



**A home in the hinterland:** Legend has it that there is an eerie, almost otherworldly presence in the quaint Karoo town of Prince Albert. From the many ghosts who are believed to haunt its hearth to the fables relayed by the town's Story Weaver, Ailsa Tudhope. For Frances van Hasselt however, it's the place where she spent the first 11 years of her life – a place that beckoned her to return to start her own family. Fate or destiny?



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Words by Emma Jude Jackson Photography by Warren Heath Styling by Sven Alberding Production by Bureaux

Frances spent her early childhood growing up in Prince Albert on her family's mohair farm. In her teenage years she attended boarding school, and was only able to visit while on her breaks. From the charming little town in the Karoo, she would go on to explore the wide world beyond – and only 20 years later did she fully realise that her dream lifestyle was right where she started. Now settled in Prince Albert once more, Frances is the founder of Frances VH, the label under which she produces her sought-after mohair rugs, knitwear and tapestries.

Asked if she misses the thrill of the fashion industry in Hong Kong or Tokyo, where she harvested some of her business acumen and much of her entrepreneurial spirit before returning to her roots, she reminds you of just how connected we all are now, and that the rest of the world has never been more within reach. Ironically, it was while out there – exploring and working abroad – that she realised she was thinking too small and it would be back home in Prince Albert – a relatively small town set within a vast and semi-desert landscape and dramatic mountain passes – where she could truly unleash the hugeness of her creative spirit.

'There is something about the Karoo and the antiquity of the place, that I feel I have some umbilical connection to. The Karoo is so ancient and so vast. There are open and endless skies and huge landscapes but even going back to a time long before us, this used to be the bottom of the ocean floor, and if you look at it like that, it is completely trippy. The plants look like fossilised coral, the rocks take on new meaning, and if you go to the coast, you will see the similarities between the plant life. Even the Swartberg pass is literally mud that has been crumpled and pushed and hardened into mesmerising shapes. This is a magical place and I am completely humbled by it.'

Frances, who was always interested in fashion and textiles, recalls a glittering Turner Classic Movies phase that could've sent her off in many directions in her life, but it was her father (and a natural affinity for the exquisite mohair her family produced) who kept her grounded. 'If you're interested in clothing and fashion, you better come and spend some time in the veld, to find out where this all starts,' he told her once, to which she remembers thinking as all young adults do, 'you poor, delusional man, you have no idea!' He was a wonderful and stylish man, she says, but he was still a farmer.

Little did she know back then, Frances would go on to make an honest farmhouse and a tiny, intimate barn turned studio into her sanctuary, for a craft so deeply connected to its surroundings that it could not exist anywhere else.

'As a human, you look at all this and you feel like a speck of dust, which is what you are! So firstly, you feel insignificant, and this is huge and magnificent, and the nature and history are so far beyond us, but because you are this one little person experiencing it all, the opposite becomes true. You feel like the biggest and most privileged person in the world. You become incredibly conscious of every detail; the purple hue of this flower, or the intense tones in that sunset, the surreal azure of the sky, and at times it feels like I am the only person in the world who sees it so intensely. That is what the Karoo does for me and what is completely addictive to me; me and this porous vastness.' Frances pulled back on her regular commutes to her Cape Town base last year to make Prince Albert her permanent address, which has given her even more time to play in her magical environment.

'It is when we play that the magic really happens. It is so freeing to be creating from a place where I know that what we're making here stems from just walking in the veld. Every fibre is connected to the land and the hands that make it. Every piece has a soul.'

'But now going back to textiles, many people think that because mohair is natural and this is the desert, they should be created in natural tones – and, while there is space for that, I must ask, have you looked deeply at a praying mantis, or have you seen the colours in a sunset? It's completely cosmic and wild. One of mohair's most wondrous qualities is its ability to capture colour because it has a natural lustre and curl and character, a silkiness to it. It's used around the world for holding colour beautifully, so I use it to reflect the environment. Part of being creative is having the ability to see the beauty around you and channel it into your work. I need colour. We need colour. It is a relief on this prickly, unforgiving, scorched Earth.'

