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Craftsmanship

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NEXT STEPS

Painting with yarn

A Dutch laboratory focuses on fabric innovation

TILBURG, THE NETHERLANDS

BY DIANE DANIEL

On a cloudy morning in late October, the Finnish artist and designer Kustaa Saksi and Stef Miero, a weaving product developer here at TextielLab, conferred behind adjacent computer screens in the laboratory's research and development room.

To their left lay a dozen large spools of yarn — the paints for their canvas — with colors ranging from fluorescent orange to dark solids, and materials including silk, velvet, rubberized cotton and mohair.

On Mr. Saksi's screen was a design, sweeping swirls of golds, pinks and purples that he had drawn at his studio in Amsterdam, some 75 minutes north by car, and then emailed to Mr. Miero before he arrived. The not-yet titled piece, destined to measure 5.6 feet by 8.2 feet, was the first in a series of eight woven tapestries he was preparing for a solo show in Stockholm.

Mr. Miero had downloaded the drawing into a software program, open on his screen, where he translated each color into a combination of threads.

"My ready-made plan will probably change some," said Mr. Saksi, whose clients have included Bergdorf Goodman and Marimekko. "I'll get inspired by a material or binding or whatever Stef has in his mind. It's like an action painting. We can throw different yarns into the machine and make changes as we go along."

In a traditional textile plant, where time is money, machinery doesn't pause and work is conducted behind closed doors, a designer experimenting with color and texture during weaving would be rare. But at TextielLab, internationally recognized as a highly specialized work space focused on innovations in woven and knit fabrics, experimentation takes center stage.

Opened in 2005, the lab sits inside the TextielMuseum, which was established in 1958 to honor Tilburg's heritage as a once-thriving wool capital.

While the museum still salutes the past, it now focuses on the future by curating contemporary exhibitions, commissioning artists to create inventive work and producing a series of stylish household textiles for sale, with the production work done in the lab. The shop is

especially known for kitchen towels, created mostly by young designers, and sells about 13,000 a year.

The lab was rebooted five years ago, with an eye toward innovation, said Hebe Verstappen, the lab's director, who came from the textile industry and manages a staff of 20. "We started to think again about what the lab is for," she said. "It's not only for visitors or production, but for pushing the boundaries of techniques, discovering new processes and teaching the next generation."

Some designers are invited to the lab to work on commissions from the museum or the lab itself, financed through national arts funds. Others, including students, can pay a daily rate to use the lab for research or to create prototypes or finished products. The roster of industry heavyweights who have designed work here includes Viktor & Rolf, Studio Formafantasma, Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec, Studio Job and Scholten & Baijings. (In a newly opened sample studio, visitors can see, and even touch, preliminary models that those designers and dozens of others have made.)

"I think the lab really makes a difference for textiles in the Netherlands and is why we're so well known for them," said Carole Baijings, who credits museum commissions with drawing international attention to the studio that she and her partner, Stefan Scholten, operate in Amsterdam.

The lab, she said, has had a hand in everything from the duo's trademark bold colors to their first foray into florals for an exhibition at the museum earlier this year. And it is where they make upholstery design samples for Schooten & Baijings's collaboration with the large New York-based textile brand Maharam. (The lab also played a role in the exhibition "Scholten & Baijings: Lessons from the Studio," which runs through Nov. 28 at the Cooper Hewitt museum in New York.)

"You come with your design and you have all these master craftsmen that know how to get to the right result," Ms. Baijings said. "We've been working for 14 years with Stef. For us, he's like a tovenaar," she added, using the Dutch word for wizard to refer to Mr. Miero.

