

GAME CHANGERS: ANGELA MEDLIN

Appetite for instruction

After a career that has seen her working for global brands such as Nike, adidas, The North Face and Levi Strauss & Co., experienced performance apparel designer Angela Medlin has taken a well-earned creative sabbatical in 2017. During her time away, she has founded the Functional Apparel and Accessories Studio (FAAS), an education programme that she will deliver in collaboration with the Pensole Footwear Design Academy and the Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), both located in the US state of Oregon. It gives her the opportunity to engage in one of her main passions: helping the next generation of young designers to reach their potential.

At what age did you realise you had a talent for design?

As a kid I had the ability to sketch things and make clothes for my dolls. I think most girls think about those things and do those things, but it was something that stayed with me. I wanted to get an education in it. When I graduated from high school I had a few different options, including scholarships to different schools. I was encouraged to take the engineering route by my mom. I had a scholarship and entered college as an engineer, at least for the first semester. But then I decided to follow my heart and go into design. That's when I switched over to the school of design at North Carolina State University. I focused on apparel design and textiles, working in partnership with both the school of design and the school of textiles. After taking direction from a couple of my professors, who saw the raw talent I had, I started to narrow down my focus to apparel.

What was your route into the apparel design industry?

My first job in the industry was in California with Cross Colours, which was one of the first urban design companies that was really successful. That's where I got started. During my time with Cross Colours I was visiting Portland and I met [adidas global creative director] Peter Moore. We talked about what I wanted to do and he told me to go back to my work with Cross Colours. He said in about a year he would want me to come to adidas. I thought it was just a conversation, but a year later they brought me up for an interview and that's how I entered into the performance apparel industry.

A creative sabbatical has allowed Angela Medlin to focus on projects outside of the performance apparel design industry.

 Angela Medlin

Where did you go from there?

Adidas was the first active apparel company I worked for. Four years later, I was interested in starting a hockey-inspired clothing line launched by some professional hockey players. It started off in a good way, but after a year they ran out of money. After that I went to Levi Strauss in San Francisco. It was an opportunity for me to explore something different: denim. The category that I was going into was more like a start-up business so it gave me the opportunity to learn all the different parts of the business. It was an amazing experience for me.

How did the partnership with the Pensole Footwear Design Academy come about?

I think it was serendipitous. When I started working at Nike [in 2015], one of the first questions people asked me was 'Do you know D'wayne [Edwards, founder of Pensole]? I felt like I needed to meet this person because everyone kept asking me if I'd met him. Two years later, I still hadn't met him.

I wanted to do something more involved with the community, but I wasn't sure what it was. I decided to take a sabbatical to figure it out. A month after I left Nike to start my creative sabbatical [at the start of 2017], I was introduced to D'wayne through friends. He told me everybody had been asking him if he knew Angela Medlin. We went to lunch and we talked for an hour about our history and what we wanted to do with the next generation of designers in terms of mentoring, teaching and sharing our own experience. He asked me to start an apparel programme [at Pensole]. I said yes because it sounded like the most natural thing to do.

This course starts to complete the circle of product creation [at Pensole]. You now have footwear, colour and materials, and apparel, as well as an educational component about branding and product management. It's like a real-life scenario of what happens in the industry, which students would never get in college. It could be extremely valuable to up-and-coming designers and to brands, who don't have to spend the time training people to understand what the design process is. It seemed like an amazing serendipitous moment.

What sort of things will be on the teaching programme for the Functional Apparel and Accessories Studio?

One of the things we felt needed to be understood up front was what product creation actually is and what it means to be a designer in the product creation chain. Students in the FAAS will partner with footwear students and work together as if they are in a company and are working with product management, developers, branding partners and graphic partners. The



Ms Medlin's partnership with Pensole will see her work alongside the academy's founder D'Wayne Edwards, who featured in the March/April 2017 issue of WSA magazine.

 Marcus Yam/Pensole

number one priority is to teach the process and the language of being in this type of scenario.

We will also teach what it means to develop products; the whole development calendar, working with cross-functional partners, working with manufacturers, textile mills, and what those conversations sound like. Also, the understanding of colour and materials and why you would like to use certain ingredients in a material. We are teaching function in partnership with aesthetic. I tell my mentees that you have to design purposefully. When you design, you should be solving a problem. There shouldn't be any extra 'fluffy' parts. The whole thing should mean something. We are teaching the students to problem solve creatively.

