Threads that show the way ahead

Hella Jongerius | The artist and designer has made her name with innovative woven works which reimagine the ancient craft.

Kristina Foster talks to her in Berlin

M odern and contemporary artists have often revived the ancient craft of weaving in a way of recontextualising within a post-war Dutch design and artist Hella Jongerius. The technique can be used to look towards the future by combining the threads of traditional craft, innovative processes and responsible manufacturing which runs throughout her work.

“We are all born on a thread,” Jongerius says as we walk around her studio in the Prenzlauer Berg district of Berlin, a bauhaus wonderland teeming with spools of yarn and lifelike. “People understood the world by computing a turning spindle in the earth’s rotation. The cycle of this moon and the sun was all about seeing with spinning.”

Jongerius started her career in 2009 as a designer practice, Jongerlaus, and can now see a cross-section of the contradicting approaches in the field of design, handmade and the industrial, which Jongerius is known for having in her work. Admiring the trade are her many students, “Sometimes it’s not even about anything, scrapes of wool, paper, means of beautiful craft. Textile samplers share an area with a digital jacquard loom—a machine that makes itself to generate complex patterns—which the artist is using to create a woven prototype.”

“Woven has been an important part of my career for a long time,” she says. “I started off as an industrial weaver for Maharam, a textile company in New York, but over the past five years I’ve wanted to use technology to rethink the kind of work you do with traditional processes. That’s why I thought this Jacquard machine. On this machine you can really find new questions and answers.”

Using Jacquard weaving techniques, Jongerius has been able to redefine what’s possible in weaving, whether that’s spawning three-dimensional fabric “bricks” that could potentially function as eco-friendly architectural elements or creating “sweave windows”, whose warm, sensual grids of color resemble abstract paintings.

Her connection to weaving is personal, she remembers how, growing up on a farm near Utrecht, her first brush with art and design came through textiles. “There wasn’t a lot of colors in our house. My father was a farmer and my mother was trained as a patternmaker, and growing up in the ’70s and ’80s we did as girls was knitting and cross-stitch.”

Doms to the art world but nothing a field of study with more innovative Jongerius, who was born in 1963, eventually enrolled at the Academy of Industrial Design in Eindhoven. A few years after graduating she was already presenting her designs in museums, from MoMA in New York to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Being appointed art director of colours and material at Vitra in 2007 allowed her to delve into the archives of the Swiss furniture brand, a period of research which she says, “became a whole study in itself, and at a certain moment it was ready for an exhibition.”

In 2017 she presented a series of objects and textile works at London’s Design Museum in a show called Breathing Colour: Some muted, some intensely vibrant, these works showed how special pigments and yarns—typically obtained by manufacturers for their changeability—react to light and evolve over the day. "Colour is for me a material," she says. "As a designer the key is this to get the audience involved in the color and say: ‘It’s not these colors that are stable...it looks the same in the morning as in the evening. And I don’t think that’s what makes quality of color. I think it’s about breathing with light’.

With this innovative approach to materials—which has also won Jongerius commercial projects for brands such as Bonperson, Vitra and Dutch design label 101 Copenhagen—the artist seeks to challenge the rigidity of the design industry, especially when it comes to attitudes towards manufacturing and sustainability. A large part of this involves reconnecting people with production processes. Last year she explored the “healing” potential of weaving in society and the environment in a solo show titled Woven Cosmoc at the Gropius Bau museum in Berlin.

Throughout the rooms, Jongerius installed a loom designed to be activated by several hands. One such device, “Dancing Yarns”, invited visitors to collaboratively make a rope by moving around the room holding strands of fibres attached to rope-branding machines. "The togetherness of making textile works is a long time very important social aspect of the craft," says Jongerius. "But since fast fashion all of this has been lost. So I wanted to address this.

Today the art space is her preferred access to explore urgent issues in the design industry: "Trifah illustrates better voice in a museum. In a museum you can really make contact with people via a material or craft, even more so than with a product. Something aesthetic makes you concentrate for longer in a certain item. And since they don’t have to spend hours there, they look at things totally differently. They’re more open.

Jongerius hopes these experiences will extend beyond the boundaries of the museum and encourage us to be more sensitive to the objects around us, from the clothes we wear to the colour of our furniture. "I think that’s also the role of a designer," she says. "That you can show people what’s possible and help people relate a bit more to the things they buy.'"