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THE SCOOP ON SHOPPING, STYLE, DESIGN & CULTURE



PHOTOGRAPH: STEPHANIE VELDMAN

MOHAIR BRAND FRANCES V.H
FOUNDER AND DESIGNER FRANCES
VAN HASSELT PHOTOGRAPHED
AT SWARTBERG HOUSE



HOME COMING

Four years after launching her eponymous label – and amidst a pandemic – mohair designer Frances van Hasselt has released two collections that tell a story of memory, heritage and, hopefully, peace

TEXT PIET SMEDY
PHOTOGRAPHS STEPHANIE VELDMAN AND JACOBUS SNYMAN

Earlier this year, in April, Frances van Hasselt and I were exchanging WhatsApps when I sent her a screengrab of *Home Journal*,

the Hong Kong-based interiors magazine, with her on the cover, and congratulations. ‘What? I have not seen this,’ she writes back. ‘This is great! Dankie dankie.’ In so many ways, this brief exchange is a *very* revealing glimpse into the deceptively low-key designer’s ever-expanding sphere of influence, which apparently now includes Asia’s design cognoscenti. There is pleasantly surprised gratitude. But there is also power. Not the in-your-face, overexposed, overhyped type we have seen played out on our daily Instagram feeds, but the quiet, purposeful type of a designer who has come to own her space. Not many can claim to be accidentally unknowing cover stars. But, then again, you cannot blame her – Frances has been busy.

Time is a curious concept out here in Prince Albert, the curiously creative Karoo hamlet that has established itself as the de facto Xanadu for South Africa’s right-brained thinkers. Four-or-so hours and a whole world away from Cape Town, it is ground zero for Frances V.H.’s operations, the eponymous mohair label that Frances started in August 2017 based in Cape Town (the collection debuted in *House & Garden* that same month, which is when I first met Frances). ‘I had been travelling a lot and trying to get to the Karoo as often as I could,’ she says. Her family’s mohair stud is out here. She may have been toying with the idea of making the Karoo her permanent home, but the pandemic certainly was not playing games – and she made the move. ‘Covid, the lockdowns, it has taken a toll on us all, but with this, there has also been an incredible shift in thinking – we have been given a chance to reconnect to the basics. I am so grateful to have moved home,’ she says.

With a to-do list that could have been written by Laura Ingalls Wilder, Frances spends her days with family, or in the veld, but mostly her studio, interacting with artisans, experimenting with threads, listening to the exchange of stories and finding comfort in the zing of a spinning



wheel and the bird life cohabiting in the studio nest. ‘Being back in the Karoo brings a new meaning to time – the pace is slow and steady, but the desert and the characters that inhabit it are constantly unexpected and thrillingly real.’

Isolation has, of course, been very real – and very personal – to us all, but certainly for the young designer out here in the hinterlands, it manifest in a landscape that has seemingly escaped the Anthropocene, with only the surrounding San art as evidence that people did, in fact, walk here. And, it turns out, this is exactly what Frances needed. ‘Not interacting with many external influences has freed my creativity in that I create from a place that is built on a deeply personal relationship

with the Karoo, the veld, its people, the mud-walled architecture and the endless skylines,’ she says. It is easy to get into your head about this, that her work has transcended its physical form to become a study in place and time, but Frances is quick to disagree. In the end, it always comes back to the story of the material told through the narrative of craftsmanship with considered bravura. Tactility, reinvented and refined through the mixing of raw materials in old, familiar ways, is, what marketer’s call, Frances’s USP. As we pinball between phone screens and TV screens and computer screens, she offers up a moment of anti-technology, of artisanal imperfection. ‘There is a certain comfort and soul that handmade objects have ▶



PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT TO RIGHT FRANCES VAN HASSELT AT HER KAROO STUDIO WITH A 'SQUID INK' MOHAIR RUG, PART OF THE 'DEEP SEEING TIDE' COLLABORATION WITH ARTIST AND NEW YORK LIFESTYLE BRAND TULSI FOUNDER TARA HOGAN; 'DEEP SEEING TIDE' COLLECTION 'EVENTIDE' RUG IN HAND-SPUN, DYED AND WOVEN MOHAIR WITH FRINGE DETAILING LEFT TO RIGHT FVH X LM 'DESERT HOMAGE' COLLECTION 'DUNE DUST' AND 'VYGIE FIESTA' SCARVES WOVEN IN VARIOUS MOHAIR YARNS; 'DEEP SEEING TIDE' COLLECTION 'BATEAU' RUG IN NATURAL IN COMBINED AND RAW MOHAIR WITH HAND-DYED BLACK COMBED MOHAIR

that we feel cannot be replicated in mechanised, mass-made objects,' she says. 'Fabrics do not start in factories. Our work is as much about the finished product as it is about the process, origin and makeup.'

