

# TEXTILE

'Then I know the person you should talk to'

Grethe Wittrock, 56 years  
Lives in Copenhagen  
Married

Learnt weaving from Annette Juel  
and Kyoto Seika University, School of Art, Japan  
Represented by brownrotta arts, United States  
Has an agent in Washington, DC

## IN THE GREENHOUSE

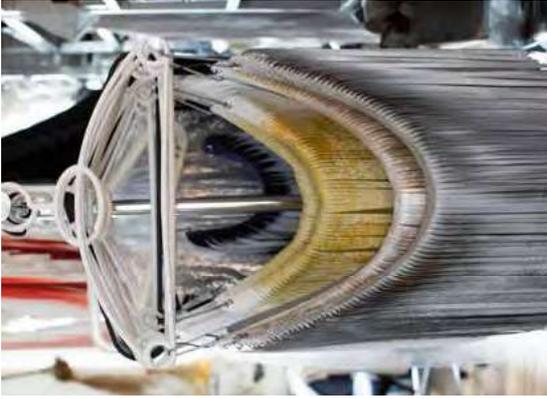
The year is drawing to a close, but the sun's rays still provide some warmth. We meet in the greenhouse in the garden behind the building in Nørrebrogade in central Copenhagen where Grethe Wittrock has had her workshop since 1992 as part of the collective group Tekstil 5C. Grethe pours glasses of blueberry juice and offers me the best seat.

We talk about how amazing it is that these lush places exist in the heart of the city, and Grethe mentions that she is thinking of moving to the countryside. A peaceful spot where she can immerse herself fully in her work. She has found a house she would like to buy in Odsherred, in the north-west of Zealand, and her husband, who is an urbanite at heart, loves the idea. The only catch is that the owner of the house does not want to sell, or not right now. 'When we move, I am going to spend the first years on my knees, nose to the ground, that's how much I miss the fresh smell of soil,' she says. Are you going to retire? I wonder. 'No, I'll be working full blast. I expect the land will give me a fresh boost of energy to create new works of art. I was born and raised in the country, near Rosnaes, and have spent my entire adult life in cities, so now I'm just really keen to get back to nature.'

## IN DYREHAVEHUSET (DEER PARK HOUSE)

The last time I saw Grethe was in the summer of 2020, at a summer salon hosted by the textile artist Bess Kristoffersen in Dyrehavehuset. The event marked the end of Grethe's one-year residence at Dyrehavehuset, a beautifully renovated deer feeding house at Gunderslevholm Estate. Today, the house on the edge of the wood serves as Bess Kristoffersen's studio and as a guest studio for another artist/craft maker in a one-year residency. During her stay at Dyrehavehuset, Grethe created experimental textile sketches and an installation made of painted linden branches and 'fingerprints' of tree stumps on paper.





## AT THE LIGHTHOUSE

Prior to 2020, the last time we ran into each other was in 2018, when Grethe had just returned from a two-month stay at The North Atlantic Lighthouse near the city of Helsingør on Denmark's North Sea coast. During this stay she produced pieces that are now included in the Lighthouse's permanent art collection.

At the lighthouse, Grethe worked closely together with anthropologist Rikke Nyvang, a collaboration she speaks highly of. Both the reflective aspect and their more outgoing explorations of the local area and Thy National Park. They kept the door to the studio open to offer locals a look at the creative process.

Grethe has long worked with worn, weather-beaten sails. Initially, she worked with big, heavy canvas sails donated by the training ship Georg Stage and later with lighter, densely woven, thinner sails from yachts. She hand-prints abstract patterns on the sails and sometimes uses a leather punch to make perforations, also by hand, to create large translucent pieces or uses a scalpel and scissors to create sculptural, floating works of art. In 'Menneske og Vind' (People and Wind), the Facebook group Kvindeligt Sejlklub (Women's Sailing Club) donated weather-beaten sails, which were transformed into huge textile sculptures of 'birds'.

'My working process is slow,' she says. 'It takes a meditative mindset and training in precision; something I learnt while studying in Kyoto. I apprenticed with a katazome master, learning to cut big, delicate stencil patterns by hand.'

**FACTS**  
Thisted Municipality took over Helsingør Lighthouse in 2007 and began an extensive renovation process in 2013 after a process that reached out to the local community and municipal agencies. The user-involving process resulted in a vision for the lighthouse: 'The new Helsingør Lighthouse works with art, nature and people. The lighthouse is a meeting place for professionals and locals working together to explore and express the relationship between nature, art and people, as it is manifested today and as it has been manifested historically. The activity is based on the notion of "nature in art and art in nature", reflection, in-depth studies and expressions inspired by the "soul" of the lighthouse.'  
The project 'Menneske og Vind' began with an open call to artists and scientists in early 2018. The idea was to form a partnership between an artist and a scientist aimed at fostering mutual inspiration and co-creation. Another key priority was to promote interactions with the local community.

