

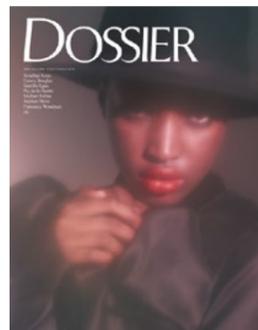
Black & white



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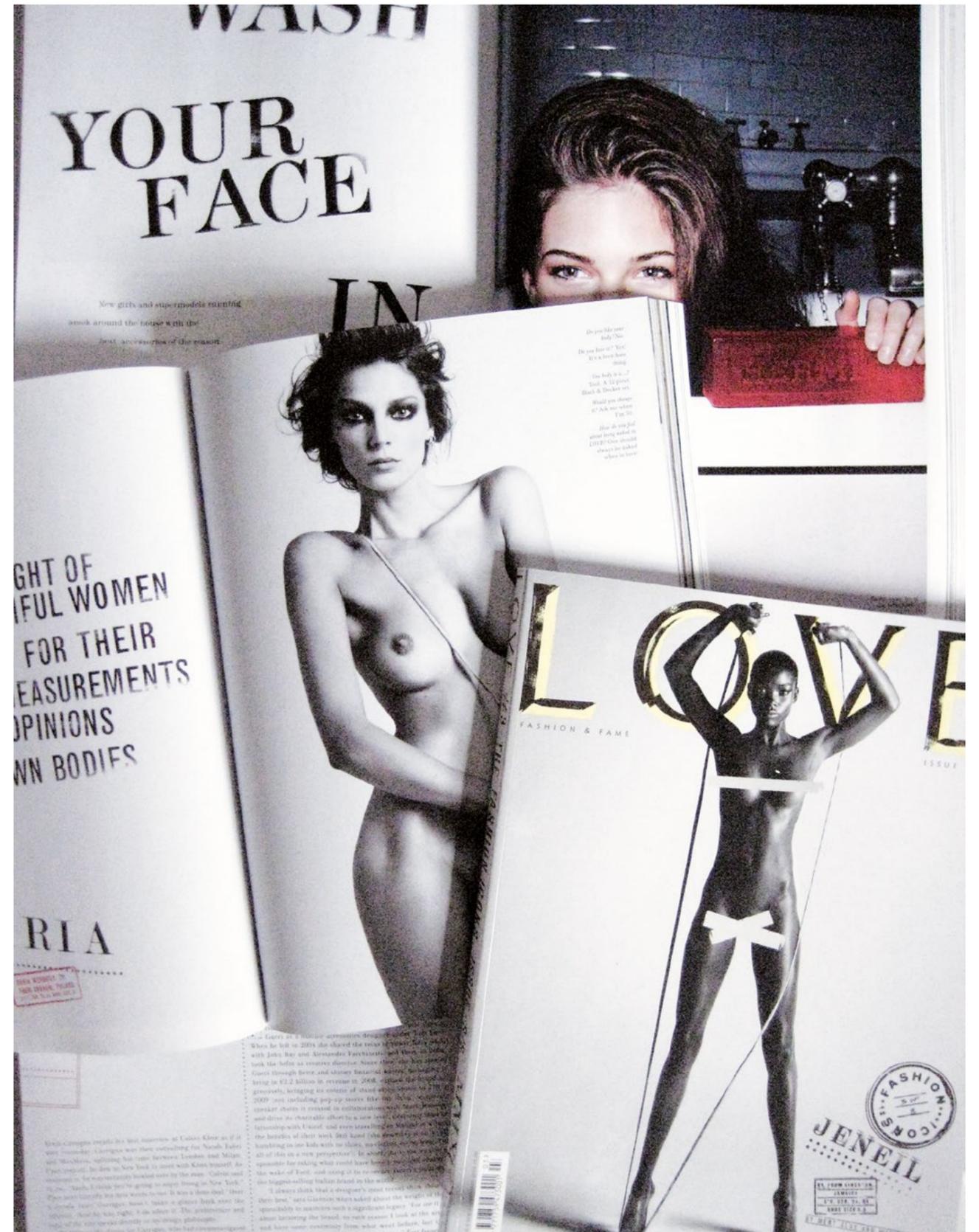
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Paris-based design duo AHONEN and LAMBERG create strong visuals for fashion clients all over the world.

Text
Pihla Hintikka



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DOSSIER

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Photography NINA MERIKALLIO - Make-up and hair JENNY JANSSON - Model JULIA JOHANSSON at Fondri

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UTE PLOIER

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It's quiet on the cobblestone courtyard in the Paris neighbourhood of Marais. A wooden spiral staircase leads to the second floor. At the end of the hallway there is a small, quiet office with high ceilings. A Chinese paper lantern sways in the breeze outside the window. The smell of paint lingers in the air.

