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HaaT Trick

ISSEY MIYAKE INC. in Tokyo, is the hub of this most eponymous of Japanese design companies. With its crisp, white spaces of polished concrete, floor-to-ceiling windows, and neatly ordered rails of exquisite textiles and clothing, it hums with a beautifully impossible efficiency. Among the Miyake brands managed here is the distinct and characteristically sophisticated HaaT, which has just enjoyed its 15th year in business.

The brand name HaaT (Hindi for 'village market'), represents the intersection of tradition and the future, East and West. This "gentle gaze" deliberately embraces all that is HaaT: borderless, material imbued, and hand-work-centred thinking, designing and making. With a primary interest in bringing the charm and connectivity of the makers' hand to 'production' textiles, it exercises effortless ingenuity and rationality, with garment design respectful and sympathetic to carefully developed fabrics. Since its inception, HaaT has focussed on its 'made-in-Japan' line (*HeaRT*) engaging in sensitive collaboration with regional craftspeople and manufacturers, and testing of possibilities through the small factory system to come up with contemporary clothing solutions. HaaT seeks to bring a 'brand-original perspective' to the various traditions it explores, ensuring comfort and a contemporary lightness, broad but sensitive appeal, together with the assurance of everlasting enjoyment. At the centre of this careful-creativity is HaaT's Creative Director, long-time Managing and Design Director of ISSEY MIYAKE INC., Makiko Minagawa.

Born in the ancient capital of Kyoto, Minagawa grew up surrounded by and very much aware of textile culture and started making her own clothes as a child. "I was used to clothes and comfortable with their language". While a student of textiles at Kyoto City University of Fine Arts, she threw herself into these passions, but as a self-confessed enfant terrible, actually spent most of her student days in her own atelier, experimenting with dyeing, and making shibori (pressure-resist-dyed) t-shirts to sell. She wove a great deal and had many aspirations in weaving, but there was a frustration with not being able to do exactly what she wanted. "I could of course work really hard and produce 100m but I was excited by the idea of large-scale production, the 1000m runs possible with power looms. At the same time, I was thrilled by diversity. It was an exciting time in contemporary art and I was inspired by the Pop-art 'production' of Warhol etc."

From college days onwards, she had a burgeoning fascination with the eclectic and changing face of the fashion world. It was perhaps quite natural then that she would move into the industry and after setting out as an independent designer, a chance meeting with Issey Miyake revealed they held many values in common, particularly in a desire to "use the wonderful things available to us". Minagawa was appointed Textile Director in 1971 and she knew she was in the right place. "From the outset, Miyake's work gave you the feeling it was the first time you were viewing things. It had a huge appeal. There was a strong element of research and looking deeply, of seeking something with permanence. Things then became alternative and avant-garde. It was very inspiring."

Early 1970's London provided valuable insight into the global fashion industry but interestingly, this laid the foundations for a lasting commitment to Japanese materials. However, beginning with native narrow width fabrics, then double-unit cloths, they finally moved into a fusion with the western cloth traditions. Later, enjoying the creative freedom of an economically booming Japan, with investment and flexibility in materials and technologies, Minagawa was able to freely explore and play with ideas on an industrial scale.

One might ask then, how is such a passion for research rationalised with the fast world of fashion? “With its two-year planning focus and six-month cycles, which MUST be delivered against, it is actually an interesting stimulant for ideas. At Miyake, a full cycle means material to fabric to product and we are constantly considering: ‘What shall we create for next year?’” And whatever the theme, preparation and process, there is much unknown, which mustn’t be allowed to hold back potential. She also describes how while ‘trends’ are of course something to be aware of, if anything, at Miyake they generally work in the opposite direction. Here at least, people aren’t doing the same things so there is little competition and they are free to ‘linger’ as long as they like. She also acknowledges the unnatural and relentless pace of the fashion seasons. “Changing things slowly is better. Being rational with ideas and preserving things that matter is what is important. Half-baked ideas will never survive.” “The bottom line with textiles and fashion is that it has to be about beautiful things for people to wear.”

