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Interweaving Media

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INTER-WEAVING MEDIA





Five artists working in wood, glass, clay, metal and fiber collaborate with Pollack's design team to create a new line of fabrics.

by Chris Quirk

THERE'S AN OLD ITALIAN SAYING: "TRADUTTORE, TRADITORE."

The translator is a traitor. Poets are often the most aggrieved—mostly because in verse the sound, rhythm and resonances of words vie vainly for the translator's favor against the more workaday aspects of meaning.

Every once in while, though, a translation can add instead of subtract—something is created that didn't exist before and couldn't have been foreseen.

This happened recently when Pollack, the NYC textile design firm founded by **Mark Pollack** 76 TX, embarked on a two-year project to collaborate with five artists and designers working in different media. The goal? To create a line of newly released fabrics—called simply *The Makers Collection*.

The project grew from a brainstorming session between Mark Pollack, who has since moved on from the firm and is serving as a guest critic for a graduate Textiles studio at RISD this fall, and **Rachel Doriss** 99 TX, who has been with the company since 2000 and now heads the studio as vice president and design director. She and fellow Pollack designers Lauren Kidwell and Jenia Myagkov then took it from there.

"We are expert weavers, we know our craft inside and out—all the intricacies of fibers, yarns, dyeing, spinning and weaving," Doriss explains. "But with this project we wanted to tap into the minds of people working with totally different materials. We wanted them to express their unique perspective on making, but translate that into our medium, bringing the way they approach their particular material to fabric."

It was not a risk-free experiment. Each of the 13 fabrics inspired by the invited artists had to be plausible for production runs. "We have definitely done wild things in the past, but maybe not this density of wild all at the same time," Doriss admits. "Sometimes if we're developing a line and a design isn't working or production is delayed, we'll can it and go on to something else. But we didn't have that option here. Since we had committed to this as our Fall 2013 line, we had to deal not only with the timing and logistics, we had to make something great."



“There’s something about the RISD brain that we knew would be crucial to the success of this project.” Rachel Doriss 99 TX

The studio began by identifying the expressive media they wanted to explore: woodworking, metals, glass, ceramics and knitwear. The team then turned to the RISD network to find artists whose work they love and with whom they felt they could collaborate productively. “We weren’t limiting ourselves to the RISD community, but it was the perfect place to make connections,” Doriss says. “There’s something about the RISD brain that we knew would be crucial to the success of this project; we’re really trained to push ourselves. It’s a way of persisting with a problem—of fleshing out ideas.”

In the end, Pollack selected knit designer **Liz Collins** 91 TX/ MFA 99 TX in Brooklyn, ceramicist **Nathan Craven** MFA 08 CR in Roswell, NM, glass artist **Katherine Gray** MFA 91 GL in Los Angeles, furniture designer **Matthias Pliessnig** 03 FD in Providence and jewelry artist and former RISD faculty member **Klaus Bürgel**, who divides his time between New York City and Massachusetts. Each artist was chosen based on clear evidence of individual expertise in his or her preferred medium.

WIDE OPEN PROCESS

The process began by asking artists essentially unfamiliar with textile design to “bring their perspective to a different way of looking at fabric,” says Doriss, who grew up learning about fabric and textiles from her grandmother, but didn’t actually realize that a pastime would become her passion until she transferred to RISD—“and everything became so clear.”

Based on location and medium, each of the artists interacted with Pollack in a slightly different way. “They invited me in and told me I could do anything I wanted,” says Collins, the only collaborating artist with a textiles background. “It was wide open, with basically no parameters. But I knew that when you take an idea from one medium you don’t translate it directly into another,” she points out. “You have to go through all these different iterations. That was a good—but hard—part of the process.”

Bürgel approached the challenge by returning to the visual source for much of his jewelry. “I do these drawings—five or six a day—kind of like a diary,” he says in explaining how he explores ideas and generates designs for his work. “At one point, I ran into the trap of thinking ‘I am now a fabric designer.’” But when the jewelry maker started proposing things smaller in scale, the Pollack team cautioned him against predetermining the outcome. “Do what you would do in your studio!” they urged. “Don’t work on the computer. Make your drawings and we’ll go from there.”



