



THE VOICE OF THE SEA

MORE THAN EVERY OTHER BREATH WE TAKE IS THANKS TO ALGAE. QUIET, DISCREET AND SILENT, THEY HAVE FOR OVER 3 BILLION YEARS BEEN A VITAL FACTOR FOR ALL LIFE ON EARTH. IN VIOLAINE BUETS WORK IT GIVES US AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE.

Violaine Buets favourite alga is the edible *Saccharina latissima* (sugar kelp). A strong seaweed. Here in the studio it gets dyed with cochineal, indigo and various plants.

"For me, working with seaweed is primarily about communication. I want us to open our eyes to the significance of seaweed for everyone's survival: by making it visible and giving it a rightful place, its voice can direct us towards the next step for our civilization."

Violaine Buet lives in Brittany, near the sea. The wind was up the day we met in September, with spume cresting the sea waves and the smell of washed up seaweed on the shore. Violaine's studio, in Auray, is filled with the aroma of these seashore finds. She gathers the seaweed she needs with utmost respect for its survival and welfare. There are only a few hours when low tide allows her to go out and harvest.

– I love walking on the rocks and being with the sea and its vegetation. It is mighty and I so respect the power seaweed represents. It tells about the earth and transforms that narrative for us. For me it is important to be part of the whole process, from selecting each piece of seaweed to the point where I have followed up and made something of the intention conveyed by the material.

Back in the studio, work proceeds. Some of the seaweed gets bleached in a gentle chemical process before being dyed, natural coloured seaweed can be dyed in its original state and other seaweeds are kept natural. These ancient sea plants readily absorb the rays of sunlight cast through the window. Natural seaweed colouring combined with indigo blue, a sharp cochineal red, yellow, turquoise and green obtained from different plants. To the touch, seaweed feels like human skin: soft and smooth, a little rubbery, warm yet cool – alive.

– While seaweed is sustainable to work with, it is fragile from an ecological perspective and this fragility is what probably tells us the most, Violaine pointed out.

Violaine has used seaweed in many different techniques. Laid out

on the table were small weaves with intricate patterns, some with indigo resist dyed weft. Some have been gilded. A cut repeat pattern produces the feel of sophisticated leather craft. She knits and braids with it, creating both small and large installations. Seaweed formed the weft in a belt she wove recently. The belt has both functional and ritual aspects. "Worn around the waist, it is placed between earth and sky".

The different species have specific characteristics, shapes and sizes. In Brittany alone there are over 700 species of seaweed. She mentions *Saccharina latissima*, a strong seaweed with wavy edges. It is the one cultivated in Finistère as a foodstuff.

Violaine Buet is an industrial designer, trained at ENSCI, the École Nationale Supérieure de Création Industrielle in Paris. It was during her subsequent seven years of living in India that her interest in textiles awakened and for a while she worked with block printers in Bangalore. In 2016, on her return to France and Brittany where she grew up, she did a one-year textile course at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (EnsAD) in Paris. That was where she came across seaweed as a viable material.

– I felt immediately that I had found something I wanted to explore further. I was captivated by the material as such, by its material nature and properties. And its personality. For me, seaweed holds deep, tacit knowledge grounded in billions of years of existence on earth. It is mighty. Primitive in one way and incredibly advanced in another.

On the course she encountered weaving. The loom in her studio had



Below left Violaine Buet wearing a macramé piece made out of 3 big kelps, featured at the exhibition *Future of Fashion* in September, Museum of Bourgoin-Jallieu, France. **Right** A small weave with piles of algae.

"It's a bit like leather, like a hide. It is something akin to a mixture of plant and skin, even human skin. The feel is soft and a little tough. It is very sensitive."

been set up for a weave with weft consisting of fine strips of seaweed.

– Being able to work with this primordial material in a slow technique like weaving feels very right and natural. And it takes time. We live in a noisy, frenetic time. Seaweed as a material and used in a craft like weaving can serve as a counterpoint – an opportunity for much needed calm and reflection.

Violaine Buet has participated in several exhibitions, showing larger and smaller work. She has been featured in trend forecaster Li Edelkoort's *Trend Tablet* and has several exhibitions and collaborative projects lined up. Collaboration with different craft practitioners, designers and artists is important to her. Her previous role as an industrial designer, where she managed projects and coordinated various competences, serves her well.

– I can see seaweed being used in different techniques; partly in what we see here, but also in connection with glass, metal, ceramics and basketry. I can see seaweed incorporated into fashion, interior design and art. I am dreaming to work with the living arts; especially with dancers, scenographic, and costumes.

Over the past two years Violaine Buet has been collaborating with German artist Julia Lohmann, both of whom are part of an inter-

disciplinary group of makers specializing in the sustainable use of seaweed, *the Department of Seaweed*. She would like to explore other countries' traditions and contextualize them in a way that appeals to that particular place. Japan is high on her wishlist. A country where the sea, craft and tradition are all significant and where algae are of great importance, not least in cooking.

– But, she emphasized, for me it is not about launching consumer products based on today's economic thinking. When we talk about environmentally friendly production and switching to sustainable consumption, it often means that we carry on as before, with the same large-scale production, sending freight all over the world and furthering overconsumption.

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If we are ready for it?

Coming exhibitions: Violaine Buet will show a large range of samples at the exhibition "La Manufacture: a Labour of Love" commissioned by Li Edelkoort, 9 September–8 November in Lille. violainebuet.com



Above A woven belt as a tribute to the Samish people, a culture living close to nature.
Below left Algae with a golden surface. **Middle** A piece of folded algae. **Right** Dyed stripes of algae, like ikat.



ALGAE/SEAWEED

Seaweed = larger species of marine algae and certain phanerogams.

Algae produce more than 50% of the oxygen in the atmosphere. Because of climate change, pollution and human exploitation of the sea, their existence is now threatened. For example in the Baltic Sea, ever decreasing salinity can have detrimental effects on bladderwrack and thereby upset ecosystems.

Algae are found and used worldwide: as food, as fertilizer and curatively. There are different species of algae in different places and some algae are what we commonly call seaweed. In Brittany, algae/seaweed is mostly grown for eating. Along the coast seaweed is harvested on a large scale and it is in Finistère, where Violaine grew up, that she finds much of the algae she uses. Microscopic algae, the phytoplankton, are what generate half of the atmosphere's oxygen.

On the few nights when the summer light is at its brightest, millions of sperm and eggs are released into the Baltic Sea. Bladderwrack reproduction is governed by the phase of the moon.

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algae (French algue, from Latin alga, 'seaweed'), Algae, collective term for several groups of single and multicellular organisms that can photosynthesize and live in moist environments, that is, both the sea and lakes, as well as ponds, ditches, damp soil, wet rocks and snow. They range in size from the microscopic – most species – to 60–70 m in length. Of the currently known living species, around 40,000, some 8,000–10,000 can be found in Nordic aquatic environments.

