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 Paris, 7 January 2018

VS Let's start from the beginning. How is it that you become a knitwear designer?

CF I am Swiss, but I grew up in Munich. So when I finished high school, I decided that I would like to study in Switzerland, because I never had lived there. I went to Zurich to take the foundation course at what is now the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). During this year, thanks to the colour theory course taught by textile designer Andrea Burkhard, I found out that you can study textile design. I always knitted and embroidered by hand: I loved it, and I had a very talented grandmother who introduced me to it. But I never appreciated doing it in school, and with time I lost interest in these special textile skills. During that year in Zurich, textile design seemed a very open field: it was not like fashion, where in the end you become a fashion designer, and it wasn't like graphic design, which wasn't three-dimensional enough for me. Textile design seemed perfect. I loved it, and we had so many possibilities. And we were just six per year! In total, twenty-four people for the whole course.

VS That's like a little family.

CF It was a little family. Additionally, we had a very good director, Bärbel Birkelbach, a very interesting and talented teacher. My studies were not focused on knitwear, but rather weaving and prints. Knitwear was a little bit on the side, and while our teacher Risli Lindon—with whom I learned a lot—taught us all the techniques, I was not very talented at knitwear at the time. Knitwear design was a new language. If you design, say, printed patterns, you can draw a flower, and then you put this flower into a set, and the set has some rhythm, and you have some nice forms. But with knitwear, we learned to create a surface starting with one single thread. Most importantly: the colours, the materials, and the fact that for the first 10–15 centimetres, you don't see anything, and you don't know where you're going, as the piece you are working on disappears into a tiny slot of the machine. By contrast, with weaving, you have one million threads, weft meets wrap to develop one nice fabric. And with knitwear, you

have the tension, you have the weight, everything is stretched out. And you have this one single thread, so if it breaks or doesn't do what it should, poof.

VS Everything is lost.

CF And in the beginning, that is rather frustrating. Especially when you have amazing ideas, and they just don't work. So knitwear needs a certain kind of patience, a certain kind of concentration. Total concentration. It's not this activity you do with two needles, sitting with your family, watching TV, talking, eating, being very social. This nice noise of the two needles clicking and all of your love into one pullover for your child or your lover. When knitting with the machine, you need total concentration, otherwise you cannot work with it.

VS So how is it that it becomes your profession, when in school you were a bit scared of it?

CF Good question. I did not foresee it at all. Instead, I was very much in love with weaving, as it's very mathematical and very logical. And to extend the borders, the limits of the technical side, you have to calculate and you have to be very clever with all of the threads. And so that was my thing, but then I got a knitting machine. And the moment I had the machine, it was like I had my own instrument. Since then, I've always kept my machine with me wherever I go. It gives you a totally new energy, to advance and try, and to find out that the thing you tried 100 times before will work at the 101st time. I developed a really nice friendship with knitwear and knitting machines. All while respecting my love for weaving. That's how I explain the way I do knitwear. Even for knitters, the way I knit is different, and they don't really understand my approach. They find it super interesting, but they also say, "That's not knitwear. Or it is, but it's also not." My work doesn't respect the rules of traditional, industrial, or commercial knitwear. And today, when I work for the big professional houses of haute couture, I am considered an embroiderer. Often, I do not work with knitwear departments because they cannot integrate

my experimental approach. The most experimental and open people are the embroiderers. It's funny for me, because if I think back to my studies, embroidery was never a subject. There were the big subjects: printing, weaving, and then a bit of knitwear. Embroidery was never a topic.

vs What was your first breakthrough?

CF It was when I won the Brunshawig Prize for Applied Arts in 1998. I saw the Prize theme for that year was scarves, and since I was working on the topic of one-piece scarves for my diploma, I applied. I wanted to create this series that was in fact just a simple fabric, but that wrapped around the body as a scarf. The idea would be that this could then be applied to develop my full diploma collection, which of course was bigger. And I never thought I would, but I won the Prize. That was completely unforeseen. At that time it amounted to 20,000 Swiss francs. And it was all in French! I didn't speak French at the time. They called me to announce I'd won, and conservator Fabienne X. Sturm wanted to come and see my studio. And I said, "No, I don't have a studio. Actually, I'm still in school." And she was a little surprised. I added, "Also, I don't have anything to show to you, because everything I have, I've sent you. Right now, I'm in the middle of my diploma, and by summer, I will have more to show." And then she said, "Okay. We'll come to Zurich to meet you, to actually see that you exist, and if you don't have anything to show, well, that's a pity, but that's like it is. And anyway, we really like your work." And so it was. When I finished my diploma in summer, I transferred all the work to the Musée Ariana, in Geneva, where they held an exhibition of my work.

vs How cool!

