

THEA BJERG

Textile Artist & Designer

By Bradley Quinn

Sensual, lustrous, impulsive, resplendent: Thea Bjerg's forward-thinking designs herald a fresh direction in textile art, breathing new life into a time-honoured art form. Dense textures, silky-smooth surfaces and radiant colours fuse seamlessly in Bjerg's unique oeuvre, creating artworks that are both intellectually stimulating and visually spectacular. At a time when most textile designers are deconstructing fabric design or finding renewed expression for tactile fibres, Bjerg's work penetrates the essence of textile production and gives its spirit renewed meaning.

Thea Bjerg is regarded as one of the most original designers in the textile field today. While her work is wide in appeal and international in scope, it is difficult to pigeonhole Bjerg's designs or attribute them to one particular genre. Bjerg's work is neither rooted in the past nor inspired by prevailing trends, yet it articulates a moment in textile design when the boundaries between the visual arts are beginning to blur. Various described as "painterly", "sculptural" and "architectural", Bjerg's *Èlan* lends itself to a variety of disciplines. In a gallery context, her textiles occupy the visual space traditionally allocated to painting and sculpture, uniquely encapsulating the characteristics of both entities. Worn on the body, Bjerg's designs fashion the wearer in textural silhouettes. Stretched over furniture or supported by freestanding frames, her textiles assume the guise of fluid upholstery or sinuous screens. In their remarkable ability to simulate different forms or remain perfect in their original profiles, the mutability of Bjerg's textiles position them somewhere between dream and reality.

Since making her debut fifteen years ago, Bjerg has consistently transported her audience to a world of different senses. Bjerg listens to her textiles as if they are speaking, drawing attention to the subtle sounds they make as they are folded, shaken, stroked with the hand, or rustled gently by a passing breeze. Regarding fabric as an essential vehicle for tactility and sensuality, Bjerg developed a vast repertoire of rich textures that reveal the importance of touch. Soft surfaces seem to attract the fingertips and yield gently to the palm of the hand, while spiky, prickly, robust reliefs engage the eye but keep the onlooker at a critical distance.

From her very first collection, the intensity of Bjerg's work made it seem enigmatic, alluring and mysterious. Rather than reflecting on preconceived ideas about textiles to find inspiration, Bjerg's fabrics take shape according to her thinking and personal challenges, or the topics she finds interesting. "Much of my work is experimental, without being impenetrable in an intellectual sense," Bjerg explained. "My textiles are dense in the richness of their construction, but not heavy with the thought processes behind them. Mostly I think about how I can create a three-dimensional perspective on a two-dimensional fabric, and this is something that designers everywhere can appreciate, because we all struggle with it."

Fusing layers of cloth together gives Bjerg more substance to work with, yet she relies on an intangible device to give her textiles a third dimension. "I live in the northern latitudes where the sun bathes the landscape in luxuriant light," Bjerg said. "Nature is giving me a tool to work with. I can look at the same textile several times a day and see that it looks different in the changing light. The more textured the surface is the more dramatic these changes are, and that's what gives the textiles life." Bjerg's studio comes alive as the sun travels across the sky, suffusing her workspace in a kaleidoscope of motifs cast by the dark shadows that follow its luminous rays. As the sun moves over the horizon, the changing shadows reveal that light is, for Bjerg's textiles, what acoustics are for a concert hall. "Choosing luminous colours and reflective surfaces enhances the impact of the light even more," Bjerg explained. "Matt fabrics absorb the light and give the textile a dense appearance."

By harnessing the passing light and ingeniously capturing it in folds, textures and pleating, Bjerg invites the viewer to caress her work with the eye as much as with the hand. "Light gives all things their presence," Bjerg explained. "The way fabrics catch the light is important; it holds the secret of its three-dimensional appeal. I can treat the fabric in a way that it will look pleated in a certain light, and even keep that shape even when it is draped around the body and follows the movements of the wearer."

Playing on light and shadow creates fluid textures that move unpredictably, creating a range of motifs as ephemeral as the changing light source. In order to create lasting surface decoration, Bjerg moves deep into the fabric's surface to construct random configurations or repeating shapes. Bjerg's patterns are typically designed with geometric precision, yet typically take the shape of organic forms. Small bubbles may resemble dewdrops, while subtle textures mock delicate fungi forms. Linear markings intertwine or intersect randomly as they cut across the textile's surface, recalling the raised veins of leaves tracing through green foliage. While the shapes are streamlined and simple, they are too rich to be strictly minimal. Although the motifs are contoured over the surface they are not embroidery or appliqué; they constitute a part of the fabric itself.

