cover

ISSUE 71 | SUMMER 2023

FLOOR STORY

CHOOSE LOVE AND RUGS

ISSN 2042-7069

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FORMAFANTASMA • STUDIO PRATHA
XTANT 2023 • KIPS BAY PALM BEACH

SUMMER 2023 £5 €8 $10
cover-magazine.com
Hali Publications Ltd.

Questions of material

Formafantasma is a design studio with a spirit of inquiry behind every creative act. As its latest project, the exhibition 'Oltre Terra', opens in Oslo, Jessica Hemmings looks at some of the complexities in the work of the Italian team behind these 'investigations'

Photo: Simon171

01

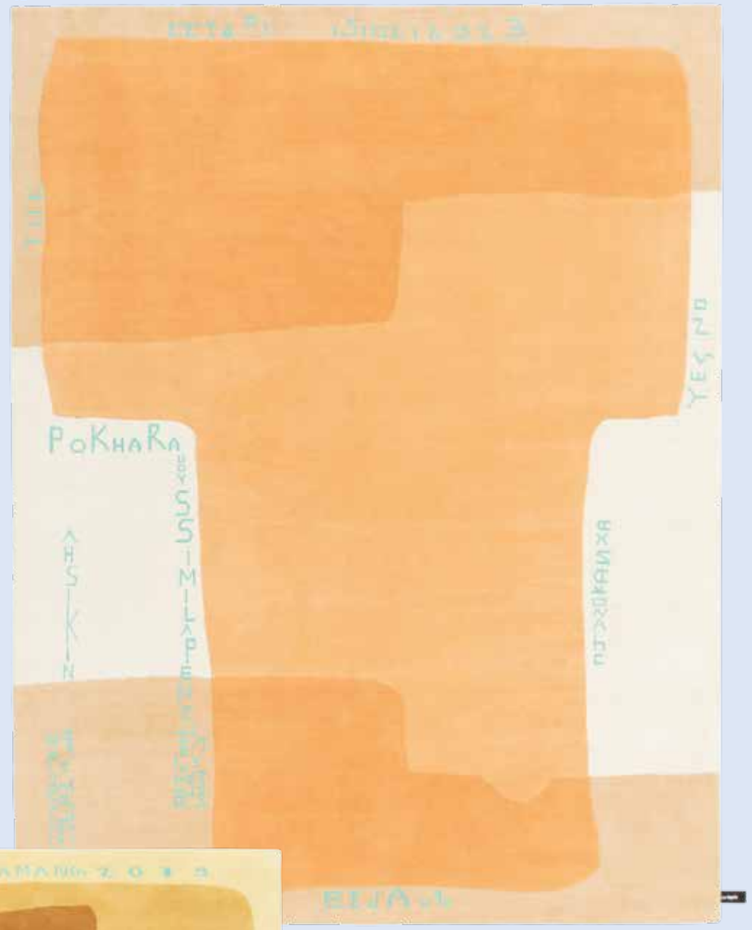
Founded in 2009 by the Italians Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin, Formafantasma describes itself as a research-based design studio. This could, in fairness, mean quite a few different things. In Formafantasma's case, the phrase signals a 'unique perspective of the design industry' which, its website proclaims, allows the studio 'to acknowledge the legacy of industrial production as the fundamental source for the designer's expertise and agency in contemporary society while also addressing its historic contribution to environmental instability'.

Now with studios in Milan and Rotterdam, Formafantasma work across an extensive portfolio that includes exhibition design and curatorial projects, alongside commissioned and independent design work. Their meticulous approach often results in an aestheticised presentation of what may otherwise be rather dry, certainly dense, research data—a presentation style shared by Dutch designer Christien Meindertsma who studied at the Design Academy Eindhoven nearly a decade before Formafantasma. Today, Trimarchi and Farresin remain connected to DAE as leaders of the Academy's GEO–design platform.

