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Interview with Claudia Caviezel

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Vera Sacchetti, design critic
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Vera Sacchetti [VS]

Why did you choose textile design?

Claudia Caviezel [CC]

The short story is: during my foundation year at the Lucerne University of Applied Arts and Sciences I saw the wall of colour threads in the weaving room, and it just resonated with me. I really wanted to work with these colours and materials. Until then, I was not even aware textile design existed. I grew up in a “handy family”: my grandmother was a seamstress, with fabrics and threads all over her house, and my grandfather was a carpenter and musician. I’ve always enjoyed handwork, and for us it was always normal to make and adjust things by ourselves. This course seemed the right one to continue my studies, combining colours, material and craft in one.

vs

You’ve said it’s a field with immense potential. How so?

cc

Textile design is great because you can work in so many fields. You can work in fashion, with product designers, architects... you can make wallpaper, cardigans, carpets, curtains, photography... it’s a very wide field, if you play with it. Weaving, printing, knitting, stitching, pleating, tapping... in all kind of materials and scales, and with so many applications.

vs

You’ve lived and worked in Paris, studied in Madrid, and, earlier, went to California for a high school exchange. You’ve been to many places in the world, both for work and leisure. Is travel a source of inspiration?

cc

Travel is inspirational in different ways. There are always the traditions, the handcraft, colours, music, food, the way people live differently. But most of all, when I travel, I forget about what’s at home. You are open, free and looking at everything unburdened by the routine of everyday life... you are there and just fill up your batteries. For me, travel isn’t just inspirational for a concrete result, but more for the energy and space it brings.

vs

Can you tell us about a few trips that were important to you?

cc

When I was seventeen, I went to California, to a high school with ceramics, art, photography, dance, literature... in this context and in this age, being so far away from your surroundings — there was no Internet back then! — you can make a really big step towards yourself. I also learned English there. Then, of course, Madrid. That was after finishing my studies and five years at [luxury fabric manufacturer] Jakob Schlaepfer; I broke with everything and went to Spain to study. It was a year full of trips in Europe, with a very international group of diverse backgrounds: architects; textile, fashion and product designers; some people worked with video or photography. Every month we would go somewhere, to see what was

happening in design. It widened my professional horizons, and it allowed me to take a very significant step in my personal work. And I learned Spanish.

vs

In your career, you’ve had the opportunity to work within large structures — Jakob Schlaepfer and then Akris — and to create products with undeniable impact. What are the advantages of working in these kinds of contexts?

cc

I don’t know if it’s about their scale, but it’s definitely about their know-how. At Jakob Schlaepfer, it’s their history of 100 years, they’ve been making fabrics, stitching, embroideries... there’s just so much knowledge in the company and its archive, for me it was very enriching. In school, you learn your tools, but at Jakob Schlaepfer it got professional. I had the opportunity to work with a great team. I started in the print department, and then I could do embroidery, sequins, and ultimately mix everything. It was fantastic that I had the possibility to design these fabrics, which then were produced and sold.

vs

At Jakob Schlaepfer, you experimented across departments. What kind of results did you create?

cc

I just started experimenting and [creative director] Martin Leuthold was open to my ideas and gave me space to follow them — I had time, and experimented with almost all the techniques they had. It was great, because where else could you do that? At home, you don’t have a laser-cut machine and all those tools. The things I did were not uncommon, just a little different, coming from another angle — bringing the digital tools and combining them with the traditional hand drawing techniques. One example was a sequin fabric in which we managed to optimize the process of stitching the sequins, in different colours, at the same time. The result is nice — it was bought by Louis Vuitton. Ultimately, I had fun and the products were successful.

vs

I’m interested in your work process. How does your mind get to work?

cc

There are parallel tracks in my work. There’s a constant archival process in my head, this constant “this is nice, let’s take a picture” or “ah, so cool, I could do this”. This happens also with pictures and drawings I do, things not linked to a special project, and photos taken without a set goal. That process isn’t focused, but it is a very important source for my work. Then, when I work on a concrete project, I first take my time, get pregnant with the idea. As soon as I have a feeling and put it together in my head, I start... and then, mostly things come out differently. I let it go and see where it ends. If I just strictly followed my initial idea, I would miss a lot of things that can be unpredictable and amazing. I take a lot of time in the beginning, which is missing at the end, but this fact I

learned to estimate — it gives me the freedom to confidently make choices and trust my decisions.

vs

In your side projects, you display this relentless energy that allows you to experiment, test and try out new things. When did you start making side projects?

cc

I believe I started in school, where I already liked to have my feet in some other fields. I was in textile design and I made videos, took stills to make prints for textiles, was friends with the graphic designers, I painted and I was interested in the art department. I like to work on different projects concurrently so they can influence each other. But in the end, I haven't done so many side projects lately. I've consciously decided that I wanted to have a year or two with not that much visible and public output.