COLLABORATION

In the lab, Mr. Miero and Mr. Saksi discussed colors and textures while an intern took the yarns to a computerized Jacquard loom in the nearby production

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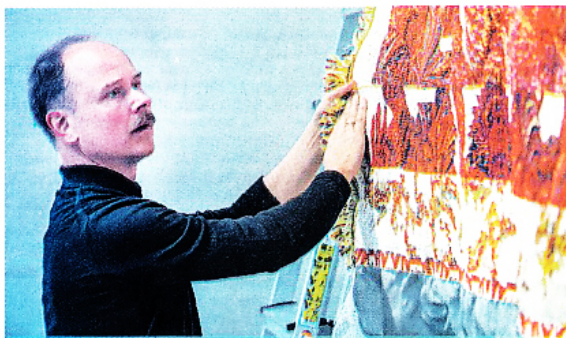
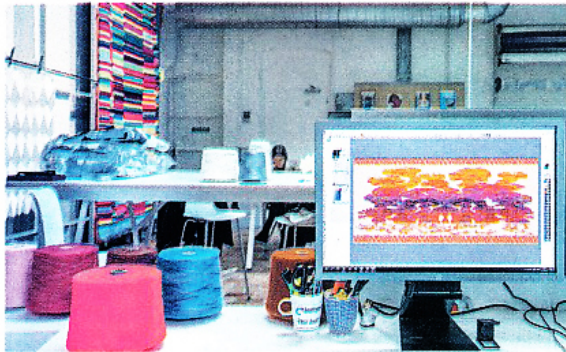
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area, where a sliding-glass door muffled the constant hum from the machine.

Mr. Saksi, who came to woven art in 2011 after finding success in graphic design and illustration, credits Mr. Miero with "reading my mind" to translate his

visions from paper to textile. "Magic happens every time," the designer said.

Another relative newcomer to the medium is Rafaël Rozendaal, a Dutch-Brazilian artist based in New York who had been scheduled to work in the lab the

same day as Mr. Saksi but was unable to travel. Known for making ultrabright art for online browsers, he first put his work into weaving in 2014 and has returned to the lab every year since to complete a tapestry project.

His laboratory partner, Marjan van Oeffelt, a product developer, continued without him (they spoke daily), working with vivid color palettes he had created and experimenting with a two-tone waffle weave. "Artists are more out of the box and I'm more a technician," Ms. van Oeffelt said. "I like that we learn from each other. Sometimes they bring you out of the border and sometimes you keep them in it."

Work by both Mr. Rozendaal and Mr. Saksi is in the museum's permanent collection, and a large Rozendaal piece is in an exhibition "Colour & Abstraction: Generations in Dialogue" (to March 3).

Later in the day, Mr. Saksi and Mr. Miero hunched over a loom, watching as woven strips were spit out. "We're trying to get the red to pop by adding a little of the fluorescent," Mr. Saksi said.

As he spoke, a few visitors wandered by, craning their necks. The entire 11,840-square-foot production area is open to museum-goers, who can observe staff members and designers at work. The space contains three looms and four knitting machines, along with multiple machines for the lab's other specialties: embroidery; hand-tufting; passementerie, or decorative trim; and laser technology.

One-off art projects were the focus of most of the laboratory work done on this particular day, but that isn't always the case.

In fact, the laboratory was about to complete the largest project it ever undertook: more than 1.8 miles of fabric for Inside Outside, an interior and landscape design studio founded by the Dutch designer Petra Blaisse. The giant curtains, essentially walls of textile, were made for LocHal, a former railroad depot being renovated into a cultural center and library in Tilburg.

"It's a hugely exciting project," Ms. Blaisse said. "The work is very experimental and you're confronting many situations, especially technical. The fantastic thing about being at the lab is that you can really work with them hands-on."

By midafternoon of Mr. Saksi's visit, the first of five work days he was to spend in the laboratory, he was back in the research and development room inspecting sample strips of tapestry.

He pointed out that the red appeared brighter, and then he slightly curled up one end of the cloth.

"It's still a bit stiff, so now we're working on that," he said. "Overall, it's a good start."

Awash in color

From top, Stef Miero, left, a weaving product developer at TextielLab, reviewed a selection of yarns with the Finnish artist and designer Kustaa Saksi; designers can download patterns into a software program and translate the colors into a combination of threads; Mr. Saksi examined a tapestry in progress.