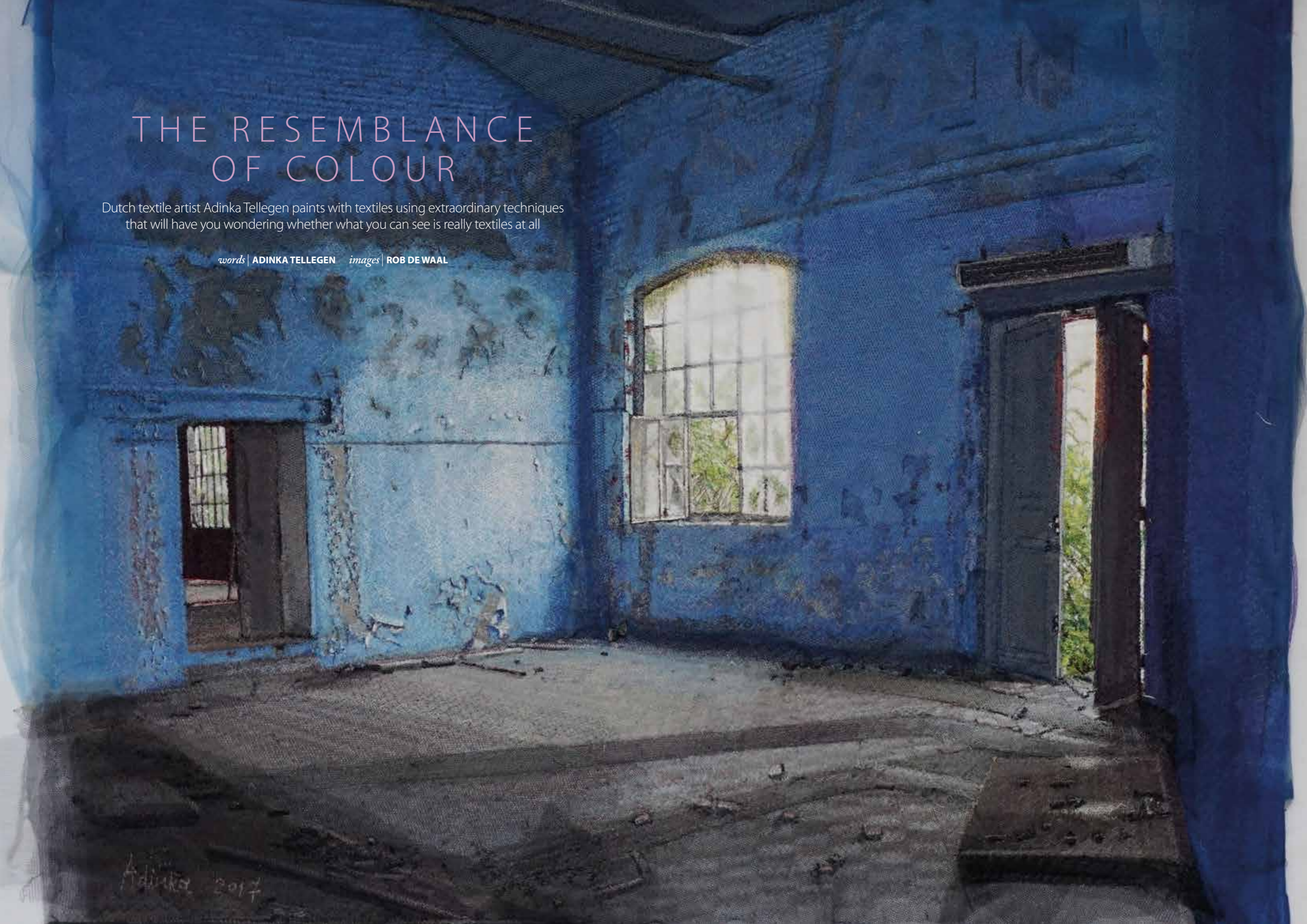


THE RESEMBLANCE OF COLOUR

Dutch textile artist Adinka Tellegen paints with textiles using extraordinary techniques that will have you wondering whether what you can see is really textiles at all

words | ADINKA TELLEGEN *images* | ROB DE WAAL



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Previous page:
Blue Room. The 'blue room' is a part of Harondel, a huge deserted industrial complex in Saint Léger-lès-Domart in northern France (Somme)

Clockwise from top left:
Stelcon Plates. Third one out of a series of four based on the breaking yard of the French demolisher Max Bardé in the Somme;

Mirjam, portrait of Mirjam Bruinsma;

Tansy. Last one out of a series of four, based on the breaking yard of the French demolisher Max Bardé in the Somme (I later found out that the pile of wood were the remains of a boat);

Glazovo. House in Tjarlevo, next to the park of Pavlovsk, near St. Petersburg. Before the Revolution the village was called Glazovo, and my grandfather used to have a datcha there.