The large gestural drawings jewelry artist Klaus Bürgel makes to inform his own work proved to be perfect inspiration for the *Bling* design Pollack developed as a result.

Steam-bent wooden furniture by **Matthias Pliessnig** 03 FD inspired an undulating, ribbed fabric called *Odalisque*.



Once he heard that, Bürgel says it “opened things up tremendously. I had never worked with fabric and was blown away by how complex it is and what the possibilities are. I wanted very much to capture this movement that is a bit dizzying, like a tiger pacing around a cage—powerful and strong but bundled up.” Translating this core idea into reality is where the Pollack team stepped in to provide expertise in producing repeat patterns that would work on the looms.

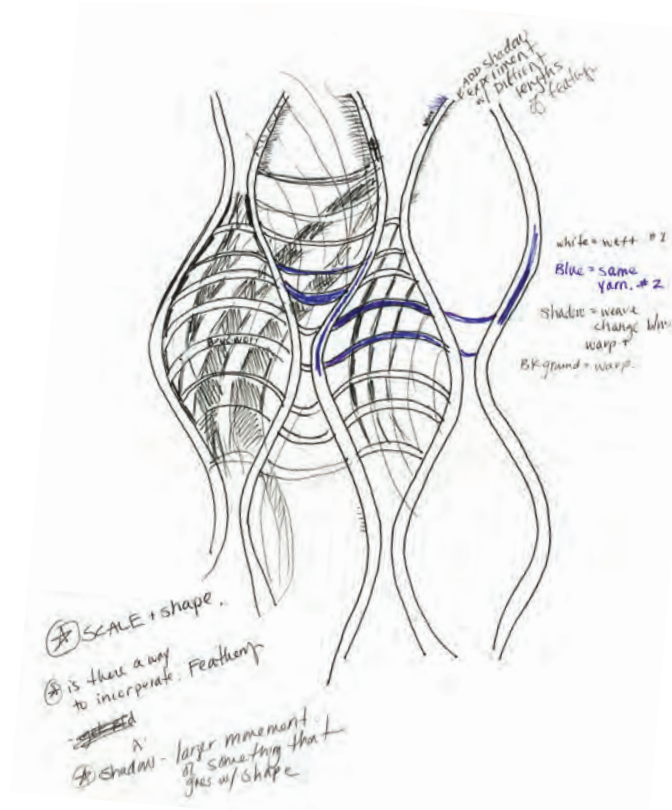
3D THINKING, 2D OUTPUT

Now teaching in the Furniture Design department at RISD, Matthias Pliessnig works primarily with a technique called steam bending, often used for shipbuilding. It was in building his own small sailboat—complete with a translucent, varnished Dacron hull and Tyvek sail—that he mastered the process, which involves heating wood to around 300 degrees in a tubular oven he built himself. “Matthias is like the mad scientist of wood,” says Doriss. Once he removes the wood from the oven, he has about 30 seconds to clamp rubbery slats into place on a skeletal frame before they become rigid again.

Pliessnig’s design for the fabric called *Interplay* mirrors his process. “Just as the ribs look perfectly spaced in his work but aren’t formulaic (the wood dictates what needs to happen and he splits the difference), we did the same thing with the fabric, which is not perfectly geometric,” Doriss explains. “It’s hand-drawn and he could see that right away.”

For a fabric called *Odalisque*, the Pollack team emulated a slender, boat-like model in his studio that had actually been created years earlier when Pliessnig took a textiles class at RISD. Ogee-shaped ribs are created by using a special yarn on the back of the fabric that shrinks when heated, causing the surface to pucker.

Working from his New Mexico studio, ceramist Nathan Craven created fabric designs that incorporate the idiosyncratic forms of his ceramic murals. Using an extrusion process, he creates forms he dubs “bricks” and assembles them into works that cover



“I had never worked with fabric and was blown away by how complex it is and what the possibilities are.”

jewelry artist **Klaus Bürgel**





a wall or floor. “My only goal in creating each individual form is to make it approachable but unrecognizable,” he says. “Once someone can identify a form, the mystery is gone and interest takes a plunge from there.”

