

TABLE OF CONTENT

PREFACE

Karen Van Godtsenhoven
HH Al Reem Al Tenaiji

6

II
SILK AND LACE

Caroline Esgain & Catherine Gauthier

42

III
ATELIER

104

THE TROUSSEAU

Caroline Esgain & Catherine Gauthier

131

I
CURIUSER AND
CURIUSER

Karen Van Godtsenhoven

10

MON COEUR EST FAIT
DE DENTELLE

Karen Van Godtsenhoven

86

LACE-INCRUSTED SILK
IS MY HANDWRITING

Caroline Esgain

121

VI
A GARDEN OF
HER OWN

Karen Van Godtsenhoven

144





Alice laughed. ‘There’s no use trying,’ she said.
‘One can’t believe impossible things.’

‘I daresay you haven’t had much practice,’ said the Queen. ‘When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.’

Lewis Carroll,
Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, 1865

CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER

Karen Van Godtsenhoven

Growing up in Brussels in the 1970s, Carine Gilson, a high-spirited young girl, was surrounded by the beautiful fabrics her mother worked with in her tailoring atelier where she produced made-to-measure two-piece suits, dresses, blouses and coats for the ladies of the upper middle class. These clients would have their clothes custom-made so they would fit like a glove, both hugging and shaping the body. They were sophisticated and stern. Gilson's mother had a predilection for expensive fabrics, for the most resplendent materials ranging from supple jerseys to fragile lace. She and her daughter would shop for these fabrics together in large warehouses and take patterns from different magazines. Teaching Carine to distinguish between different qualities, she instilled in her an understanding of how to assess a fabric, how to make it move between her fingers, to feel its 'fall', its suppleness and weight, its tactile qualities which would, when the fabric became a garment, embrace the body – a sixth sense that unites the coordination of hand and eye with a sensuous imagination and capacity for wonder. She also instilled a sense of independence in her precocious daughter, of literally taking things into her own hands, giving the twelve-year-old Carine not just permission but the patterns, tools and materials with which to make her own clothes, hitherto made by her. Armed with an eagerness to learn and a can-do attitude, Gilson thenceforth proceeded to make and wear all her own clothes.

Although her mother's work was based on the cutting and sewing techniques that are the basis of tailoring (used for daywear), rather than what in couture terms is referred to *le flou* (draping and sewing around the body, mostly used for evening wear), it was the fluid, sensual silks and diaphanous laces typical of *flou* that beguiled Gilson. She was mesmerized by the intimate underdresses worn between the body and the outer dress, which spoke to her in a language of emotions and conveyed a sense of curiosity.

prized goods. She was met with the same sort of questions as when she asked for a loan from the bank: What are you doing here? Who are you? How will you pay for these goods upon delivery? And, just as in the bank, she enthusiastically explained her vision of lingerie couture – and acquired a small piece of Chantilly lace.

As anyone in the fashion business will tell you, entering the different production areas as a small designer with small quantities and no credit history to speak of is no easy matter. So, for the first ten years Gilson focused on her product, on doing things that went against the grain of what was happening, doing them in a way that they were no longer being done, reviving what had been lost, refabricating what had been lying dormant because it was not profitable. She sees it as a sort of birthing process of a niche product which initially held no attractions for investors because it was not (directly) profitable. Ahead of the curve in terms of the appreciation of slow processes and high-quality niche products, Gilson saw the real value of luxury in the very fact that it was a niche product slowly made.

The creative appeal of Gilson's lingerie couture was picked up early on by the American high-end department store Barneys, her first client, who understood the market for this luxury product, a market that existed at first in the Middle East and the United States. They nurtured her talent and pushed her to go further, be bolder in her approach to creating a niche product, lingerie made and incrustated with lace by hand. A challenge, certainly, to create a product, whose timelessness is its strength and which alters with the seasons ever so slightly. Like minimal music, Gilson's work repeats patterns and themes, in an endless quest for perfection. Refining and reworking pieces from her own thirty-year archive she has therefore created a new line, *Les Intemporelles*, based on those iconic pieces whose relevance is timeless, pieces for which her clients return again and again, that make up the DNA of her universe. In the decade to come, Gilson wants to keep using those models and their patterns, as time has proven their significance.

Almost ironically, Gilson does not appear in the official haute couture Parisian calendar because of its stringent, location-based conditions, although she uses couture techniques in her Brussels atelier. Shying away from the fashion scene, she is one of the few people today working away in the mode of the couturiers of bygone





