

DOUBLE DUTCH

Jessica Hemmings deconstructs Dutch design



Aiko Tezuka

'Innovative' is an often misused word: however, in trying to sum up how 'Dutch Design' became a universal maxim for chic, functional and lusted over design, it seems to be entirely applicable. Arguably there are two driving forces behind Dutch design's reputation and energy today. The Design Academy Eindhoven is at the centre of contemporary design education, whilst the TextielLab in Tilburg has established itself as a hub of design activity – each of the institutions are name checked in practically every Dutch designer's profile, themselves gaining somewhat of a reputation.

There is a rich history of design and production in both sites. Eindhoven is in fact the birth place of the Philips light bulb and today the Design Academy boasts an array of talented alumni and staff who are challenging preconceived ideas about materials. These designers include Hella Jongerius, Jurgen Bey (of Studio Makkink & Bey) and Richard Hutten. Originally a textile factory, TextielLab is in fact an off-shoot of The Textiel Museum. The lab was conceived as a way of both educating people about historical methods of production as well as creating an environment for designers and students to develop and try new ideas through cutting edge technology. It counts among its allies: Van Eijk & Van der Lubbe and Studio Marcel Wanders and is perhaps, informally, a second home for Eindhoven graduates.

www.textiellab.nl, www.designacademy.nl

Dutch design has found itself celebrated internationally for a concept-heavy approach, which makes the three material-led examples profiled here all the more refreshing. While united in their shared commitment to the materiality of textile, Severine Amsing, BuroBELÉN and Studio Mae Engelgeer do not share the same ethos. Amsing hand-weaves meditations on light, undertaking every painstaking step of the production process herself; Lenneke Langenhuisen and Brecht Duijf of BuroBELÉN have coined the phrase 'materializers' to refer to their wide ranging, but materials first approach; Mae Engelgeer of her eponymous studio admits to finding hand -weaving 'too slow' for her liking, instead seeking production opportunities that range from hand-knotted carpets in Nepal to industrial dobby weaving of contract fabric in Scotland. In their own ways each cites the importance of first-hand contact with materials – but their solutions to the realities of production could not be more different. As snapshots, these examples serve to show a different side to Dutch design – engrossed with the very stuff of textiles but seeking dramatically varied ways of making it real.

As an eighteen year-old travelling in Rajasthan, Severine Amsing woke one morning to find her shuttered hotel room had become a life-sized pinhole camera. On the wall an upside down camel strolled past. 'The idea of light is magic,' she explains of the inspiration behind her weavings. 'Weaving could be

Severine Amsing

compared to the physical process of seeing light and colour. By understanding the process of weaving, I find myself speaking the same language as people who understand the way light moves, or the way colour exists through light and can be caught on photographic paper.'

Amsing's approach can be likened to analogue printing in the darkroom: 'I hide colour through satin weave, then the textile is torn and the colour revealed. It is up to me what I do and don't show.' Victorian Bush Fire, for example, was woven as a piece of red cloth and 'made black' by tearing the surface with a steel brush to expose the black threads beneath. 'I wanted to reveal and conceal the colours,' Amsing explains. She refers to the discipline of weaving – 'feeling weaving in your muscles after a day's work' – as well as confronting the monotony of weaving large areas of solid colour cloth as crucial to her process.

Horizons are another recurring theme in Amsing's weavings, perhaps influenced by her degree in social geography and an interest in why and how landscape exists – this curiosity makes sense in the context of the Netherlands' reclaimed and manmade landscapes – but her interest in horizon lines returns to her fascination with light. 'Horizons are utterly dependent on your perspective,' she explains, observing, 'mountains in the distance look different.' This is not because the mountain physically changes but rather we do. This ability to be both fixed and in flux is a source of on-going curiosity of Amsing's weavings. Few would invest the time in hand-weaving required of Amsing's often large works – let alone make this investment to then embark on the labour of deconstruction. But for Amsing the act of weaving cannot be cut short, time simply has to wait.

