

RODHE WORKS

— When her children left home and her nest seemed empty, *CECILIA RODHE* did the logical thing – she began sculpting eggs and rediscovering nature... in Brooklyn.

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Cecilia Rodhe comes bounding up the steps from the subway, late from organizing a fundraiser for Haiti. She was a celebrity wife, is a celebrity mother, a former star of the catwalk, a recording artist, a tireless charity worker, and a sculptor of renown. She is also a former Miss Sweden, which, given the competition up there, is somewhat like having been a chess grandmaster in Russia. Across the street in a smile, eyes sparkling, she slips her arm through mine and announces, "I must take you to the river."

And so we are off, Cecilia and I, under a cold and brilliant January sun, through the Williamsburg quarter of Brooklyn, a stronghold of Hasidic Jews picturesquely co-existing with migratory hipsters. On our stroll down Bedford Avenue, trendy business after trendy business passes in review; even the hardware stores could be vegan. A sharp right, waterwards, and on a side street of artfully run-down rowhouses, Cecilia points to the sky and cries, "Look!" Against the wintry blue, two separate flocks of doves wheel and swoop above the grime, the sun turning them a blinding white, like sheets on a line. "Look how the light makes their wings translucent," Cecilia observes in a whisper – and she's right. "I love

coming across nature, I'm always on the lookout for it. Especially here." Yes, a tree grows in Brooklyn, but doves? "Someone must have a dovecote on his roof," she says matter-of-factly and walks me on.

Moments later the river in question is before us: the East River, eddying silver as the tide comes in. Across the way in Manhattan stands Stuyvesant Town, a gargantuan housing project recently turned into a real-estate football by developers. "Look at that water!" she says excitedly. "Look how powerful it is! If you fell in, it would kill you!"

"I'm grateful to have grown up in a country where I could believe in trolls," she later explains, sort of, as we pass a crumbling Domino Sugar refinery. "There is no separation between us and nature. We will always have it. The rest of the world is only now catching up." In fact, Cecilia grew up in fairytale surroundings: when she was 10 years old her parents moved to a house in a forest far from her native Göteborg. As her older brothers had already struck out on their own, she was left alone much of the time, surrounded by her trolls and her trees, to cultivate an artistic imagination that still carries her aloft, over the streets of Williamsburg. ▶

Shirt/dress URBAN ZEN

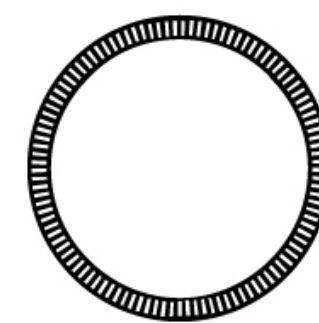




Clothing CECILIAS OWN



*Her artistic imagination carries her aloft,
over the streets of Williamsburg.*




ut of the cold at last, we enter her high-ceilinged loft near the top of a tall pillar of artist studios that towers over the neighbourhood's low-slung grid of exuberant piety and urban pioneering. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer dove's-eye views of Brooklyn; before the windows stands Cecilia's latest forest – of plinths, supporting her warm marble sculptural works. On the forest floor are several large eggs, the artist's quiet paean to creation. The mood changes, the energy subtly given off by the eggs quite palpable. Cecilia's recollection of her start in sculpture furnishes a partial explanation for her latest series. "The crucial moment came when I was pregnant for the first time. I was young, 22, and I felt the need to express myself. I was afraid, didn't know if I'd be a good mother, if I could handle it. You don't know at all where you're going, but you know your life is going to change forever." A pause. "Sculpture came to me like a gift from the angels. You see, I'd been working since I was 16. I was a beauty queen, a model, so I was looked at all the

time but no one thought to look at what I could produce. Paris, Milan, Tokyo, New York, I was moving around constantly... Sculpture was a way of getting to know myself. I had everything, but I had nothing."