In making textiles, Minagawa exercises gentle but much informed philosophies. In respect of materials, there are no special favourites, and instead she enjoys those, which have strength and permanence. The necessity of designing for the seasons brings a shift of focus but most important is that things feel good. She admits though “I suppose my true love is in natural materials and where possible, the organic. I always want to embrace these values where I can.” The craftsman’s tools are also very important to Minagawa. “Used over many generations they eventually become distinctly worn, and while these ‘flaws’ add unique character to the related textiles, they also carrying a special ‘flavour’ in themselves”. While exploring Japanese *itajime* (pressure-board-resist) traditions, and recalling ancient printing blocks in India, she recognised that the edges of these boards had their own qualities. So, these were used to ‘print’ pattern on to fabric and through the new *Itajime Border* collection, bring additional vocabulary to the spring/summer story.

Of colour, Minagawa describes how we are surrounded by it and as such it is something always felt. Intuition allows a sampling and selection from this daily palette and inspiration is taken from those that resonate, while appropriateness for design is always decided by looking at it against the skin. “We are interested in the purest of colours. Last season we introduced a *monsuki* (traditional family crest) dying process from Kyoto. It is a special black dye, which we researched and trialled heavily. In doing so we have also been able to use the precious knowledge held by an elderly man. It feels right to be using such a traditional process so we have adopted it again.” S/S2015 also sees the introduction of a ‘greens’ collection, *Tea Color*, inspired by and then developed from a favourite green tea from Miyazaki, in southern Japan, celebrating not only a special palette, but also the ‘experience’ of drinking tea.

Minagawa enjoys investigating at least one tradition each season, and tries to show how these processes might survive anew. A/W2014’s *Technical Library*, was just that, drawing on numerous age-old processes, employing *shibori*, *Kasuri* (bound thread resist-dyeing, also translated in jacquard weaving), Indian ikat and Japanese hand-cut stitch machine work. The S/S2015 collections include ‘temper printing’, rediscovered in a traditional dye house. An early precursor of transfer printing, it uses pigmented ‘clay’ that can be blended, assembled and shaped into printing rollers. These in-turn have a somewhat limited lifetime and so bring welcome transience and exclusivity. One story brings deliciously pigment-rich, monochrome ‘squares’; while the bright and fresh *Color Mosaic*, is full of playful charm, an interpretation typically Minagawa.

In terms of the deeper values of traditional practices, experiences in India (working on the *Asha by MDS* collaboration 1984~) and observing countless examples of refined and dedicated craftsmanship, left a lasting impression. Through the 'made-in-India' line *HaaTH* (the Hindi word for 'hand'), and a sustained collaboration with the workshops in Ahmedabad, Minagawa continues to bring the most exquisite of Indian traditions to the collections. The importance of handwork therefore remains a key concern in her work and while it is necessary to ask if it is feasible to make several things in one day, the primacy is in making good work, and often over time. One thing she learnt early from Asha (Sarabhai) is the power of the crafts-persons' hand. "To achieve the best work is far more important than the cost of the result".

Of inspiration, Minagawa is pleasantly aloof, struggling to think beyond her working instinct to explore. She enjoys the occasional museum visit and is very fond of the V&A in London, from where she always 'takes back' something special and lasting, also the Folk Craft Museum in Tokyo, and the Musée Guimet in Paris. But her main inspiration perhaps remains the things in the world around us. Recalling earlier life she talks warmly about green inner-urban spaces. "I am from Kyoto. We are fortunate to have many temples and gardens. I have always been aware of them, but in recent years I have rediscovered their value. Also I like waterfalls. They are perhaps not so easy to find, but there is a special energy and quality to be felt and seen in the water." The wider world has broader appeal and pressed on where she might travel with opportunity, she confesses a desire to see the 'ice countries'. "I think the ice-white must be splendid. I'd like to see that one-day."

Of ambition, Minagawa is humble. "People are small. We can't do much more than is humanly possible. I suppose in my work, I want to strive to make things, which are good. I want to find things that make people happy. I want to express truth through the things I create." In doing so, Makiko Minagawa is a very busy lady, "I do not have much free time. I am like a tuna in the ocean, always swimming, always moving-on."

And while we let this great master explore the deep waters, we can only look forward to what the next inspiration or material (re)discovery brings, and what marvellous additions we might find on those neat, polished rails.