To get him thinking about this project, Pollack sent him endless samples of fabrics they’ve produced in the past. “Because Nathan does these extruded pieces that are lifted off the wall or floor, he was drawn to the relief of voided velvet,” Doriss says. “It seemed appropriate,” Craven adds. “I wanted to focus on two main things for the fabric: porosity and dimensionality. It had to feel thick and brick-like, but also seem to allow light and air to pass through” — much like the hollow sections of his installations. “The question was how to translate that into a fabric one-eighth of an inch thick.”

In *Odyssey*, the combination of pinstripes in the underlying weave and the raised velvet create depth, which is further heightened by a shadow-like halo around each shape. Some of the shapes have openings that expose the pinstripe base, which allows the pattern to breathe. In addition to their dimensionality, Craven’s designs are among the most colorful in the line. Speaking of the fabric they ultimately called *Wacky*, Doriss says, “We must have woven a hundred different color trials. We did several beautiful, refined versions but realized it just didn’t want to be in soft gray.” One variation, for instance, uses a palette of pea green, plum and persimmon. Another combines crimson, cornsilk and ocher.



The porosity and dimensionality of Nathan Craven’s ceramics led to two related fabrics, including *Wacky* (below left).





“It opened a whole new world for me. The experience shifted things at a time of great transition in my professional life.” Liz Collins 91 TX/MFA 99 TX

INSPIRING EXPERIMENT

Contributing from the West Coast, Gray started the design translation exercise by creating a blown glass piece as a model for her fabric, called *Beam*. “It was actually a little easier for me to make a piece instead of a bunch of sketches,” she laughed. “I was making some glass forms with translucent white patterns with a technique called caning, using little rods of colored glass on the outside. *Beam* came out of having a pattern on one side and a kind of ghostly pattern you can see through the glass on the other side.”

To capture the perceptual qualities of the glass model in the fabric, the Pollack team created a sheer drapery fabric that incorporates both real and implied translucence. In the pattern, vessel shapes are overlapped to simulate the ghosting effect. As the folds of sheer fabric gather in front of the natural light of a window, the rhythmic layering of the vessels becomes clear, emphasized by a lustrous yarn that echoes the shimmer of glass. “I was pretty confident it would work, but I really love it,” Gray admits. “It’s quite beautiful.”

Collins, the only collaborating artist of the bunch who studied textiles as both an undergraduate and graduate student at RISD, says she drew inspiration for the project from abstract phenomena. “Explosions—but almost Lichtenstein, cartoon explosions—sharp lines, vibrations; it’s hard to articulate,” she says. “This was the perfect opportunity for me to develop the artwork I had in mind as a pure exploration and see how it fits into a design.”

As an avid machine knitter and knitwear designer, Collins loves playing with texture. Her designs for *The Makers Collection* involve weft floats—threads hanging off the face of the fabric to create a fringe—or in the case of *Aphrodite*, cascading, gossamer waves of white strands. “We actually developed one design that looked like a crazy lady wearing a feather boa,” Collins says, adding: “We had to trim that down a bit.”

Once the fabric samples for the new line started arriving at Pollack’s studio, Collins—a fellow New Yorker—says she would get text messages from Doriss saying: “You’ve got to come over here. These are incredible!”

For the artists involved, the collaboration was equally incredible. “It makes me look at my work from another perspective—from the outside,” Bürgel says. “I find that very helpful. And I have to give Rachel and the designers at Pollack a lot of credit. They put a lot of time and research into fulfilling the technical needs and maintaining the integrity of my idea.”

Collins echoes his experience. “It opened up a whole new world for me,” she says. “The experience shifted things at a time of great transition in my professional life.”

“It never ceases to amaze me,” Gray adds. “I graduated from RISD 20 years ago, so it’s pretty distant now. But it’s interesting that stuff like this still pops up.” As for Craven, he simply says: “This was my first really big collaboration and from my end it’s been a total joy.” ■



“This was my first really big collaboration and from my end it’s been a total joy.”

Nathan Craven MFA 08 CR

Rachel Doriss 99 TX loved checking the samples as each new fabric came to fruition, such as this one inspired by drawings (above) and glasswork by Katherine Gray MFA 91 GL. Liz Collins’ highly textured knitwear designs inspired shaggy fabrics like *Aphrodite*, which features cascading strands of white gossamer.