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# The Aesthetics of Terroir: A Review of Christien Meindertsma at the Art Institute of Chicago

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Christien Meindertsma. 1,000 Wool Sweaters for "Fibre Market Project" (detail), 2016/Photo: Roel van Tour and Mathijs Labadie. © Christien Meindertsma.

Tucked away in the Art Institute of Chicago's Architecture and Design galleries, "Christien Meindertsma: Everything Connects" is appropriately remote. The award-winning Dutch designer has two projects on view, "Flax Project" (2012-ongoing) and "Fibre Market" (2016-ongoing). Both conjure daydreams of a distant Dutch landscape: golden fields of flax, dotted with sheep and the occasional windmill. This aesthetic of terroir runs counter to the promise,

outlined in the exhibition's introductory wall text, that Meindertsma's work will "inspire viewers to engage critically with the world."

The two projects mirror one another on either side of the gallery, accompanied by a documentary film projected on the wall parallel to both. Each side boasts a chair, the product of each project, and ostensibly the two pieces of design on view. But they are presented along with the material traces of their production. For instance, "Flax Project" consists of a table, on one end of which rests a bale of flax, on the other the completed chair, and in between samples of flax at every stage of the production process. Set at waist-height and composed of highly haptic materials, the presentation nearly begs one to touch, a risk it is evident some visitors have taken. Paired with the accompanying video and its alternating shots of rolling fields and the rhythmic churning of machines, and a smaller screen highlighting the remarkably handsome family of farmers responsible for the crop, the project is deeply alluring. It bears the look one expects of a research-based practice, with components spread out in laboratory fashion, the subjects of critique at a sterile distance on a table.



*Christien Meindertsma. Commissioned by Label/Breed. Production Chain for "Flax Chair," 2015 /Photo: Roel van Tour and Mathijs Labadie. © Christien Meindertsma.*

This goes even more so for "Fibre Market." Complete with its own table, telling the story of its

squares through a fiber-sorting machine to determine discrepancies in the fiber content from that listed on the label. Sorted by hue to form a gridded ombre and immaculately pinned to the gallery wall, this work comes closest to emulating the familiar look of institutional critique and the display of research-based practices. But any claim to criticality is overshadowed by the aesthetic pleasure of the chromatically organized swatches dominating the white wall. In the case of both projects, the critique is mild at best, perhaps the effect of focusing on materials that stir romantic allusions. It is hard to imagine Meindertsma taking the same approach to materials and methods of production more ripe for critique (the refinement of crude oil comes to mind).

The flaw is not inherent to Meindertsma's projects, but is a result of its context. The exhibition frames the work in such a way that dooms it to inconsequence. Viewed instead through a lens of regionality and an intimate relationship with material, "Flax Project," in particular, and Meindertsma's work, in general, exalt the Dutch landscape in a way that makes one wonder if it might not have been better installed in proximity to the European painting galleries. It is the autobiographical thread of her native Netherlands and the terroir of the materials that betray the sterility of research-based practice, but that enlivens her design practice. Pretensions to criticality aside, the exhibition is an escape amidst the white walls of the Modern Wing—a fresh approach to landscape, that also happens to be about design. (Jenny Dally)

*"Christien Meindertsma: Everything Connects" at the Art Institute of Chicago, 111 South Michigan through October 20*

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