We're in Ahonen & Lamberg's new office. The black lamps designed by Alvar Aalto are waiting to be hung and the Aalto stools are on their way from Finland. The work of this Finnish design duo lurks deep within a white cabinet and peeks out from behind the screens of their Macs. "Damn it!" A dark-haired woman with a scarf around her neck and dark brown glasses mutters to herself as she stares intently at her computer screen.

Katariina Lamberg, 34, is fine-tuning a geometrical image, making sure each and every pixel, vector and shade is perfect. The 400-metre long strip she is creating will run along the walls and floors of the Canadian shoe brand Aldo's store on Oxford Street when it opens in April. Sitting across from her, a woman with a blond bob is googling 'mod rock',

'Lou Reed', and 'Patti Smith'. Anna Ahonen, 30, is doing research for an album cover she's working on. She turns the screen to Lamberg and says: "What if we keep the image a little bit out of focus?"

From their Paris studio, Ahonen and Lamberg design clothing prints, visual identities, logos, illustrations, magazines and album covers. Their clients include clothing brands like Uniqlo, Cerruti, Ute Ploier, Lacoste and Akira Naka. They've designed logos for fashion designer Charles Anastase as well as Finland's Ivana Helsinki, R/H and and boutique Nina's.

Ahonen & Lamberg's landscape prints adorn the simple silk dresses and shorts in French fashion house Carven's Pre Spring 2012 collection. Lacoste's Spring 2014 collection includes bathing suits, dresses and leggings with prints designed by Ahonen & Lamberg. And they'll also have a hand in Diesel's Summer 2013 collection and in the upcoming editorial publication of a major cos-

metics brand. Their list of merits is long, even though their history isn't.

The collaboration between Ahonen and Lamberg began in Paris back in 2005, although they already knew each other from their classes at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki. Lamberg who was working at *Self Service* called Ahonen, who was studying in Paris at the time, to help tackle the increasing amount of freelance work that was coming her way. Their first collaboration was a logo for a Paris-based clothing brand.

When Lamberg was looking for an assistant at *Self Service*, Ahonen, who had already returned to Finland, jumped on a plane and was back in Paris with just four days notice. Six months later they had so much freelance work coming in that they decided to create their own company.

"Our plan was that I would quit my job and we'd make ourselves a web site. That was it. What a great plan", Lamberg laughs. Ahonen and Lamberg shake their heads as they

Images

- Dossier journal #2, art direction and design, 2008, USA
- Artwork for Akira Naka Spring-Summer 2011 Collection, Japan
- Maria Luisa, lookbook Autumn-Winter 2010-11, France
- Love Magazine #3 Senior Designer, 2010, UK
- Maria Luisa, lookbook Autumn-Winter 2010-11, France
- Dossier journal logo, 2007, USA
- Artwork for Akira Naka Spring/Summer 2012 Collection, Japan
- Artwork for Carven Pre Spring-Summer 2012 Collection, France
- Ute Ploier logo, 2008, Austria
- Dossier journal co-founding, art direction and design 2007-2010, USA
- Nicolas Andreas Taralis lookbook Spring-Summer 2007, France
- Ahonen & Lamberg exhibition visual, 2012, Finland
- Nicolas Andreas Taralis logo 2008, France
- Artwork for John Lawrence Sullivan, Spring-Summer 2011 collection, Japan

recount the process of creating their company back in 2006. It was crazy, but it felt natural at the same time – both of them were living in Paris, they tackled the mounds of paperwork with the excited naivety of new business owners, and they had an impressive list of future clients from their days at Self Service. It was a very natural progression. At first, Ahonen and Lamberg were just partners. Their friendship came later.

"We're lucky to have the chemistry we do. We're partners in a world where both of us bring something to the table – artistically, stylistically and in terms of our abilities. We have very different personalities, and that's an advantage when we work with clients. Business is psychology. Anna is solution-oriented and I yell and scream and handle the money", Lamberg says. "We've grown and learned a lot from each other over the years. Katariina has gotten softer and I've gotten harder", Ahonen says.

During the first few years, Ahonen & Lamberg's prints were all black and white. Later they incorporated colour. They look to art for inspiration; some of the palettes they've used have come straight from Picasso or Matisse. Their clothing prints pull inspiration from the work of Ukiyo-e artist Hokusai, literature, music, architecture and nature.

Ahonen & Lamberg's images are like controlled chaos: they harness uncontrollable elements like water within clearly defined graphic spaces. "Our design process is pretty mathematical. We start with classic elements and then add some new, absurd element along the way. You have

to build a house before you can paint the walls", Lamberg says.

The majority of Ahonen & Lamberg's clothing

prints are the result of a chain of associations.

