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Julia Lohmann's experimental work with kelp, pictured here manipulating the material in her studio

DISEGNO NO.6

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Julia Lohmann's Department of Seaweed

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One of the subjects of **Disegno No.6** is Julia Lohmann, a German designer whose pioneering work with seaweed as a design material was the subject of a residency at the V&A museum in 2013. To celebrate the launch of the magazine, here we publish an extended excerpt from our interview with Lohmann.

Let's start at the beginning. In the profiles I've read on you, it seems you had quite an enchanted childhood, going on caravan trips with your father to collect driftwood and other objects for sculptures. Can you tell me a little about that?

I grew up in Hildesheim in the outskirts of the city, so I was playing in the woods everyday. It was a time when that was still possible; I hope it's still going to be possible for my son. It was very much what formed me.

My father is retired now, but he used to be a crafts and art teacher. So his livelihood depended on going out and drawing, finding things. Every holiday was spent in this caravan. We'd go from Germany and down to Italy and back; it took weeks! The first thing he'd do when we arrived was take out his pad and go out and draw, finding odd places and spaces. He really made me see value where nobody else would see it. We'd go to beaches and find lots of litter; he'd say: "Wow, look at this plastic dinosaur!" For many years I'd find roots and pebbles in the forest that I thought he'd like, and which I thought he could make something from. It was the most amazing present I could possibly find for him.

So that's his background, but my mum has a really strong associative mind. So even now, as a grandmother, she'll look at the clouds and say: "Oh my God, do you see that face over there?" So I'm a combination of both, I think.

Did you always tag along on these trips throughout your childhood and teens? Was it something you always thought was a fun thing to do?

Yes and no. I wanted to be a vet for the longest time. It was the one profession where I thought I could be very close to nature and animals. I was 12 when we had a school internship programme, and I interned for a vet. I worked with him when he was operating, cutting open the animals, sterilising cats and so on. I remember especially the sterilisation of a cat that was already pregnant. I remember the uterus with all the balls of baby cats in there — it was horrifying and super fascinating at the same time.

But it also made me realise that I didn't want to become a vet. Not because of the operating, but because I found people too peculiar. Some people treated their animals like they were other people, as their friends. I found that wrong; it's an animal. And if you're a vet for big animals, you just go around farms giving cows antibiotics, and they are treated as a material almost. So the prospect of dealing with these people made me not want to become a vet. But still I'm working with this contradiction between anthropomorphising animals and treating them as material all the time in my work, which is interesting. Everything that you think about is already there in childhood.

Did you ever pick up seaweed with your father when you were little?

There was probably the odd piece of seaweed. There were generally many smelly things, which were expelled from the caravan by my mum. My mum was very supportive but she also played the role of saying, "Oh my God, what did you bring *now*?"

Let's focus on the seaweed, and fast forward to 2007 when you were doing a residency in Sapporo, Japan. It's where you first discovered seaweed as a material. What triggered your interest?

In 2005 or so, the British Council took my exhibition of a series of cows to Japan. They were amazingly supportive of my work during the year after graduation. So I was invited to Japan and I went to the Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo. I was amazed by all of the textures and all of the things we pull out of the sea everyday to sustain ourselves. I've never forgotten that very sensory moment.

So I researched this a little. And I found, for example, that 80 per cent of the bluefin tuna that's fished in the Mediterranean goes to Japan. There's a big tuna crisis with over-fishing and lots of alarming statistics. I thought, "OK, I should go back to Japan and work with this". So that's what I applied with for the residency in Sapporo, S-AIR (Sapporo Artist in Residence).

Simultaneously, there was another artist in residence with me who wanted to explore Hokkaidan culture. The organisers prepared an excellent programme of activities for us. Japanese culture very much revolves around the sea; Hokkaido especially is the seafood centre. They took us to a seaweed farm, because Hokkaido is very famous for its seaweed, and for kelp, the seaweed I'm working with. So at that seaweed farm, the other artist and I were both given a big bag of seaweed. When we visited them I already knew what I wanted to do; to build this big ocean of boxes from the fish market, so I didn't use the seaweed immediately. But I really wanted to take some back and try using it as a material, because I was so fascinated with how it becomes big and leathery, really beautiful, when it's wet. And then it has such a different character when it dries.

Can you elaborate on how you developed your techniques for processing the kelp?

I work through analogies with other materials. If the analogy is glass, for example, the translucency is very important and colours might come in; I'm trying different dyes. If the analogy is wood, it's very important to see which adhesives to use and what veneers to develop. Another analogy is leather, where of course you have to try to keep the kelp flexible and give it strength at the same time.

So basically, I start with "Seaweed = leather". And then already, I see this cloud of the things you can do with leather, of objects and of techniques, from embroidered leather to pressed leather, leather saddles, bags, armchairs. So with the cloud in my head, I go back to "seaweed = leather", and try to figure out where it *doesn't* equal leather. And then some techniques that seem quite far removed may actually come nearer, because, for example, kelp is translucent. So suddenly you realise that there are some new opportunities there. For example, if you have an iPhone cover in translucent seaweed, and you can see through the cover when the light shines from inside — that's actually better than leather!

So then I focus on techniques that are nearer to the seaweed. Because those are the applications where it makes *more* sense to use seaweed than leather. I don't want to copy something, to do a hat in seaweed that could be done in leather the same way. I want to find the seaweed's own language, because the form of the hat comes out of the history of working with leather and what makes sense for that material. If I just make the same hat in seaweed, it would be a pastiche. So I try to bring as much of the character of the seaweed into the hat.

I understand that during your residency, some of the objects that came out of the project responded to the collections here at the V&A.

Yes. It's kind of like beach combing: you always find inspiration and materials in the contexts that you're in. Because I was here, I went to the workshop downstairs where they make fittings and display stands. They had boxes full of little things that were possible for me to use. So we brought lots of materials from the basements, the skip, and the back yard into the studio.

But we also found inspiration from current exhibitions. So the exhibition that was running at the time was David Bowie, where we saw lots of shoulder-pads and armour-like garments. So we had a lot of these shapes at the department. I looked also at the Japanese collection and the Wabi-sabi spirit of Japanese design.

The Japanese inspiration seems very strong in much of your work, not just in terms of the Japanese connotations of seaweed, but also in your mentality.

I think it's from before I went to Japan. It's part of the beach combing attitude. Seeing the beauty of decay and the imperfect. Seeing the beauty of forces upon something, rather than the perfect surface. I think it's natural to anybody who is brought up very close to the natural world. If you're really drawn to right angles, perfect shiny surfaces, will over nature, that's one way of seeing perfection: "We can create something that totally follows our will." But I've always seen perfection more as the perfect communication between the material and the maker. So perfection happens not when I make the perfect right angle but when I understand what the material wants to do, and I find the perfect position for the both of us to be in.

In German we have a term for this, it's "materialgerechtes Arbeiten", or truth to material. I think that's very much the Wabi Sabi spirit as opposed to, I don't know, Greek perfection.

INTERVIEW Kristina Rapacki, a PhD candidate at the Courtauld Institute of Art

The full feature on Julia Lohmann's work can be read in *Disegno* No.6