

collaborative

MIXED MEDIA

Combining digital technology and tapestry, Danish textile artist Grethe Sørensen partners with Wolf-Gordon to revolutionize weaving for the 21st century.

When modern technology and the centuries-old craft of weaving collide, anything is possible. With the advent of digital weaving, artists now have complete control over every thread, allowing them to create layered, graphic designs on a handloom that were once unimaginable.

Grethe Sørensen is one such textile artist and designer from Denmark on the cutting edge of this tech-enabled trend, after spending three decades creating wall hangings using traditional handweaving methods. Her work has been featured in museum collections all over Europe, and most recently in the Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York, but it wasn't until 2000, when she was first introduced to digital weaving, that she started to reinvent her designs—and the craft itself.

Making the switch from traditional to digital

ABOVE Millions of Colors mixes six basic colors on two different warps to create wide-ranging gradations of color in Wolf-Gordon's first wool upholstery.

weaving, Sørensen quickly discovered that digital thread control of a handloom opened up a world of possibilities. Over time, she invented a "random weave" technique that translates pixels from video and photographs into threads, a process that makes her designs truly unique. The result is an inspired blend of traditional and modern that brings textile design into the 21st century.

"There's total freedom" with digital thread control, Sørensen said. "You can weave anything—you can draw or weave photorealistic [images], and it wasn't that easy before. It changes the expression in weaving."

At first, Sørensen was drawing or constructing images digitally in Photoshop, until one day she was struck by the idea that using a photograph in her textile designs shouldn't be completely photorealistic, but rather, an abstraction of the image. She eventually found "unfocused images of light" in photos of cityscapes and backgrounds in movies, and developed a technique of zooming in on parts and transforming them into design motifs. "It gives this interesting soft-spot technique, and you can see the transparency and depth in the image," Sørensen said. "I love the way that the light makes these patterns of soft circles."

Sørensen caught the attention of New York-based design company

DesignProcess

Wolf-Gordon while her textiles were on display at The Oriole Mill in Hendersonville, N.C. At the time, Marybeth Shaw, chief creative officer of product design and marketing for Wolf-Gordon, and Lead Designer Laura Johnson were touring the mill. Finding themselves immediately drawn to Sørensen's work, they realized a collaboration was in order.

"We contacted her soon thereafter to work with us on an upholstery textile that would be appropriate for commercial interiors, and she graciously agreed," Shaw recalled. "We then asked if she would be interested in designing a few wallcoverings to round out the collection."

Wolf-Gordon then stepped aside to let Sørensen explore the color possibilities that she saw fit for the new collection. Although it was her first time designing for a commercial application, Sørensen was up to the challenge, using her random-weave technique to create a brilliant upholstery fabric and three new wallcoverings for the company.

MILLIONS OF COLORS


Wolf-Gordon's first wool upholstery product, Millions of Colors, is the centerpiece of Sørensen's collection and the inspiration for the other three wallcovering designs. Millions of Colors is woven with six basic colors (magenta, red, yellow, green, cyan, and blue) on black warp or white warp. The pattern has a 5-meter-long repeat of colors "coming and going" with a gradation from black to white for a soft, subtle look.

Changing the order of the weft colors changes the fabric's color. "The idea is that you can get millions of colors by mixing these basic colors," Sørensen explained. Because of the changing colors, "you could upholster a number of different chairs, for example, and each chair would look different, but they would all be unified by this theme of color," Shaw noted.

The collection's wallcoverings—Blinds, Codes, and Soft Spots—are printed on vinyl and available in several colorways. Like the Millions of Colors fabric, the wallcoverings use color gradations to continue a theme of transition.

The Blinds wallcovering exemplifies the heavy influence of light on Sørensen's work. Its rotogravure pattern contains vertical lines, each of which is slightly different from the others, creating a feeling of dimensionality and movement. "It looks like a series of fluorescent tubes that glow," Shaw said. "It's a new way of looking at a stripe."

Codes, a small-scale pattern of vertical stripes, is derived from a random pixel pattern. "It's a kind of digital noise," which you don't quite notice when placed on the wall, said Sørensen. In the Soft Spots pattern, diffused spots capture a sense of rhythm through color transitions, producing a dreamy quality.

Sørensen's collection for Wolf-Gordon is available now, and is just the first collaboration for the company, which is actively looking to push the boundaries of innovative textile and wallcovering design. "Wolf-Gordon is working with very significant outside voices to bring new design and new processes to what we're doing in wallcoverings and textiles," Shaw said. "We're really jump-starting the work with these outside voices, especially internationally." 



Grethe Sørensen has been credited with revolutionizing the art of tapestry by inventing a "random weave" technique that translates the pixels found in photographs and video backgrounds into threads, allowing for the creation of soft color gradations and shapes. "It's a random construction based on the pixels. The digital program can place these colors in a random way. It gives a structure that is different than traditional weaves, where you know the twill and warp and weft," Sørensen said. Her innovative approach has been leveraged into new upholsteries and wallcoverings for Wolf-Gordon (including Soft Spots, shown below), as well as in her own artwork (at bottom).