Another thing we are working on with them is their portfolio and how to create a dynamic presentation. When they go to an interview, they are representing *their* brand because they are their brand. They need to be able to show their creative process and their understanding of the demographic of the consumer. You have to understand the math behind the equation before you present it out. The goal is for the students to show up as the full package.

Is it important for experienced industry figures to pass on their knowledge to the next generation?

Absolutely. The three founders of the programmes at Pensole have our own experiences in the industry and they are pretty deep. We were intensely interested in what we were doing and we wanted to make an impact at a high level. We all took and take our jobs very seriously, and ushering in the next generation of designers is something we also take very seriously. We want to give them the tools that we may or may not have had ourselves. It is super

valuable for people to know the foundation of whatever they are doing. Whatever we can contribute from our decades in the industry is going to change somebody's life.

How has the design industry changed during your time working in it?

I've been in the industry for 25 years. When I was trying to get my first job, I was faxing my portfolio sketches to different people. Now, that would not cut it. Just showing somebody a static portfolio does not work. You have to have something dynamic, something that stands out. It has to hit the person over the head the first time they view it; you can't let them put it down. It has to have motion, colour and a story. You have to be accepted as your brand because it is easy for people to look you up on social media to decide if they want to work with your or not. There is a lot of exposure that happens before people even meet you. It's a whole different ball game now.

How has the fact that most designing is now done digitally changed things?

When I moved into a design position at adidas [in the mid-1990s], everything was still very analogue. If you needed to make a correction, you had to start a sketch completely from scratch. I had a conversation with Peter Moore about my experience working on a computer at Cross Colours and I explained that I thought it would be extremely beneficial if all of the designers had Apple computers. I said if he gave me a computer, I would prove to him how much more effective it would be. He got me a computer and for an entire season I took all of the designers' sketches and manipulated them and made any changes that needed to be made. It was a lot of work but when the season was over things had gone so well that he got all of the footwear and apparel designers a computer.

What sort of things have you been doing during your creative sabbatical in 2017?

I've been having a lot of fun. Besides the huge project of founding the FAAS, I've started designing pet products. I've created a line of designer cotton and leather dog beds and dog toys. It specifically addresses a minimalist type aesthetic. I saw the need to bring something a bit more modern, applying simple graphics to dog beds. Personalising the dog beds and the dog toys is also a huge thing. In general right now, everybody wants to feel that the things they buy are special to them and this was my way of doing that.

I've also been doing some interior design projects. My latest remodel project was featured on [US home design website] Apartment Therapy. A few people have seen that and want to bring me in to restructure their home. It is



about using what people have but making it look new again. That is something that I enjoy doing but right now [pet product brand] HouseDogge is my passion project.

Is there anything else you would like to do?

Another thing that I've been really enjoying is having the 'mindspace' to mentor. I currently have five mentees that I've scheduled in to talk with twice a month. We talk about their portfolio and what their next steps after college are. We are building on what they will present when they are ready to enter the industry. Some are recent graduates from college, some are in their last year of college and some have just graduated from high school. We talk about their skills, their talents, their interests, and I'm helping them to structure what their path might look like.

I've missed doing this. I got really busy in the industry and it was really hard to include a lot of extra time to give assistance to other people. It is everything that I enjoy, and I'm finding time to do those things that mean something deeper. I find it extremely fulfilling. The FAAS class hasn't even started yet, but I can't wait. It's an opportunity for them to learn from us, but we will learn from them too. We are teaching them to be better designers and better people.

If you could give aspiring designers just one piece of advice, what would it be?

Do the work. A lot of people talk about what they want to do, but are not willing to do the work to get there. That includes being uncomfortable sometimes in order to get the information you need. You have to get creative on different levels. It will feel like work sometimes but once you start to do that you can manipulate the direction you are going to take. You have to do the work first. Hard work is part of learning. 🌐

Students of the Functional Apparel and Accessories Studio (FAAS) will follow a "learn by doing" curriculum, just like with all of the classes taught at Pensole.

🌐 Marcus Yam/Pensole