

ARACHNE FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

↑ Process 6 by Casey Reas for Maharam Digital Projects

By Steven Heller

The New York-based textiles company Maharam is a fourth-generation, family-run business. It has been reinvented by each successive generation, which probably accounts for its unusual longevity in the dysfunctional realm of family businesses. Louis Maharam, its founder, was a Russian immigrant who started out selling fabric remnants from a pushcart on the Lower East Side more than a century ago. This month, Lars Müller is publishing the company's first monograph, which covers its work with collaborators as diverse as Maira Kalman and Nike. Maharam's current director, Michael Maharam, recently sat down to talk about its storied past and the future of textiles in a digital world.

I first became aware of Maharam through your revival of midcentury-modern textiles—pillows for instance. How did that come about?

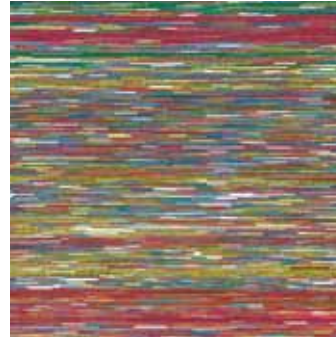
When we took charge of Maharam, our collection was haphazardly assembled, and we needed to create order. I was an avid collector, and at the time midcentury modernism was emerging from a cyclical slumber. I realized that nearly every noteworthy midcentury designer had designed textiles, virtually all of which had vanished into obscurity. Thus began my international treasure hunt—seeking clues, tracking down aging family members and bits of fragmented knowledge, and rummaging through dusty archives. Since we typically do not produce finished products, the pillows were merely an extension of this effort, intended to create access through MoMA, Moss, Design Within Reach, Vitra, and various other design venues.

Are you a manufacturer, a designer, an impresario—what?

We do not manufacture but rather work with mills across the globe based on our project and product requirements, as married to their specific area of production expertise. We sell to commercial architects and interior designers and recognize that we are essentially in the business of narrative—telling interesting stories through the products we choose to develop.

I take that to mean “storyteller.” As a graphic designer, I never gave much thought to textile design. And yet many graphic designers I admire—Paul Rand, Alvin Lustig, Massimo Vignelli, Milton Glaser, Maira Kalman—designed for fabric. Who makes the best textile designer—someone trained to be one, or someone who dips in?

By nature, woven textiles (unlike printed textiles, which are little different from



Top row (from left): *City of Words* by Acconci Studio; *Type* by Polly Apfelbaum; *Floral Explosion* by Post Typography

printed paper) are complicated to engineer and produce. They're conceived on multiple parallel tiers; the yarn, pattern, texture, and color are all tied together through weaving and finishing. Extreme expertise is essential. We choose to collaborate with non-textile designers because they ask questions that we often no longer ask of ourselves. Often, revisiting these questions yields new and innovative results. So the answer is both.

Many of your recent projects have come from digital technology. What is possible now that wasn't five years ago?

I'd love to say anything is possible, but I'm sure a whole new "anything" will be at our disposal five years from now. On the textile-design side, CAD is an increasingly powerful tool in its sensitivity and ability to communicate with production. The utopian model would permit us to produce

short runs of immediately generated design on a moment's notice—even randomly generated patterns that would be both arbitrary and predictable, an idea we've discussed with John Maeda (of course!) and others over the years. More concretely, our Maharam Digital Projects are large-scale wall installations created by artists, photographers, and fashion, graphic, and industrial designers. Scaled and produced to order, they're printed using water-based-pigment inks on a latex-saturated cellulosic ground, which yields excellent color rendition and near-archival quality. These are unconditioned works and are all sold at the same price, and each of our contributors is compensated equally, whether they're seven-figure artists or graphic designers working at an hourly wage. It's extremely egalitarian and very gratifying for all. In the graphic design world, collaborators include Cyan, Casey Reas, Marian

Bantjes, Karel Martens, Post Typography, 2x4, Abbott Miller, Harmen Liemburg, Niesen and DeVries, and Charley Harper (our sole deceased contributor).

You've engaged the offbeat designer Claudy Jongstra, among other textile avant-gardists. What do you look for in designers of untraditional, handcrafted materials?

It's a challenging area, as our clients insist on production, performance, and predictability—products that perform to commercial standards and resemble the samples they select from. Claudy is an exception. She raises her own sheep, shears them, processes their wool, blends it with other fibers, and dyes the resulting textiles with dyestuffs she creates using plant material that she grows. She is our benchmark! In a more commercial realm, Hella Jongerius is gifted in finding a place where craft and manufacturing intersect. Her





↑ Living With That Person by Matt Mullican

unique approach to craft from the perspective of industry, and her particular combination of these two seemingly diametrically opposed modes of production in all manner of products, have allowed her to create individuality on a mass scale and to successfully navigate the pitfalls of nostalgia associated with craft-for-craft’s-sake.

Some of your prints look perfect for cloth bookbinding. What other products do you make using textiles?

MegaNano, a project with Bruce Mau, was intended to address the needs of the open-office environment, an often stultifying landscape of workstations and the loom fodder that covers them. Bruce conceived a system of compatible textiles on multiple scales that could be used together to create depth and dimensionality. Though our textiles can be used for many things—pillows, hats, clothing, and bags, most obviously—

our most rewarding present collaboration is with Nike, bringing unexpected pattern, texture, color, and material to footwear.

Maharam’s graphics are designed with great care. Did that come about naturally?

We initially relied on consulting graphic designers to create our identity, advertising, and collateral. We are an OCD-driven organization and recognized that extreme consistency and cohesiveness were critical to conveying an integrated message. We dreaded the moment when we would have to acquaint every new hire with our corporate culture, visual language, strategy, and tactics, all with the hope that they A) got it, and B) were gifted enough to do something with it. We formed A4 Studio, our in-house graphic design arm, for this reason. We love the control and the outcome, and embrace the graphic design medium with fervor equal to textile, architecture, in-

terior, furniture, show, and interior design. We feel that expression as a corporate entity committed to design is a fully dimensional experience, and anything less is merely commerce. A4 interacts with our in-house and consulting contributors on every project. A pleasant example presently at work is a sample bin or box for our client’s libraries being developed by Konstantin Grcic, in Munich, with the Dutch graphic-designer-cum-cartographer Joost Grootens handling embellishment, all orchestrated and made harmonious by A4.

What’s the future of the textile world?

We’re in a slow-moving fashion business. The future is seasonal, inspired and catalyzed by the world across all media, and with a respect for the practical needs of clients, coupled with the embrace of risk and through the contributions of interesting characters we find along the way. ■