CF Yes, and we also did a catalogue of my work. That was my first edition, and I still like it. I worked with friends: model Jacqueline Uhlmann, graphic designer Leander Eisenmann, and photographer Peter Tillessen, all from ZHdK. We were all coming out of school, we were full of ideas, projects, and dreams. And it was exceptional that we could be paid for our work. Now they all have made their careers as well. A fantastic starting point, don't you think?

vs So success came early! But afterwards, you took a sharp turn to enter the world of theatre for many years. How did it happen?

CF After the Prize, I started to sell my scarves in several shops and even had an exhibition in Tokyo, at the Issey Miyake shop in Omotesando, the famous shopping street. I was going somewhere, but I was far too young to understand that you have to stay in touch with the people you get to know. I did not understand that this is just a one-night stand kind of business, if you don't work hard to turn a good collaboration into a long-term relationship. So of course, I didn't chase people, and they didn't call me back. So I thought, "Okay, I've done this, what's next?" And I met a theatre photographer who completely believed I should be doing theatre costumes. She invited me to come to Hannover to see Peter Stein and Bruno Ganz's *Faust*, which I did and I was super impressed, but I couldn't be convinced to leave my fantastic small studio in Zurich for the chaotic creativity of the theatre. It was crazy, but I said no. Nevertheless, I started working with the renown costume designer Moidele Bickl. She'd send me drawings, I'd send her stuff, and I went there from time to time. It was already this freelance way of working that I liked from the beginning. It is totally my way of working, because I need concentration, I need my own space, my way of working, my rhythm, my loneliness, also, to create. And to dive into different topics, I have to explore, to go beyond the limits and expectation of the people, to surprise them, to surprise myself, to surprise the material, and then it starts to excite me as well. That's when it starts to be interesting, good, and convincing. That's when I can not just deliver what I'm asked for, but more, and show the client another direction. This way, I can go beyond saying, "Okay, you want it black, so you get it black," but rather, "You want it black so you get yellow, white stripes, or you will see that actually, that's what you wanted but you didn't dare to say it."

vs At the time, you were still based in Zurich.

CF Yes, because the Brunshawig Prize had given me a certain notoriety and a good financial base. But, in order to work closer to fashion or even costume design I understood I had to leave Zurich. And then, actor Robert Hunger-Bühler told me he knew a theatre director in Paris who was in dire need of a costume designer, and asked if I could go there and be that costume designer. I didn't know anything about costumes, but I chose not to tell anyone, and went to Paris to meet this director. He didn't have any doubts that I could do it, but I couldn't show him any theatre project, because I had never done one. But in the end, I got the job. The first costumes I made for theatre

were in 2001. And after that, I was lucky, because I had an assistant who had worked for Thierry Mugler before, and he was totally in love with knitwear. He helped me with everything, and taught me. “Now you have to design the shoes, now you have design the wigs. Now you have to organise fittings.” I was incredibly naïve and I was constantly surprised, in a good way. At that time you had bigger budgets, too. Everything was designed by me: the wigs, the shoes. I could go to all these ateliers in Paris, all these craftspeople with extraordinary talent and tell them what I wanted. That was amazing, and I learned so much. And then, of course, I was head over heels in love with the theatre.

vs You immersed yourself into this world for eight years. Why did you stop?

CF In the end, for a very practical reason, I had kids. I couldn’t do the long theatre nights anymore. With the first child, my son, I could still work, small children can sleep anywhere. With the second baby, my daughter, it was not possible anymore. She was born in 2008, and then I accepted it was time to stop. And I had done so much at the time, too. There were lots of theatre directors that appreciated my work: it was very conceptual work, of course, also with colours and forms and development within the play, and changes of costumes. It’s a whole thing, because it’s not only this kind of ten to twenty minutes fashion catwalk thing, it’s one and a half hours or longer per play. It’s a completely different approach.

vs In 2010, you found your studio space, and changed direction again, towards fashion.