Trimarchi and Farresin's early work often questioned the materials with which they designed. The Botanica collection (2011), for example, sought alternatives to plastics by exploring polymers from plants and animals, while Turkish Red (2013) revisited the once popular madder dye. De Natura Fossilium (2014) took lava as both inspiration and material. The studio's recent work has increasingly focused on the research that informs its design work, often following a detailed investigation of one substance across time and geography. Ore Streams (2017) targeted electronic waste. The ongoing project Cambio (2020) tackles the timber industry and its governance.

Formafantasma has long maintained a sceptical relationship with craft when it becomes a tired cliché. In 2010, its collection of ceramics Moulding Tradition presented a contemporary reaction to Sicilian Teste di Moro ceramics that 'questions the notion of national identity and the custom of craft to perpetuate the past mindlessly'. This year, it is releasing Telegram, a collection of hand-knotted rugs in collaboration with cc-tapis, based on the words weavers have spontaneously woven onto the excess borders of other carpets by the Italian brand.

02



03

01 Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin of Formafantsma developing rug designs with cc-tapis

02 *Gramma A*, Telegram collection, Formafantasma x cc-tapis

03 *Gramma B*, Telegram collection, Formafantasma x cc-tapis

04 *Transhumance path in the Alps*, 2023, Formafantasma

05 *Tacchini FLOCK*, installation at Milano Design Week 2023, Formafantasma x Tacchini

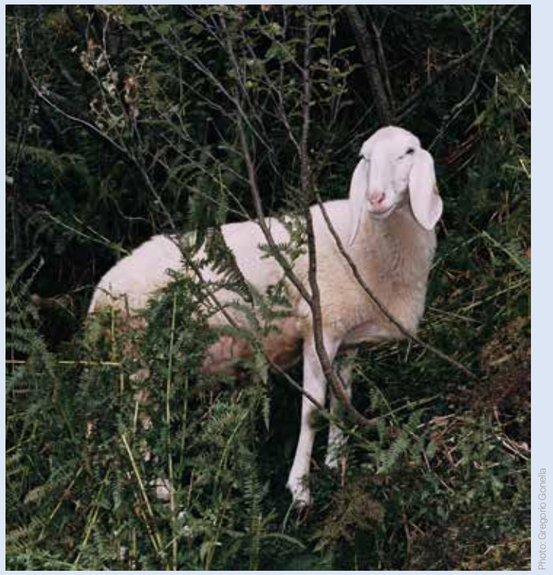


Photo: Gregorio Gonella

04

Photo: Andrea Ferrari

05

> **Recent work has often followed a detailed investigation of one substance across time and geography**

Formafantasma's latest initiative, 'Oltre Terra. Why Wool Matters' (2023), takes as its focus wool. Curated by Hanne Eide for the new premises of The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo, the exhibition considers the 'extraction and production of wool in relation to the biological evolution of sheep as a unified but complex ecology', to quote the accompanying publication. The designers explain that the exhibition title shares etymological roots with the term *transhumance*: 'a common ground between humans, animals and the environment [that] is constantly negotiated'.

In the exhibition catalogue expert perspectives from the wool industries of Italy, Australia and Norway, at times conflicting, sit beside contributions that focus on topics ranging from domestication and landscape to breeding and recycling. Some of the absurdities of human ingenuity make an appearance, including astonishing historical and contemporary photographs of Merino sheep seemingly engulfed in coats the animals cannot shed without human assistance. The anthropologist Tim Ingold speculates that, millennia from today, weaving and wool will remain.

'Oltre Terra' is an exhibition about knowledge, and how knowledge is contained and conveyed. It most certainly is not a product launch, or even a set of experimental propositions like those often found in Formafantasma's earlier exhibitions. Trimarchi and Farresin have worked with long-time collaborator Joanna Piotrowska on a film called *Tactile afferents*. But beyond that, the one material outcome of the studio's research is a collaboration with the Italian furniture design company Tacchini. This has resulted in the development of an upholstery stuffing using surplus sheep wool and natural latex as an alternative to industrial foam.

Eide describes it as an exhibition that aims 'to unfix and make porous the great divide between the natural sciences and the humanities to allow for a more holistic perspective'.

—— **formafantasma.com**