When people ask me, 'what is your work?', I answer simply: I paint on the sewing machine. It began with cut out pieces of material, sewn on cotton underground on which I 'drew' details on the machine.

In the course of time, the cut out pieces disappeared to the underground, and I began to paint more and more with thread and pieces of tulle. Thread is the sable brush; tulle, the hog brush.

Since it takes me at least half a year to finish a canvas, the chosen image is very important. I work from pictures only taken by myself. Once, I used a beautiful photo on a postcard but, after a while, I realized it made me unhappy to copy someone else's work and I decided never to do that again. I enlarge the photo to the size of the canvas on plain paper in black and white. I use a smaller photo print for the image as a whole and the colours.

There must be a spark of melancholy in the picture; a desire to return to the spot. I have often wondered why some landscapes are so touching. Is it a glance of eternity or just the opposite; the notion that everything passes? I must feel that desire to start with, but I aim to bring it over to the cloth so that the spectator feels it too.

Of great importance for the picture I choose is a touch of colour; sometimes in just one detail, like the green door in 'Harondel', or a remnant of blue paint in 'Tansy'. Colour is a condition to start with >>



“IS IT HYPOCRITICAL AS A TEXTILE ARTIST TO CONSIDER IT A COMPLIMENT WHEN PEOPLE SAY, ‘I CAN’T BELIEVE THIS IS MADE FROM TEXTILES?’”

Above left and right:
Bus station Luga. Bus
station between Pskov
and St. Petersburg

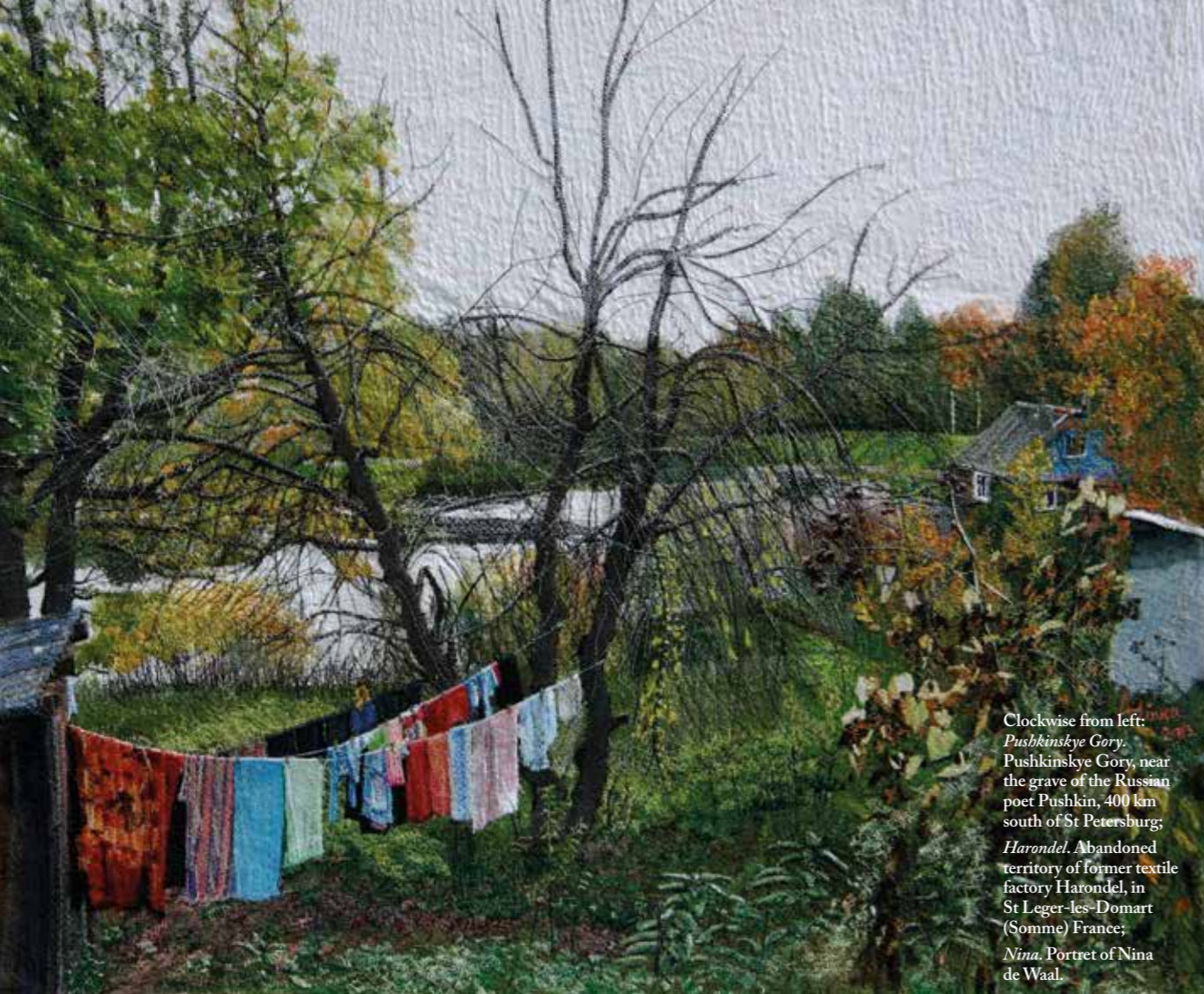
and I long to get to it. Sometimes, I have to wait till the very end to finally reach it, like the red leaf of the Virginia creeper at the window of ‘Grandcour’. On the other hand, the Blue Room of ‘Harondel’ was one big colour shower. It has mainly been ‘painted’ with tulle. At first, I thought it was an easy subject, without small details. But then, I found out that a plain smooth wall demands more skill than the tiniest detail and that just one piece of blue material is not the answer. The light that falls through the window gives the unicoloured wall many shades of blue. I used all kind of combinations of blue tulle with white, grey, purple, lilac, and pink, gradually and subtly changing from one combination to another. The layers had to be fastened invisibly, not leaving a trace on the smooth wall. On the contrary, the places where the wall peeled off had to be shown in detail. It took me many efforts to make it look like the plaster really came off. For the light that falls through the windows, I use lace curtain where it is maximum, with a small red contour to make it blinding, remembering that the painter Karel Appel once said that the brightest white, is white with a touch of red. When I had the Blue Room in my atelier, I experienced that the colour blue, because of the many layers, changed with the light in my studio, passing from full day into dark twilight. That’s why the cloth is difficult to photograph.