CF It’s very funny, because Paris is the capital of fashion, and I came here to do theatre. And as I became immersed in it, I completely forgot about fashion. And all the time it was right next to me! For example, I was working in really big theatres, like the Theatre National du Chaillot, and next to it Stella McCartney was showing her early collections, and I was just walking through the large foyer where they installed the catwalk, thinking, “Oh, these fashion people”. And now, I’m going to Chaillot to look at the haute couture show of Armani, and for me it’s like coming home, in a way. So when I decided to go back to fashion, I really thought hard, “Who can I call? How can I get into the system?” I decided to call Claudine Lachaud, who is the chief of Atelier Caraco. When I worked for the Comédie-Française, she had helped us a great deal; and when I decided to

call her up, she still remembered me. And through her I got a contact to exhibit at Maison d’Exceptions, a small section dedicated to craftsmanship and special textile skills, at the textile fair Première Vision, in 2012. I was sceptical, since it was an investment, but it was incredible. Suddenly, you have all the business cards, Chanel, Dior, Armani, you name it, they would pass by. For three days I did not eat or take bathroom breaks, I couldn’t move from my small stand with all my textile samples.

vs And you’ve done it a few more times after that. It’s somehow incredible, the pace of the fashion world is much faster, with so many collections per year. It’s somehow dystopian and perhaps unsustainable.

CF It’s crazy, but in a way, I also profit from that fact. I think that I will always have work, because there’s so many things going on in parallel in Paris, not to mention other big cities. Already in Paris, if one of my samples doesn’t work for one fashion house, it will function very well with another. Within the development I do for different houses, I experiment so much with other materials and other colours, that even if one doesn’t take it, the next one will. It’s a whole circle of recycling ideas, and it’s so interesting for me to see the way one sample can develop over the course of several meetings. That’s what I love about textile design: everybody sees something else in the same sample. So I develop one same sample, but for both the car industry and a big luxury fashion brand, for example. They will start from that same idea but in the end, you will not even understand that both came from the same starting point. Proportion, colours, materials—it all changes, and it’s magic. For me, it’s magic. It also means I can continue to show the same collection every year, and just add to it continuously.

vs Just adding the new things you develop each year.

CF Exactly. With my new samples, of course, but just the juxtaposition of new and old, placing a new sample next to one that already exists makes the older sample look different. And if you think of all these people from the fashion houses that come to Première Vision, for example, they need to see this fair in three days, everything from super high-quality, experimental stuff to very basic stuff. They’re drunk from all these impressions. So it doesn’t matter if they see your stuff two or three or even five times.

VS Because depending on what they are looking for, they will see some of your things, but others not at all.

CF Every year they come with another filter. They have specific mood boards, or different information from the brands they work for, and then they skim the fair. So maybe last year they looked for yellow, and transparency, and this year they look for shiny and matte. And how should I know? I would be stupid if I didn't present my whole set of samples. And once they are interested, they will ask, "How much can you do and how fast can you do it?" It's pure business, and it's very clear, very tough, very fast, and very professional. And it's appreciated when you're organized, you can deliver on time, and it's perfectly made. I must say that I find it highly stimulating to work this way. Because I don't want to dance around my fabric. I want to see that my fabrics work, and walk, and become stunning.

VS At the same time you returned to the studio and to fashion, you also started teaching.

CF I always had wanted to teach. It is stimulating, and it's about generational exchange, and when I say that one of the keywords in my work is experimentation, the other is vision. Everything that's visionary interests me. Haute couture is about vision. And teaching, for me, is also visionary, because you plan a seed onto someone, which may in some years turn into something. It's not immediate. It's a long-term trial, and it's also experimental. That's why I also have to find a certain type of school—my approach doesn't work with a commercial and down-to-earth idea of school or teaching, because I don't know, myself, what's coming out in the end. My teaching, like my work, is experimental.

VS It seems you now have a double thread in your life, where you have the teaching and your work, with a solid client portfolio and relationships. And then, you receive the Swiss Grand Award for Design, which on the one hand recognizes your career, but on the other can also be an impulse to do something new, or different. Is there something else you want to do?

CF It's funny, but while you mention I'm on a very safe track, the Award in fact comes at a moment when things are shifting. What I will do actually is to rent a new space, which means to separate production and creation, and gain the

capacity for new projects. Thanks to the Award, I will have the possibility to have this space to think, and understand what will happen in the months to come. You cannot imagine what that means to me. What happens now, is that my projects are getting really international and even intercontinental. This is something completely new that I did not look for nor dare to think of, but it happened. At the moment, I have an exhibition in Los Angeles at the Please Do Not Enter gallery, I am preparing an exhibition in Paris at the Made In Town gallery, and then New York and Tokyo. And then, Shanghai. And then, ever since my two publications back in the 1990s, I've been thinking of doing a third one, and perhaps this is the right moment.

