

Crossing borders

It really is astonishing, how these two people, who have come from totally different creative backgrounds, form a unity as they work together and complement each other.

Both of them have their own styles but without each other it would not be possible to produce the work they do, which demonstrates a synthesis of their artistic talents.

Barbara Esser, a professional textile designer, started to study at the Art Institute Niederrhein, in Krefeld, Germany in 1988 and graduated as a textile designer. Shortly after Barbara bought herself an electronically powered 24 shaft Loom and since then has worked as a freelance designer.

Wolfgang Horn read architecture at the Art Institute of Duesseldorf and graduated in 1999 with the degree of Dipl. Ing.. His interest in painting and utopian ideas of space, as shown in the legendary "Star Wars" films in 1977, led him early on in his career to produce drawings in this style. These, he and Barbara would later use as the basis for their installations.

Since 1993 both he and Barbara Esser have worked together in their tiny studio in Duesseldorf where there is just enough space to have Barbara's loom. Here she weaves all her fabrics which are mainly double cloths. These unique textiles produced by Esser, form the basis of their joint artistic work and are the starting point for all their creations.

It is not only the fact that they studied different subject areas for their degrees, but their different interests that make them versatile and prepared to cross boundaries to achieve the effects they are looking for. They, themselves do not specifically categorise their own work. They choose to remain flexible.

The fabrics that Barbara Esser weaves are textiles which have been made into cushions, rugs to be put on the floor or even as fabric for tailor-made clothing. (Cat.No.4) Here an attractive double cloth with folds was made by using the *Cloque* technique where one of the warps is under more tension than the other one. In the 90's it was very typical for Barbara to work with contrasting colours e.g. black, red, yellow and orange. Even though they are intensive colours they radiate peace and harmony. The quality of the material and the unusual but defined cut of the waistcoat which was produced from the fabric (Cat.No.58) demonstrate her skills perfectly. Whilst Barbara Esser can produce beautiful clothing and it was suggested to her that she could work as a fashion designer, she knew that the time needed to produce these fabrics was so great that the clothing would be too expensive to sell on the open market.

The fabrics are unique with a woven width of 1,50m and the length of 3 – 5m and with a density of 4 000-6 000 ends. Weaving these highly technical fabrics, Barbara usually spends more than 100 hours on the fabric before it's finished. Adding the time which the design takes and the assembling of the garment the job of a fashion designer is unrealistic for Barbara Esser. The few garments that are made have to stay "one offs". One of these is a suit, which Wolfgang Horn wears (Cat. No.57). From a distance it appears chequered black and white but close up you find loads of little skulls. They do not have anything frightening or affected about them. It is a legitimate but somewhat ironical game of optical illusion. The material belongs to a collection of patterns with small designs, where there is a flickering effect but it can

also be seen as a one single piece. Next to the skull motive there are similar double cloths with names like e.g. "Parrots" from 1995 (Cat. No.13) and "Runners" (Cat. No.14) from the same year.

It's clear that the complicated woven waistcoat, as described, cannot be mass produced. However, when textiles are made which could be mass produced in part or in their entirety there is a problem. Something has to be added in a variety of different ways so that the industry cannot duplicate it.

Wolfgang Horn transforms the textiles into pictures, room dividers and objets d'art. And suddenly he changes the geometrical compositions to something that crosses the textile border.

The textiles of Barbara Esser evolve from the never-ending variations available on her loom. Sometimes there are repeated patterns, but not always. Bold colour contrasts juggle with optical illusions, which partly transform reality. ("TV", Cat.No.21, "The Stock Exchange", Cat. No.5, "Circuit Board", Cat. No. 26). Technical possibilities are put into action for workable effects. Barbara Esser produces the basis for the procedures. Through the changes that Wolfgang Horn makes to the fabrics they become a newly defined object. The artists don't give their role in a piece of art work. That's very important for their work. Both of them cross the borders of the traditional areas of textile design, in which they are both perfectly skilled, to produce works of art which are not intended to be for clothing, furnishing or even decoration, but for changing the appearance of a large room and its structure in an extravagant and sometimes daring way.

The most impressive example is the installation "6 Rugs" which was exhibited at the 7th "German Designer Weekend" in Ehrenhof, Düsseldorf. Here the artists took the huge green lawns as their basis for the transformation, where they made use of the rectangular lawns for their "lawn rugs" which gave them the idea of creating "6 Rugs". Here Esser/Horn used natural coloured cotton, which they were given by an industrial weave company from the wastage of woven cloth edges, to span over massive frames of different sizes. This gave a very dense white area in every frame, which at the same time maintained its textile character because of the loose white and soft-looking threads which did not appear at all harsh. Such bright, almost white areas were put on the rectangular grass areas and achieved a spectacular result whereby nature came to life through patterns, which actually came from the rugs but looked as if they had been woven.

All of this at a minimal expense. Quite an achievement!

