

Analytical by design

Brazilian-born academic has put aside her papers and formal studies, turning to glass, wool and all things artistic

HOMEFRONT



SHEILA BRADY

Delfina Falcao has more university degrees and has produced more studies on ergonomics than folks have fingers on both their hands.

But after a career spent helping surgeons operate better and shoemakers save money on leather, this former university professor has retilted her chair. Now, Falcao is using her talents to produce wildly colourful glass panels and patterned carpets you would normally expect to see in an art gallery.

She's also slick at modern wall murals that combine paint and glass. Her glass mosaics in a bathroom helped Ottawa designer Penny Southam win honours at the annual fall design fête sponsored by the Ottawa-Carleton Home Builders' Association.

Three years ago, Falcao turned away from the science of studying human measurements and designing products that fit, not stress, body parts to become a full-time artist. Since then, she has become a sparkling light in a city gripped by long, dull winters. And even though it was grey and rainy outside her Kanata home last week, inside the walls sparkled.

My tour started with her bold cobalt-blue glass table in the dining room. The table has no legs to confound human limbs, since Falcao anchored it to the wall with a hefty black iron U-joint, leaving the glass top to float on two tapered struts made of vintage Rija pine from Russia. The table is elegant and strong, distinctive and practical.

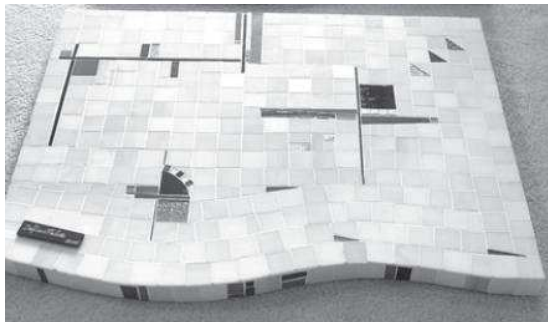
The table, made by Falcao in the 1980s while she and her husband, Hector Guestrin, were working in her native Brazil, clearly shows both sides of the artist's brain — the analytical, scientific side and the artistic lobe.

It was the analytical side that saw Falcao earn degrees in industrial design in Brazil and conduct an exhaustive study for the shoe industry that looked at the shape of Brazilian feet. Brazilian feet are shorter and wider than the feet of most other nations, but the country's shoe industry earns most of its money on exports and creates shoes for an international market. The result is most Brazilians wear uncomfortable shoes. Falcao offered the industry her findings, and also perfected a process to dramatically reduce the amount of leather wasted during shoe production. While the shoe industry shelved her findings on foot shapes, it did pick up her leather-saving suggestions.



JEAN LEVAC, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Delfina Falcao has more degrees and academic papers than you can count on one hand, yet has honed her skills working with glass, wool and ceramic to create colourful carpets, pendant lights and abstract wall murals. Her glass mosaics, like the one below, helped designer Penny Southam win a design award for a custom bathroom.



In 1988, Falcao and Guestrin left Brazil for England, where she earned further degrees while working with industrial design students at the University of Manchester. At this time she launched an extensive study to observe plastic surgeons at work and redesign their surgical tools to cause less stress on their hands and wrists. She earned another degree, applied and won patents, and the surgeons praised her prototype tools. But budgets dried up and the prototypes didn't go into production.

The couple returned to Brazil for

more study, then landed in Ottawa in 1994 to take jobs at the National Research Council and in the technology sector.

It was a round of further budget cuts while working with a design group at Nortel that prompted Falcao to jump careers.

"I love this stage of my life. There is more freedom. Before it was always cut, cut, cut. Now I have the freedom to create," says Falcao, who as a child watched her now 79-year-old mother paint fine patterns on porcelain. A sister and brother are also artists and her

daughter, Julia Falcao Guestrin, 18, has finished her first year in fashion design at Ryerson University in Toronto.

Three years ago, Falcao walked into Michele Villeneuve's Dalhousie Street studio with a multi-coloured rug tucked under her arm. Villeneuve, a veteran designer, was impressed and began introducing Falcao to clients.

"My immediate reaction was: 'Here is someone who is very special.' Ottawa is very hard to break into and most people that have the money don't often take risks."

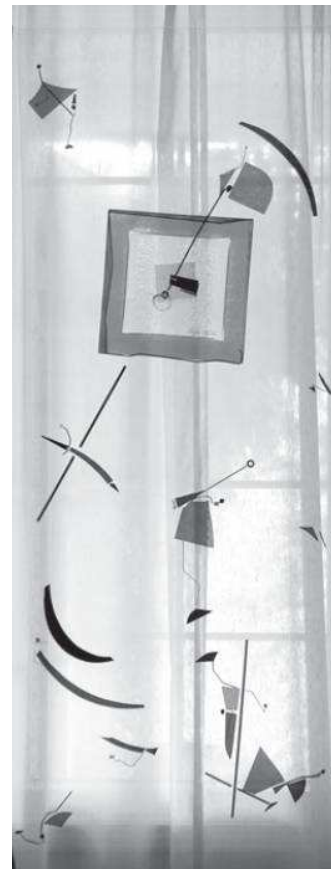
Falcao is worth the step into the unknown, Villeneuve says, struggling to put together the right words to describe a body of work that goes from glass mosaics to wall murals to unique cushions to industrial mats embedded with glass.

She adds the Kanata artist goes beyond ethnic to joyful and lush, partly because she uses primary colours.

Falcao readily admits she is influenced by the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian and Austrian painter Gustav Klimt.

Like them, she prefers geometric shapes, straight lines and bold colours. Then she adds her own twists and textures when working on projects in her basement studio.

When ideas were plenty but money scarce, Falcao did glass mosaics on



window sills in a sunny retreat off her master bedroom. On the main floor she modified pendant lights, adding glass to glass. Local company Marchand Electrical asked her to produce customized glass pendant lights for its customers.

"She is always open to ideas," says Villeneuve, adding Falcao's work can be used in a million ways. She bonds glass to glass when working with panels that can hang in a window, be the backing for a waterfall or serve as a backsplash in a kitchen. Or, the glass can be used in a more subtle manner.

"When you are finished a project, you always come to the front door and there needs to be a mat," says Villeneuve. "It was Delfina who used a basic industrial mat and embedded glass. It is practical and it is perfect."

Delfina Falcao can be reached at design@deiffinafalcao.com, 613-599-9540 or www.deiffinafalcao.com. Her work is also on display at Michele Villeneuve's studio at 204 Dalhousie St., 613-234-4323.

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