Lenneke Langenhuijsen and Brecht Duijf of BuroBELÉN refer to themselves as 'materializers'. Design, they bemoan, is an 'overused word' because of the sheer number of disciplines that claim the term. Instead, the pair define their expertise as a new role that feeds horizontally into conversations occurring across different disciplines ▶

Judith Jockel



BuroBELÉN



While the outcomes are varied, they are emphatic that their starting point is constant: 'we lead with the material.' The pair are intrigued by how far 'we can stretch materials' and find that the only way to test this knowledge is with a firm rule they have established for their studio. 'Two days each week are material working days. You need materials in your hands. That is the way you open up.'

BuroBELÉN's *Combed Cotton* project was woven at the TextielLab in Tilburg and is based on archival research into AaBe blankets, a type of Dutch wool blanket held in the museum's archive. These historical antecedents were important before the advent of central heating but 'not nice on the skin.' *Combed Cotton* uses a yarn developed with the company Rubia Natural Colors made of a cotton yarn harvested in Mali. Combing the cotton has proved crucial to creating a softer handle. But many of BuroBELÉN's seemingly high-tech solutions are low-tech in reality. For example, the *BlueRed* collection in collaboration with Tinctoria is based on an existing fabric of silk and viscose. The fabric takes blue and red dye differently – in fact blue and red are the two colours that create the most extreme difference in reaction. As a result, the fabric looks to be shimmering.

April 2014 saw the launch of their clothing label 18-11-81 which includes a jacket dipped seven times in an indigo bath. Depth of saturation makes the colour shiny and futuristic. 'It is about clothing not fashion,' Langenhuijsen makes clear. 'The material and its use have to be in balance.' The pair refer to a return to 'the material essence of things' as central to all their varied projects and are looking to a future where material and function enjoy a healthier relationship. *Generation Pants*, for example, is an idea for trousers intended to outlive a human lifespan. 'Maybe the material is oil based but high tech and strong enough to survive many generations,' they muse. It all depends on material potential and design intention.

'Even mistakes are inspiration,' Mae Engelgeer explains of her archive of samples that continue to provide a primary source of

Gaia Schiotti, Jolanda Deemman

Studio Mae Engelgeer

references for her design work today. The material makes its own suggestions. While working by hand is familiar to her from years as a student, today she explains that her company struggles with growth if handwork is her primary approach. Instead, as a designer she focuses on woven textiles with an assortment of production solutions: *YEAH* Rug, for example, is hand-knotted in Nepal in collaboration with a Dutch organisation. An upholstery collection, *MODE*, is woven in Scotland on industrial dobby looms. The *ISH* collection uses a white warp rather than a white weft to produce the dominant pattern, was woven at the TextielLab in Tilburg.

Each project undertaken by Studio Mae Engelgeer creates a different set of design opportunities and restrictions. Working with Nepali weavers means samples arrive in the Netherlands by post, whereas design development with the technicians at the TextielLab allows changes to be tested and implemented onsite immediately. While TextielLab is a vital resource for weavers, Engelgeer is quick to explain that it is 'important but you really have to know what you want out of the machine. I have a structure in mind and this is translated at the TextielLab through working with the technician.'

Her collection *HUES* includes six hand-knotted wall pieces. Again working with weavers in Nepal, Engelgeer capitalises on what hand production can do best. The collection is comprised of seemingly plain blocks of colour with minimal design features such as a single black line running around the edge or across the bottom of a piece. The simplicity of each design allows for the fact that it is woven by hand to become the focal point: texture is not perfectly uniform, nor is the monochrome palette of individual works. 'Coming from fashion I want to make a collection – for it to look like a family,' she explains of the influence her education has on her approach today. Her practice continues to be a balancing act: brand development on the one hand, coupled with her signature as a textile designer on the other. ••• **Jessica Hemmings**



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