The inspiration behind the t-shirt print they designed for John Lawrence Sullivan came from a Japanese painting. It tells the story of an artist who ate his wife as a gesture of love. Impressed and inspired by this wild work of art, Ahonen and Lamberg designed a print that resembled a head of a cauliflower made out of human organs, blood and tendons. The client was thrilled. And that was the start of a collaboration that lasted for years.

Sometimes ideas come from the banality of the everyday. The idea behind the t-shirt print they designed for Ute Ploier came from a layer of film that had formed on the surface of an old cup of tea. Ahonen and Lamberg drew an exact replica of the photograph they took of the cup of tea. The t-shirts were sold as part of the Ute Ploier for TOPMAN collection.

Although Ahonen and Lamberg are usually given carte blanche to design prints as they see fit, sometimes clients come to them with an idea for them to execute. When Lacoste came to Ahonen and Lamberg to design a watercolour crocodile, neither one of them had painted since art school.

It's Thursday morning and the

tiny Kooka Boora café in the 9th arrondissement is packed with people. Ahonen arrives straight from yoga and Lamberg comes from her flat in Montmartre.

They usually start their day around 10.0-11.00 and work through until 19.00. They always have time for a long lunch. And if they hit a patch of designer's block, they go home or grab a glass of wine.

But there's an inherent risk involved in not working frantically around the clock or on weekends or vacation. Lamberg recalls getting a phone call from a strange number while she was on vacation in Finland in August of 2007. She didn't listen to the voicemail until she was back in Paris a month later. She was standing in front of the Agora Press magazine shop when she listened to the message asking if they were interested in pitching their concept for a project at Kenzo. "I was sweating and I thought to myself 'Now you've really screwed up.'"

They had just two weeks to come up with their concept for Kenzo's new visual identity. Ahonen and Lamberg rolled up their sleeves and worked around the clock. "We were really nervous before we had to pitch our idea to the Kenzo team in French. When we presented our concept, they burst out laughing. We used elements they were already using in a totally new and unexpected way. We basically pulled the rug out from under their feet. We weren't sure whether this was a good thing or a bad thing. Two weeks later we got the call that we had won the project", Ahonen recalls. But the project never materialised.

The global recession hit in 2008, and it affected Ahonen and Lamberg, too. They were working on large perfume projects and album covers. When the fashion industry started tightening its belt and record labels started to go under, they lost many of their clients. "When we first started the company, we were spending lots of money and didn't have any savings at all", Lamberg says.

For a couple of months Ahonen and Lamberg tried to keep their heads above water by invoicing clients who didn't have the money to pay their bills. They had to become hard-headed businesswomen literally overnight. They had no choice.

Today, Ahonen and Lamberg are happy to support young emerging artists, as long as the budget is there and it's a project they want to take on.

Ahonen and Lamberg struggle with clients over budgets and copyright issues – particularly with large clients. Projects are carried out across continents and over Skype, and everyone wants to have their say about everything. "Many designers are in their own creative zone when they're designing a collection, and they think everyone else is right there with them. Nowadays our clients are used to the idea that whatever it is, it can wait until Monday", Ahonen says.

Ahonen and Lamberg don't have to recruit clients. The clients come to them. Word of mouth is the best form of advertising, and successful projects lead to new projects. They are often praised for their ability to combine their classical skills with a totally unique visual way of thinking. Their diverse, classical style is per-

fectly suited to the fashion industry, but it also allows them to work on almost any kind of project. And while most graphic designers follow trends in graphic design, Ahonen and Lamberg follow the latest trends in fashion. "I always check out Balenciaga's new collections online. And I love the

Laitinen siblings and Heikki Salonen", Ahonen says. Lamberg nods in agreement and adds Lanvin, Hussein Chalayan and Jonathan Saunders to the list.

Ahonen & Lamberg would like to design a perfume bottle or something similar for Comme des Garçons.

Ahonen and Lamberg like to be involved in every aspect of the projects they work on, from designing the concept right through to implementation. And they have a lot of experience with doing just that. The American fashion and culture magazine Dossier is their handiwork, and they collaborated with interior designer Linda Bergroth to design the overall concept for Le Trabendo, the club which opened in Paris in April. In addition, Ahonen and Lamberg take on art gallery projects as a way of recharging their batteries and their friendship. Their work will be on display in Helsinki from 16-23 of August in Helsinki and in the fall in New York and Tokyo.

Ahonen orders another café au lait. Lamberg orders another ginger lemon tea and rubs her belly. From mid-February until May Ahonen will be on her own for the first time while Lambers is on maternity leave. "Lots of people have said that Ahonen & Lamberg will be on hiatus. Hey,

come on! As if we haven't arranged things so that the company will carry on just as it always has", Lamberg says.