II

SILK & LACE





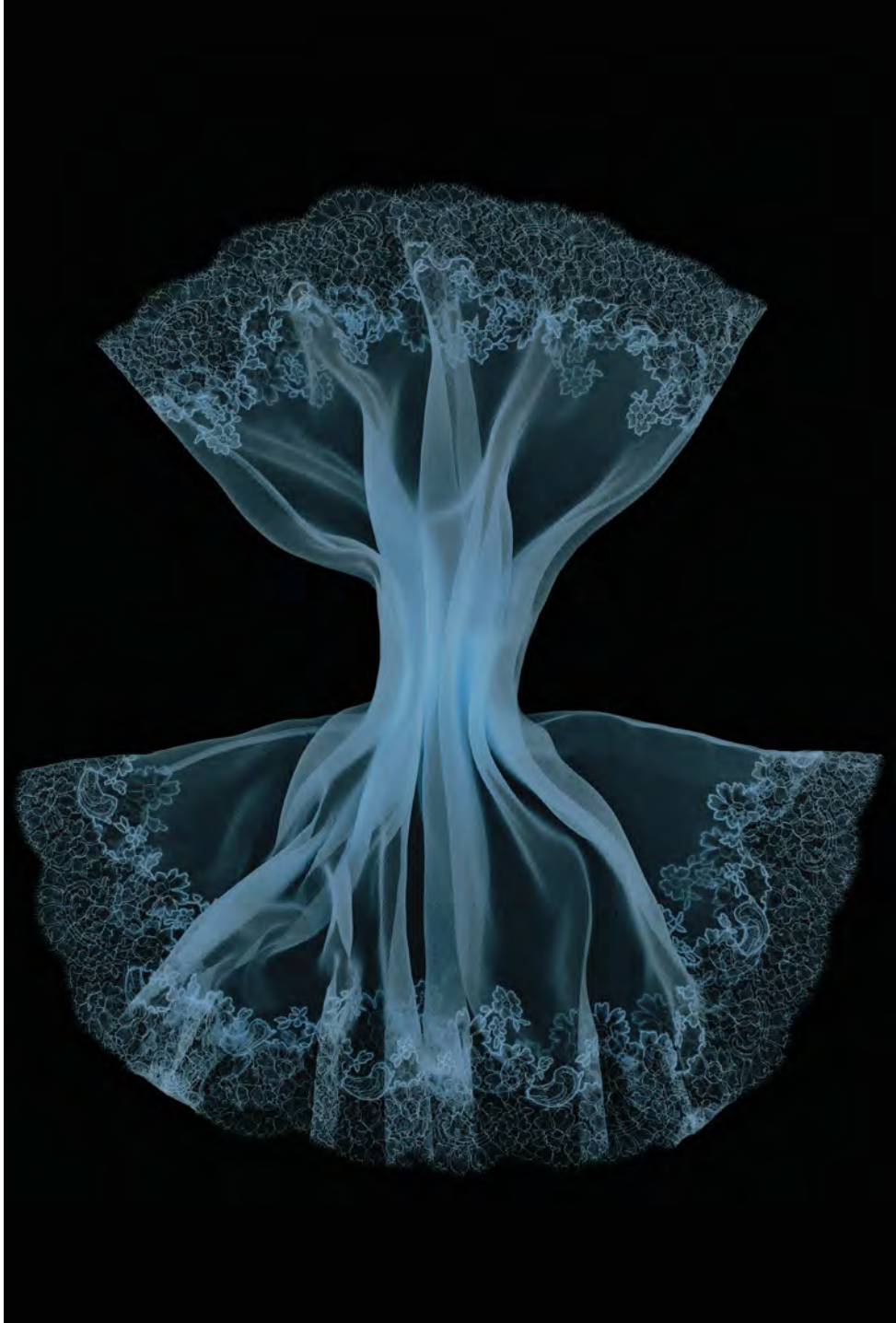
MON COEUR EST FAIT DE DENTELLE

Karen Van Godtsenhoven

In the quiet recess of her atelier, Carine Gilson communes with her muse, lace, by making still life photographs that capture her creations like rare flowers or birds of paradise in flight. These feather-light, diaphanous pieces in silk and lace are painstakingly arranged and rearranged (perhaps as many as fifty times), folded, draped and fanned out on top of a light source. Like a Rorschach inkblot, the emerging shapes reveal the veiled mysteries hidden in their maker's mind. The symbiosis of lace and silk becomes a work of art, a chiaroscuro painting of fleeting beauty, captured by lightning.

In *The Painter of Modern Life*, Charles Baudelaire observes that it is not the naked body one desires, but the clothed body, the silhouette clad in silk, velvet and lace: just as in his memories of childhood, where the fabrics of his mother's clothes would evoke her embrace, he later delights in the sight of his mistress attired in her finery, which he sees as an indivisible unity of body and cloth. In Gilson's images the gaze is directed by the fabric, the residuum not the body. The body has stepped out of or is yet to be enveloped in the lace. Nonetheless, our eye is mesmerized, held in thrall by the suggestion of affection and desire.

Naturally introverted, Gilson has been making these images ever since she began to work with lace. The process gives her a way of quietly speaking and travelling with her own work; it's the purest way for her to express herself, to redirect her creative energy into her own work, to look at it with new eyes. As keeper of the flame or patient alchemist, Gilson brings the fabrics to life, draping and unfolding them into shapes resembling floral arabesques. The sculpted three-dimensional fabric is arrested in a flat image that seems to quiver with motion: a baroque reverie of ornament, light and movement. The body is absent yet implicit, as the movement of the fabrics seems to hold the curves and twists of a body in









4m80

silk is needed to make a long kimono

484 pins

are stitched on by hand, one by one,
to place the lace on an underdress

18 000m

lace flowers are inlaid every year







Jacquard tapestry representing *La Tubéreuse Casée*,
Frans Van Dael © Métaphores





Vionnet, Mme Grès, Jeanne Lanvin and Gabrielle Chanel, who – each in her own way – emancipated and elevated the tradition of female craftsmanship in the fashion industry not only into a form of applied art but also into a highly successful business. The *savoir-faire* of their collaborative practice (with a system of premières, the most important right hand to the designer) inspires Gilson’s own work in her atelier.



The artistry and scientific precision of Madeleine Vionnet inspired Gilson so much that she worked on small dolls for a while, mirroring the practice of her predecessor, who famously worked on three-quarter-scale dolls to try out experimental designs that were cut on the bias – diagonal to the fabric’s weave – thus creating a sort of body-hugging, pyjama-like silk cocoon. Vionnet’s eveningwear liberated the body from its constraining corseted carapace and enveloped it in a gentle embrace. Her singular, non-seasonal