The courage, to manage such a large scale project (both middle lawns measured 45 x 11 m, the four outside ones each 35 x 11 m), is just as impressive as the simple enhancement of the green grass through the white textile rugs.

The base material, woven cotton edges, has also been used for other designs and installations. Through additional material the threads were thicker and further textile designs appeared, which demonstrated over dimensional plain weave and a twill structure. (Cat. No. 40, 41).

In April 2002 Esser and Horn produced a massive installation called "Treppenhaus" in Düsseldorf's "Stilwerk" (shopping mall), Hanging closely and loosely together, the polyester threads took on the elliptic shape of the stairs.

Also here there is no sign that the size of this massive room installation put the designers off this project. 9000 metres of yarn materials, in individual lengths of 1,50 m and up to 6,50 m. were used. The form of the stairs of the "Stilwerk" takes on the right-angled threads naturally, which at the same time are flexible and can therefore

follow the ellipsis around the railing. This installation has the double function of acting as wall hangings and at the same time hiding the gallery which is just behind them. The function of covering the galleries is secondary in importance to the work itself which immediately draws the attention of those who pass by.

In comparison with that their works "Shirt 1-2-3"(Cat. No.45), a picture installation made out of plastic tags, or even an armchair in 70's design made of rectangular translucent plastic cushions filled with old shredded banknotes, seem ironic. (cat. No. 53). By the way you don't sit any better on "millions" than on any other cushions which calls into question the value of money and leads us to wonder whether the inflated prices of often uncomfortable, designer furniture, are justifiable.

However, the fabrics are still the most beautiful, the white / cream cloqué from 1994 (Cat. No.8), where clearly defined small squares are assembled together and create a great pattern of "untidiness" through cramming and spacing of the different tensioned warps, through which the seriousness of the pattern dissolves without losing the shape at the same time. Or "Circuit board" from 2001 (Cat. No.26), in which restlessness of the pattern reflects the actual movement of the unbelievably quick movements of a circuit board. A circuit board and a loom both offer a huge variety of possibilities and don't limit the creativity of the designer.

The double cloths by Barbara Esser, and in particular "Circuit board" lets both sides of a pattern seem like different sounds, which you almost think you can physically hear.

On the same warp further double clothes were created such as "Foliage" (Cat. No.37) and "Untitled" (Cat. No.38) both also from 2001. The falling brown leaves are captured nicely in the mainly green coloured carpet "Lawn". The brown tones in the bottom half of the woven part form a carpet of leaves, whilst in the upper part of the wall hanging the smaller squares get less and less showing the bareness of the branches where the leaves have already fallen from the trees. A dense forest line, consisting of dark brown and green vertical stripes with light yellow in between, gives the remaining part with its geometric forms, a natural feeling. The colour on the reverse side glows in warm brown-orange tones, on which more green leaves seem to be floating and swirling through the air.

The rug "Untitled" (Cat. No.38) has got the same colour weights and at first sight it seems to have a structure which repeats itself regularly and it shows calmness and is not like the lively "leaf pattern". It is only after one has looked at it a second time that one can see the subtly changing structures. When concentrating on the diagonal stripes one can see that one horizontal division in the middle is definitely smaller than the other three, whilst irregular green crosses in the wider diagonal stripes are differently directed. Such little details used at the same time have a significant effect, because together they make the piece a unity.

Very clearly, herein lies the strength of the work of Barbara Esser. She manages to escape from the normal confines of the loom and through fantastic deviations gives her designs unbelievable liveliness.

The similarities of the works by the Bauhaus weavers are perhaps coincidental. Esser/Horn admit that they themselves were surprised when they read the literature about the old weaving structures. The similarity comes from the fact that the looms used were of a similar type to the one used by Barbara Esser, although they were ,of

course, not computer assisted as hers is. However, they too used geometric patterns and the use of rich contrasting colours was just as important then as it is now. Also the careful use of all the technical possibilities available was, and is, of special importance. In particular the attraction of warp tension or the interest which of varying materials with their tactile and visual characteristics.

A fabric like "Stock Exchange" (Cat. No.5) was inspired by the daily news reports of the ever-changing Stock market, and is therefore clearly a child of our present time. Other pieces (Cat. Nos. 4, 6, 34) remind us of designs by Gunta Stöelzl, and then again other designers, who followed the Bauhaus style afterwards.

One thing might be added in this connection. The diligence with which Barbara Esser carries out her work, never tired of experimenting with her loom to find new possibilities and ways of creating new effects, is similar to the dedication of the Bauhaus weavers. It is this total commitment to her work that enables Barbara to produce materials of such high quality.

The range of Esser / Horn's work is very wide : textile works, objects, installations and clothes. It is a characteristic of those who work in an inter-disciplinary way that border lines are crossed, but the designers feel at home on both sides of the border. This leaves all opportunities open. Barbara Esser and Wolfgang Horn are such people, always open to new ideas and impulses.