## IN THE NETWORK

I also met Grethe in 2017. At the time, she was speaking enthusiastically about the United States. She still does; with excitement and with longing, since today she was originally supposed to fly to Washington, DC, to meet up with her fellow artist Francie Hester, whom she is planning a joint exhibition with. 'Ever since we met, we have been wanting to do a project together. I was also supposed to go to Houston, Texas, where I am hoping to stage an exhibition in the not-too-distant future at Houston Center for Contemporary Craft. And I was going to meet my agent in Washington, DC, and a potential new cooperation partner in Dallas.'

The trip has been delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Your clients are in the United States? I ask. 'Yes, at least, many of my clients,' Grethe replies.

'When I first met my husband in 2006, he was about to leave for New York to take a master's degree at Columbia University. I came along, and that allowed me to develop my existing network and to work on a specific project.'

I had received a working grant of DKK 30,000 from Danmarks Nationalbank and had spent DKK 42,000 on Swiss gold yarns and Japanese silk yarns. Eight suitcases filled with gold yarn! I was going to make a modern macramé wall hanging inspired by the story of the Danish gold reserves, which were secretly shipped to the United States just before the breakout of World War Two. I created the piece in a small studio owned by the graphic designer Milton Glaser (who designed the iconic "I♥NY"). The studio was near the Empire State Building, and the pulsating city was all around me. It took more than a year to finish "Gold Reserves Copenhagen-New York 1939-49", which was later exhibited at the Danish Consulate General in New York. I hope that one day, Danmarks Nationalbank will buy it, because it addresses a part of Danish history and the history of the national bank.'

Grethe returned to the US in 2015-2018. This time, her destination was Washington DC, where her husband had taken up a position as climate and energy adviser at the Danish embassy. Although Washington's art scene is smaller than New York's, Grethe

soon established a daily practice.

'I applied for a Halcyon Arts Lab Fellowship and was given a large, bright studio in an art school building owned by Sashiko Kuno, a Japanese woman who promotes art and culture. This gave me a setting where I met colleagues from many different fields of art on a daily basis. The tone here was lighter than I'm used to from Scandinavia. You are invited out, people are open and curious and quick: "Hello, what are you doing?" And when you tell them, they respond, "Then I know the person you should talk to, here's my card." They'll write a note on the back of the card, and then it's up to you to follow up. I'm not trying to paint a completely rosy picture; American society can also be tough and merciless. It takes dedication, power, courage and, not least, luck to establish oneself in the United States, and I could never have done it without my husband's loving support.'

I ask Grethe whether, in a sense, she reinvented herself in America?

She pauses before answering. 'I certainly developed a greater freedom in my expression. Americans are not focused on whether you define yourself as an artist or a maker, they look at what you do and assess your work on its merits. They don't try to fit things into boxes but celebrate the ones who dare to think outside the box, so yes, you can reinvent yourself, and that frees up a new capacity.'

What has America meant for Grethe Wittrock in business terms, I ask.

'It has enabled me to find colleagues, a network, a gallery, an agent and collaborations with interior design and architecture firms that use my works in interior solutions and commission works from me. I feel a strong gratitude towards America and the many people there who believe in me.'

## IN THE BEGINNING

Did you always plan to work with textile fibres as an artist?

'In upper secondary school I specialized in classical languages and culture, because I thought I was going to be an archaeologist, but instead, fibres and structures came to define my path. As a child,



I roamed through the corn fields at Rosness, and I've always been fascinated by nature's forms and the different fibres that can be transformed into sculptural objects.'

'I was part of the first class to graduate from the then Department of Industrial Design at the School of Arts and Crafts (now the Royal Danish Academy – Design). I graduated in 1992 and had imagined a career based on designing commercial textile for industry. That did not work out.'

Instead, I decided to work with unique pieces in my own studio and established my own business in 1996. Big working grants from the Danish Arts Foundation and other foundations have allowed me to develop my own projects and stage exhibitions.'

## AT DRIFTSKONTORET

Industry or not, in early summer 2021, Grethe Wittrock will be exhibiting at Driftskontoret, the gallery at Bruunshåb GI, Papfabrik (page 105).

'I just pulled out my project description, because I knew you were going to ask about the exhibition,' says Grethe. 'It's been almost two years since I wrote it, but I do remember writing that I wanted to work with soil from the local area; I want to add raw soil – deposited by water and wind – and with pebbles, gravel, sand, clay and limestone to the pulp at the paper mill. I am also going to include roots and textile fibres. I will then translate the different expressions into sculptural objects to be exhibited at Driftskontoret. The exhibition title is "Of Soil and Roots".'

In my art, I always strive to combine roughness with poetry.'