The endless horizons of the sacred and mystical Karoo mirror Frances' own capacity for creativity and every piece she creates. ●

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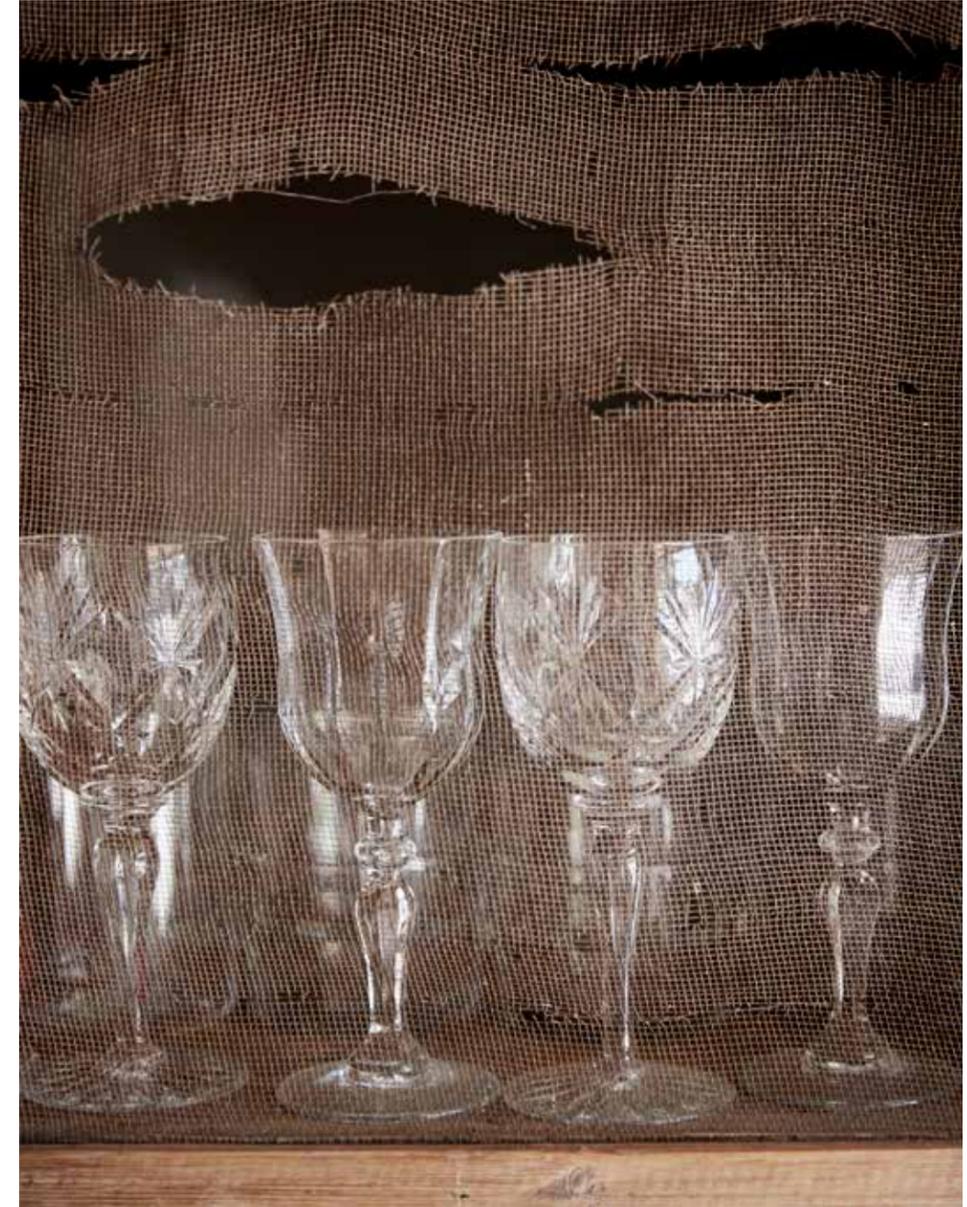
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