It may not have helped that her husband was a supernova of celebrity at the time. In 1983, the year he married his Swedish beauty, Yannick Noah, the Franco-Cameroonian athlete (and now singing star), had just become the first Frenchman to win the French Open tennis tournament in almost four decades (by beating, of all people, a Swede, Mats Wilander). Together the couple had two children – "When we first met," Cecilia recalls, "Yannick and I knew instantly we wanted children together" – but their marriage ended in divorce later in the 1980s. The two remain on good terms. "We've never broken in our commitment to our children. It's really, really awful to break up a family," she states. "We, Yannick and myself, always put our children before ourselves. And that is beautiful and I'm very proud of it. I'm proud of him and I'm proud of myself. It's very important to keep that love, that protection, because it's always the kids who get bashed up in divorce. Bottom line."

Left, top: Cecilia with her daughter Yelena

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a white tank dress, is sitting on a light-colored tiled floor. She is surrounded by several large, smooth, white spheres. In the background, there are white rectangular pedestals, a djembe drum, and a blue heart-shaped object on a small wooden stand. The room is bright and minimalist.

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Tank Dress URBAN ZEN



Wine is poured. Cecilia speaks at length of her remarkable trajectory, from a scared young mother in Paris, caught in the paparazzi headlights of a celebrity divorce, to a confident New Yorker, exuding joy at the diversity of her pursuits. The long night of self-realisation came through learning her art in her studio in Belleville, in the northeast of the French capital. "It was such a wonderful journey to be alone for ten years, hitting on a stone, releasing beautiful shapes and having stories go through my mind and all of them had names and concepts," she recalls. "It was like me living the Grimm Brothers' tales." Then there was yoga, which she practised "religiously" and eventually instructed, as part of her firm belief in the mind-body connection, and psychoanalysis – "Of course I needed a shrink!" she says emphatically – on the Left Bank. Of those Parisian years she says, "My soul was in Belleville, my mind was in St. Germain, and I slept in Neuilly."

And raised her children, one of whom, Yelena, now lopes through the apartment front door along with her fiancé. Mother Cecilia glances over at me with a look that says isn't-she-a-gazelle? and I nod. Yelena, student of political science and international relations – and, soon, acting – disappears into another room. Only missing from the picture is the product of that first, life-changing pregnancy, her son Joakim Noah. He's on the road with the Chicago Bulls. The only self-styled "African Viking" NBA basketball star, Joakim is beloved by fans for his outsized personality – he recently berated LeBron James on national television for his on-court antics – and his infectious enthusiasm. "He's always enchanted us," says his mother. "He has an incredibly charismatic and expressive persona. Even as a baby." But how did he get to be 2.1-metres tall, 30 centimetres taller than his mother and sister? "I've always thought he willed himself to be that tall," Cecilia replies, serenely.

She has drawn this clan into her passion for helping others. When the move was made from Paris to New York, to Hell's Kitchen, then a gritty boho/hobo section of west midtown Manhattan, Cecilia wasted no time in turning her hard-won therapeutic self-knowledge to good use. In Harlem, Queens and the Lower East Side she organized art-therapy workshops for children in difficulty under the rubric "Expression from the Inside for Kids." That led to her participating in Innocence in Danger, an international group that helps child victims of sexual abuse. "Children are extremely vulnerable. They will live their lives by the way they were treated as children," she says with conviction. To that end, the Noah's Ark Foundation has been created. "I'm the CEO, Yelena is director of operations, Joakim is president, and Yannick is vice-president," she says triumphantly. While completing a degree in Creative Art Therapy at New York's New School for Social Research, Cecilia, along with her three Noahs, organizes basketball camps and tournaments, and art-therapy sessions, all within a summer-long framework for high-risk youth in the borough of Queens. There are plans to expand the programmes to other cities and countries.

So what about her marble eggs? "The eggs started when my children left, and I had an empty nest. I moved from Hell's Kitchen to here, and I broke a large piece I was sculpting," she says. "The pieces lay around on the floor, and finally they suggested their shape and their message." Which was? Cecilia pauses, then continues unexpectedly, "The eggs were on display in the office of the Swedish ambassador to the UN. A British diplomat came in, all very chatty, and asked me what they were supposed to be saying. And you know what I said to him? I told him they said: *Hope*."

As Cecilia showed me to the door for my journey back to the subway, she made sure that I truly got the message of her art. "I think that love and sharing is the most important thing that we have to do in our lifetime," she said in farewell. "There's really nothing else." ○

Top: Cecilia in her modelling days, and with her son Joakim, now and as a baby

