, for instance, she transforms everyday cotton into a material with the texture of popcorn that can stretch to adjust to the body. "Here, there's always about three times more fabric than required for a

standard piece," says Beydoun. "The idea is to push the boundaries with craft and create something noble from everyday fabrics."

It took more than two years to find a Lebanon-based manufacturer who could execute such painstaking techniques and, more recently, Beydoun decided to set up her own atelier, hiring some of the tailors and artisans she had collaborated with to craft her designs in-house.

Her new space, in Beirut's central Clemenceau district, is now buzzing with energy: when *Konfekt* arrives her head of atelier is cutting pattern after pattern, while others are ironing, sewing or weaving elastics into cotton. On a design table in the middle of the action, Beydoun and her team create new woven patterns: "I used to do everything on my own," she says. "This is the first time I find myself with a team."

Last summer she completed an order for three custom-made dresses for a San Francisco-based weaver who is planning a Tuscan wedding. Her international customer base hails from as far away as Japan, Mexico and the US. "Age doesn't



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matter but it’s usually a working woman who loves to dress up, look sophisticated and at the same time feel quite comfortable.”

Though Super Yaya is almost a decade old (it started as an online platform selling ready-to-wear clothing for which customers could choose their own fabric prints), everything came to a halt after the Beirut blast, which left Beydoun bedridden for months. But true to the resilience that the Lebanese have historically been known for, she used this enforced pause to spend time with her family in the Ivory Coast, to crystallise her vision, and expand her creative scope to other projects, which included designing interiors for some of Abidjan’s new cafés.

“Life was just slower so I decided to put fashion on hold and explore other creative mediums,” says Beydoun, who recently collaborated with the Köln-based knitwear team LeoRosa. “It was interesting to come back to the brand with a different approach, making sure that there are always different conversations going on.” The ready-to-wear collection marking her

“I envision establishing a design practice where we can create clothes and accessories but also art and other objects. I’m as interested in making a sofa as I am in making a pair of trousers”

brand’s relaunch is aptly named Recovery and debuted in January. True to her autobiographical design style, Beydoun channelled her need for comfort and calm after her injury into elegant shirt dresses, cotton overcoats and muted colour palettes. “I got all my retail partners back,” says Beydoun, who has built long-term partnerships with international retailers such as Canada-based Ssense and British luxury retailer Matches Fashion. “It’s not true that if you stop for a season you become instantly forgotten.”

Alongside the joy of returning to design and setting up a new home and atelier in Beirut, also comes the daily reality of living with Lebanon’s collapsed banking system

and, as a result, seeing friends and family fleeing abroad. But there are also those who, like Beydoun, choose to stay put. Driven by their love for their country they are restarting their businesses, employing local people and keeping the energy of the city high, despite government-level failures. “Working with the current banking system makes life a lot more difficult but I still felt that it was necessary for me to be here,” says Beydoun, gazing out at the Mediterranean from Sporting Club Beach, one of her favourite spots in town, along with the romantic Casablanca restaurant and the family-run café and bar Internazionale. “I’ve spent too many years investing in the city to abandon everything.”



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As she drives with *Konfekt* along the Corniche to Sporting Club Beach, where crowds of elegant beachgoers are gathering for lunch (fresh fish and countless plates of mezze are served), she looks enamoured by the beauty of her surroundings, snapping pictures with a wide smile, as if she was discovering the place for the first time. “Just the landscape of the country and waking up near the sea is such a privilege,” she says.

Later in the day, she usually gathers friends in the Mar Mikhael neighbourhood for coffee – a creative circle that includes musician Charbel Haber, hotelier Olivier Gasnier Duparc and stylist and longtime collaborator Makram Bitar. The warmth and sense of camaraderie found in Beirut’s social circles is another reason why creatives like Beydoun remain committed to their hometown. “It really is one big, happy family,” says Gasnier Duparc, wearing a Super Yaya T-shirt with the slogan “La Famille” printed on the front.

Against the odds, this creative group collectively makes a point to enjoy life’s everyday moments, stay active and support

each other’s many new ventures, from Beydoun’s forthcoming collection to Haber’s new record and Gasnier Duparc’s soon-to-open guesthouse, in which a room will be named after Beydoun and feature one of her artworks. Given the unstable climate that they have all learnt to exist in, they operate free from industry rules and external expectations, naturally setting themselves apart in the international creative space and continuing to intrigue the world.

Beydoun personifies this free-spirited approach, emerging from her recovery with one-of-a-kind designs and a commitment to working beyond industry norms. Her

chic shirt dresses, printed cotton fabrics and charming bow embellishments are bound to brighten up a rather homogenised fashion scene but she is also looking beyond clothing. She has taken commissions to design the interiors of private apartments and three outposts of Ivorian speciality coffee chain Café Continent in Abidjan, and will also soon be launching a series of bags in collaboration with tableware brand Gohar World. “It’s eye-opening to work on these different projects,” she says. “What I envision is establishing a design practice where we can create clothes and accessories but also art and other objects. I’m equally interested in making a sofa as I am in making a pair of trousers. I just want freedom.”

Liberty of expression and independent thinking have always been woven into the very fabric of Beirut. The continued presence of creatives such as Beydoun is helping the city to maintain these values and, against the odds, to remain a centre for design, new ideas and defiant *joie de vivre* for the world to watch. ——— κ