vs

There is for example, your work for Atelier Pfister, such as the *Surava* carpets, which also were born out of a trip.

cc

I travelled with [Pfister chief carpet buyer] Niels Blättler to Turkey. We first met people in Istanbul, who collaborate with the artisans that make the carpets. And then we went to central Anatolia, to Cappadocia, where we met the craftsmen, and we worked alongside them in the workshop, trying to decide what to do. It was so nice. I really get nervous and excited when I see these nice materials, threads, all of that. And there, we could mix the colours, there were so many samples... so many possibilities, and you can do it with these craftspeople, you can do it together. This happened again with a ceramics project I am doing for Atelier Pfister, I went to Portugal and I loved it. Really, my heart goes faster when I start with all the colours, getting to know the people and finding my way around the workshop.

vs

You've mentioned ceramics has some parallels with textile design.

cc

For me, it has. It's about the craft, the colours, shapes and materials, and you can work in many different scales. Of course, it is also completely different, but there is a similar approach — and you can do so much with it, not just bowls. Well, for the moment I'm starting with the bowls [laughs]. It's also interesting to work with glazes, to see the different outcomes. I am learning and, either way, you just have to experiment. With ceramics, right now, it's my hobby, but it's important and gives me energy... it makes me want to do more. I have also started to fuse ceramics into my textile work.

vs

Your work in the textile industry has changed your behaviour as a consumer. How so?

cc

I'm used to touching quality fabrics, especially for my work at Akris, and you cannot stop doing it when you're buying your own clothes. It's about the feeling of having a really nice sweater on your skin, or just an itchy, stupid acrylic plastic on you. What do you give yourself? In textiles, it's also and

always about how it feels. Of course people look at you, but first of all you just wear it yourself, and you want to be comfortable. And then of course, the ethical part of this choice comes in. I'm not saying I only buy fair trade... But I think we should just all buy less. Vivienne Westwood also said once, "don't buy so many clothes, choose carefully!"

vs

You've mentioned Vivienne Westwood is an inspiration, but so is [violinist] Nigel Kennedy.

cc

I have a hard time putting people up on a pedestal. I like Vivienne Westwood for her free, punk spirit, and I think the sustainable concept of Stella McCartney sounds great. However, although they seem very consequent, you never know the whole picture, and how much of it is marketing... With Nigel Kennedy, that's another story! I have been to two of his concerts and it was so much good energy, fun and play, combined with a musicality and professionalism that blew me away. He is really good at what he does and takes it seriously, but doesn't fit in and plays with this, too. Concerts like that just give you the push to go on, do what you like and have fun with it, and not to take everything and yourself so seriously, but to do what you do carefully and with full energy. Don't take it seriously... but at the same time, take it seriously.

vs

Is it this feeling that you don't want to be labelled as one thing or another? In your career, you don't seem to be fixed in the same place, you constantly experiment...

cc

If I thought "now I do this again and again, because I did it and they like it", I would be still be taping everything, because some people loved my diploma project. But that would be so boring! There are things that stay with me, such as these dots [used in bed linens by Atelier Pfister]; I've liked them for five years, and I am still working with them. It's not like I hop from one thing to the next, but I evolve: my work changes, my interest changes. I don't think I have to stand for a style. I want to try things, experiment, and see where they take me. It's still always my work, and I like it to be fresh, colourful, light and happy.

vs

You've won the Swiss Design Award three times — in 2003, 2007 and 2010. How has this federal encouragement impacted your career?

cc

A lot. When your work is appreciated like that, it gives you energy and reassures you: some people like it, too. They believed in my work so much, and it was so constant. When you win it the first time, you think, they really liked the diploma, but now, something totally different? And then you win it a second time, and then again... And of course, the money helped me a lot. When you work on your own, it really helps: to buy your computer, all the stuff you need, good equipment, good lawyers... [laughs].

vs

In you career, what remains to be done?

cc

I just keep going. Don't ask me about a five-year plan — I don't have one and I never had. I would never have planned to be where I am, and certainly not winning the Swiss Grand Award for Design. It's a big, big honour, and I can hardly believe it. If you could apply for it, I wouldn't even think of it. It's such a nice surprise. Sometimes things work out better than you'd have dared to imagine!

vs

Is there a danger to lose yourself in self-appreciation? And then losing your edge and possibility to innovate?

cc

Sometimes I try to do things as ugly as possible: it's really hard to make things really ugly. But then you come to something else.

vs

Is it a way to continuously push yourself out of your comfort zone?

cc

Yes: because otherwise it gets boring, and then I'd rather go do another job... this is about my life, and I want it to be interesting, moving. And what I do everyday is my life. I do a lot of things because I like to, and every project opens the door to the next. For everything I give one hundred per cent, and then I can put it aside, because it's done, and I tried my best.