There is, of course, a quid pro quo between Frances and the land, which she describes as the 'defining element' in her work, informing every aspect of the creation process – but perhaps in a less obvious way. 'There is nothing uniform in nature's precision and the shifting tones and texture the land takes on throughout the day,' says Frances. 'In the desert, there is nothing to distract you from noticing the light, the scorch of the midday sun, the slow relief of an evening breeze and the velvet, vast skylines.' Fact check: South Africa is one of the largest producers of mohair (which is woven from the wool of the angora goat) in the world, contributing around 50 per cent of the global supply. This is something that does not escape

'Storytelling is a way of sharing your experience with others. We choose to weave our tales into textiles'

Frances. If anything it fuels her motivation to showcase the land, the animal, the fibre and the hands that make each piece. 'We feel strongly that a sustainable, circular textile economy starts with rain, the delicate ecosystem of the veld, the role of herdsmen, and the importance of healthy animals to produce quality mohair. From raw fibre, we move into the process of washing, cleaning, dyeing and spinning until finally the yarn ends up on the loom. In many ways, weaving and finishing are the last few steps on an intricate supply chain,' she says. 'The work we produce hopes to peel back the fibres that weave together this place of contradictions, this forgotten, thriving, living, dying, fossilised, futuristic landscape we call home.'

By this stage, it becomes clear who, or what, Frances really is: a storyteller,

a modern-day bard, making supply chains sound sexy and adding mysticism to the mercantile. After all, hers has all the hallmarks of a Tolkienesque epic: a vast, unspoiled landscape, a noble quest, a magical item, an ancient craft, and a band of champions. 'Storytelling is a way of sharing your experience with others and can take on any form you feel best expresses that which you wish to share,' she says. 'We choose to weave our tales into textiles.'

Which brings us to the latest chapter in the Frances V.H story: collaboration.

In April 2020 and June 2021, Frances V.H launched two new projects with designers Tara Hogan and Leandi Mulder, respectively. The former, 'Deep Seeing Tide', translated the New England artist's

paper works into rugs, while the latter fashion-bent project, focusing on oversized blanket scarves, was born after the two friends returned from a textile residency in Italy. 'Both Tara and Leandi are aligned in their thoughts on making and nature. Both are exceptional creators and their work aligns effortlessly with what we do and why we do it.' I ask her if she singles out women as collaborators (not just Tara and Leandi, but the many craftswomen of the Eastern Cape who have worked with Frances since day one), and if she believes that there is a 'shared experience' between female creatives. 'We work with anyone who shares our passion and aptitude for creating artisanal, sustainably produced textiles and this certainly is not limited to women. It just so happens that we work with ▶





FVH X LM 'DESERT HOMAGE COLLECTION' 'VYGIE FIESTA'
SCARF WOVEN IN VARIOUS MOHAIR YARNS

artisans in rural areas of the country and it is predominantly women who have been taught traditional textile skills,' she says. 'There is a special bond between women creating together that has a positive impact on our communities as women often invest back into their families, the ripple effect of which is invaluable.'

And align with the narrative they certainly do. Before producing 'Deep Seeing Tide', Frances and Tara connected through Instagram in 2018 and, when a vis-à-vis meeting two years later became impossible, continued to work together online. The exchange was simple enough, with Tara sending through her art and Frances reinterpreting them into mohair. 'Tara focussed on subtle monochrome moments – playing purely with textures and keeping colours natural,' says Frances. 'This simple vision created some of the most beautiful moments.' The collection developed to incorporate Tara's bold, amorphous forms, both a homage to Matisse and a reference to the abstract-like creatures that live on the ocean floor (fitting, considering the Karoo itself was, millennia ago, the ocean bed). 'This feeling of underwater isolation bridges well into our solemn present. 'We wanted to create pieces that were original, striking in simplicity, timeless but suited the modern home,' says Frances. 'Structureless yet spiritual in that they convey a sense of calm and raw tactility and bring the natural world in, providing a sense of connectivity, comfort and soul that we all so badly need right now.'

I cannot help thinking back to the charming, naive, young designer I met four years ago in Cape Town and how different she is today. Still (if not more) a captivating personality, she has developed an otherworldly insight into the psyche of home and translated this into something tangible, pieces that impart a kind of transcendental Zen into our spaces. 'I believe the concept of luxury may evolve into a more abstract world view; clean air, open land, health, an appreciation for nature, lengthy, unrushed meals around a table with friends and family, and building homes that make you feel safe, calm, functional and a reflection of your world,' she says. 'We hope that the work we put out embodies this shift.' ■

Frances V.H francesvh.com

'DEEP SEEING TIDE' COLLECTION PHOTOGRAPHED AT SWARTBERG HOUSE BY OPEN STUDIO ARCHITECTS. 'DESERT HOMAGE' COLLECTION HAIR AND MAKEUP: INGA HEWETT; MODELS: AVIES NEWTON, LEHLOHONOLO MOKELE