My style is naturalistic, and I oppose the notion that a reproduction doesn’t have to be exact because it’s textile, especially when it comes to construction. I like the friction between the material and the

subject: one doesn’t expect an exact, rectangular representation being made in textile. Is it hypocritical as a textile artist, to consider it a compliment when people say, ‘I can’t believe this is made from textiles?’ This attitude puts me in some sort of struggle with the material, since textiles contract and shrink - more here, less there, especially when using zigzag stitch. This draws the image out of shape, and often, where it concerns the construction, it has to be adjusted in the course of the work. The glass panels of the greenhouse of ‘Campneuseville’, for example, had to be removed and replaced over two centimetres to the right. Consequently, resemblance is very important to me, whether it concerns a portrait, a building, or a landscape. It is fascinating to realize how colour influences resemblance. Only colour can make concrete look like concrete, and it’s colour that makes the difference between brown paint and rust.

During the work, the cloth has to be taken out of the sewing machine all the time, since one cannot judge from so close and often, upside down. Only at a distance can I see if it is right. With pins, I mark the spots I have to work on; at most, six or seven. I hate to take the cloth out, especially towards the end when it’s getting heavy. But each time I go on too long without verifying it at a distance, I’m punished, and need to unpick what I’ve just done.

My work table is filled with reels - about a hundred colours - and I change them all the time. The under thread I don’t change so often; I use grey, black, white, and sometimes another colour >>



Clockwise from left:
Pushkinskye Gory, near
 the grave of the Russian
 poet Pushkin, 400 km
 south of St Petersburg;
Harondel, Abandoned
 territory of former textile
 factory Harondel, in
 St Leger-les-Domart
 (Somme) France;
Nina, Portret of Nina
 de Waal.



if demanded above. This makes the work look very different on the reverse, yet it resembles the front. The back side is drawing, the front side is painting. Nothing is sewn at one time. That's impossible; it needs to be elaborated, and even when it's right the first time, it lacks the depth, which comes with more layers, a bit more colour, shadow, and contouring. This goes for every single detail, and I never rest before all is as I want it. During the procedure, the cloth gets thicker and thicker.

When a work is finished, it needs a frame. At least, that's what I used to think, and I made each work a frame, until an artist friend once humbly asked me why I wrapped my work up so frumpily, why I closed it in. The very moment she asked it, I realized why I had always felt so sad after framing a canvas, whereas I had been satisfied before that. It took me quite some time to set the framed cloths free, but what a relief! Ever since then, I leave them naked, as they are, with uneven and frayed edges.

It's obvious that one doesn't decide one day to start painting on the sewing machine. It has been a process, and it took me many years to get there. The deciding factor must have been the love of colour, the admiration for craftsmanship in general, and the desire to master an uncommon skill in particular. Above all, it takes endurance to never give in to the sigh of 'enough', before even the smallest detail has been realized satisfactorily. www.adinkatellegen.nl



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