Because Bjerg's designs are non-figurative, they are innovative in their stylistic neutrality. But at the same time, the brilliance of Bjerg's colour palette gives her textiles lasting impact. The deep colours and striking textures of the Renaissance have been a source of inspiration that led Bjerg towards rich jewel tones, while the muted colours of paintings by fifteenth-century Dutch and Italian masters come alive in her matt fabrics. The modernist metallic colours Bjerg uses are lifted from spark plugs, old medallions and classic cars, and often printed directly onto the surface of the fabric. Broad bands of colour may be divided into contrasting panels, or separated into individual strips.

Against this backdrop, Bjerg's use of stark white seems like a stylistic extreme. Coupled with the dense textures she creates in the fabric, white becomes imbued with silvery shadows and ceases to be monochrome. Bjerg associates white with lightness and brilliance, sunshine, luminosity and candlelight, and regards it as a warm colour. Bjerg's choice of reds ranges from the fiery tones of scarlet, titian and carmine to earthy terracotta colours and sienna, giving her silk laminations gravity and lustre. Delicate hues of coral and rose-pink appear to emanate light from beneath the textile's surface, creating the iridescent hues of a Rothko canvas. While Bjerg's individual textiles typically remain true to a solitary colour, she may present several textiles as a single body of work that explores the visual impact of their combined colours. By displaying panels of

white or black against a backdrop of red textiles, for example, Bjerg creates the textural equivalent of a Richard Serra drawing of a black plane skewed against a monochromatic background.

In the body of work produced for her exhibition at Copenhagen's Kunstindustrimuseet (The Danish Museum of Decorative Arts), Bjerg created an underwater world of colourful enchantment. Her fascination for the dramatic cliff faces and fossilised stones of the Danish coastline eventually led her further a field to the coral reefs of the South Pacific. Intrigued by the aquatic creatures flourishing in the reef, Bjerg was inspired to reproduce their vibrant colours, textures and shapes in textile form. This was achieved through Bjerg's development of new pleating techniques, a quest which inspired her to experiment with ultrasonic cutting and welding, laser cutting, new hand-pleating processes and machine pleating. Bjerg's research took her beyond the walls of her studio to several factories, some of which were unaccustomed to working with textiles, where she succeeded in breaking new ground as she pioneered original methods of textile design.

Each textile is presented in its sculptural guise, bringing the gallery to life in a visual sweep of fabric, colour and motif. The exhibition features eight "body sculptures"; exhibited alongside an aquarium, the water's aquamarine tints and sapphire tones filter the ambient light and wash the gallery in soft hues of blue. "Because this collection was inspired by an aspect of sea-life, I wanted to use the gallery space as if it were an aquarium," Bjerg explained. "The blue-tinted lighting surrounding the textiles and the sand we scattered beneath them takes the theme beyond the edges of the fabrics." The role of light in the exhibition mirrors the experimental basis of the "body sculptures". Fibre-optic lights trace through the sand and sparkle throughout the space as they are reflected through the water tank. As the textiles appear to hover above a sand-strewn beach, they suggest the moment when land first separated from the sea, just as the experimental nature of the works also constitutes a process of forming and evolving.

Bjerg was fascinated to observe how sea creatures use their colours and textures as a disguise or a cover-up. In certain respects, fashion textiles fulfil the same purpose; as they reveal and conceal they also function as a metaphor for the thrill of avoiding detection. "Textiles can cover us and shroud us but they can also attract the gaze of others. This is something that I find compelling about sea life, that many of the colours and textures that draws me to them enable them to hide from other creatures," Bjerg said.

Although the beauty of Bjerg's textiles makes them unlikely hiding places, they still provide a perfect refuge. As a backdrop for modern life, Bjerg's work transforms the classical hallmarks of the past into new inspirations for the present. In moving fabric design away from the perception that textiles are static, lifeless entities, Bjerg lines our surroundings with subtle motifs and understated sculptural forms that outline a fresh direction for the styles of the future.

Bradley Quinn is a writer and curator based in London, where he has presented the work of leading artists and designers in a variety of exhibition venues. He is also the author of "Chinese Style" and "Scandinavian Style" published by Conran Octopus, and his book "Techno Fashion" and "Fashion of Architecture" have been released by Berg Publishers.

Quinn is currently working on "Mid-century Style" for publication in 2004 and curating "Come Closer", an exhibition of contemporary Swedish design.