VS What will be the theme of your exhibition? Are you showing specific work?

CF The exhibition was the idea of curator Pascal Gautrand; I met him through Claudine Lachaud of Atelier Caraco. Pascal was the first person who visited my studio and deemed my work interesting; he pushed me into exhibiting at Maison d'Exceptions. And we are friends now. He now made a film about me, and wants me to exhibit in his space. This prompted a reflection about where I am and where I'm going. I realized I want to stay in my "visionary" context, and then, perhaps the third main aspect of my work is "collaboration", maybe even permanent collaboration: with the fashion houses, the car industry, the trendsetters, the schools, the students. And also, photographers. I've always loved working with photographers since the very beginning. Because it documents the work. In the last three years, I've been working with Aurelie Cenno, who normally never takes pictures of fashion, and she's documenting the space where I work, my samples, me, and everything that concerns me. So the exhibition is now called Ensemble, in the sense of collaboration, the fashion outfit, and also the music group.

VS And you will show Pascal's film as part of the exhibition?

CF Yes, exactly. With Pascal, we were talking a lot about the noise of the machine, the rhythm, and how the rhythm helps me to understand where I'm going technically. The movie he made is really about the sound of the machine and the sound that is my daily environment. It will be the first presentation of the film. And all the while we're developing this, the Swiss Grand Award for Design also comes.

vs Great timing.

CF It's so funny, because when you ask me what does this Award mean, it's like another arm in the big flow of things, another affluent joining the large river, making it even faster and stronger. And going right into the same direction. It's less the end of something and the start of something new: it's more strength added to a previously existing flow. In the first place, a prize is a very nice thing, of course. But on a second level, in this kind of work, you never get a general overview. And it's a big surprise, and very relaxing, to suddenly have this feeling that it's not just one project that is appreciated, but that all of my projects are appreciated, as an ensemble. And that made me really happy. Even though I get a lot of very good feedback, people are super nice and I cannot complain. But still, there is a lot of doubt in all of this. I still doubt. Can I really manage it? Is it really possible? How will they react when the box arrives and the fabrics are delivered?

vs It's very human to have these doubts.

CF In the end, when the clients are happy, I'm very relieved, but at the same time, I'm already looking for the next project, and doubting if it will work out. This is not a bad thing; it also keeps me going, and I find it stimulating. With the Award, there's a recognition, and it's also very nice and professional that there is a real ceremony coming along with it. It is very nice to be able to invite some people there, and to be able to thank them for having believed in me. Because there are some people, especially in Switzerland, that always believed in me and pushed me to where I am today.

vs It seems you have established yourself in Paris, and your entire life is here. Does this Award bring you closer to Switzerland again?

CF It does. But again, the Award is just accelerating the big flow. Back during my studies, I really appreciated my time in Zurich. There was such a freedom to use all the machines, and such

respect towards the materials. And there were so few of us, that everybody had his own access to a loom for weaving, or to a printing table. When I started to show my work, everyone asked me if I was coming from Central Saint Martins in London, and I was a little upset because no one had heard of the ZHdK. The quality in Switzerland is extremely high, and I can really tell that because I see a lot of things from all over the place. And then, for example, Jakob Schlaepfer, I interned there, it was my Swiss education, but they are so influential globally.

vs You've had a very interesting career so far, full of detours. But who says it has to be linear?

CF I did a big detour during my time in the theatre, but I must say the theatre was a very good training. I've never seen anything crazier than in the theatre or since that time. Even if people tell me that fashion people are crazy, I can say, "It's okay. Come to the theatre." I must say nothing ever shocked me, since I work in fashion. And the theatre gave me great efficiency, which has served me very well in the fashion world. When I started doing fashion again, I was so amazed about the freedom to do whatever you wanted. And everyone was like, "Oh, wow. Somebody that respects deadlines. I haven't worked with anyone like that for a really long time."

vs Do you think you will return to the theatre?

CF Maybe it will come. Maybe it will be when I am in my 80s, I'm going to do opera in New York or something like that. I'll have an assistant and I'll just say, "No, not like that." Not working anymore, but being there, enjoying. I think opera would be good. But 30 years to go. Then it's a really good time. I meet a lot of women who are 75, and it's the perfect age. They have more energy than us. I think we are heading for very good times. There is still a lot to come.