

WHATEVER LOLA WANTS

In a marriage of fashion and art, Lola Schnabel found herself in the rural South making T-shirts. Horacio Silva explores Project Alabama.

Last March, during the Paris ready-to-wear shows, some of the most influential fashion editors on the planet converged on the Oscar Wilde Room at L'Hôtel. Save for a showy mural of a peacock and period-piece *objets de clutter*, the tiny room lacks the wit and flamboyance of its most famous resident and is best known as the inspiration for Wilde's spurious final quip about the wallpaper, "One or the other of us has to go."

Over the years, the hotel has become a mecca for sensitive young men and wizened literary types. But these particular pilgrims, better dressed but perhaps worse read than the typical Wilde acolyte, had made the trek to view a collection of recycled T-shirts stitched together by a sewing circle of women in Alabama and featuring embroideries of drawings by the photographer and artist Lola Schnabel. With the Wildean grandiloquence that art dealers in the 1980's used to describe the work of Lola's father, the painter Julian Schnabel, the editors took tea on the balcony and declared the clothes to be "genius."

For Natalie Chanin, the force behind Project Alabama, the showing was a voyage that began in earnest in late 2000. Chanin, whom everyone calls Alabama, had recently moved back to New York, after 10 years in Europe as a stylist and costume designer, to start a line of hand-sewn T-shirts that were immediately celebrated. When the one-woman cottage industry failed to keep up with demand and the search for a New

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York manufacturer proved elusive, Alabama had an epiphany: the rough-hewn techniques she was using to sew her shirts were the same as the quilt-stitching methods of her grandmother and the women she grew up with in Lauderdale County, Ala. So she high-tailed it back to her cotton-picking birthplace.

Alabama teamed up with a business partner, Enrico Marone-Cinzano, and together they marshaled a group of Southern



The artist Lola Schnabel, above, had her drawings made into hand-stitched T-shirts, far right, by Natalie Chanin (aka Alabama), right, who runs Project Alabama in her home state. The project's "stationery," inset.

women to sew the garments. The team has expanded now to about 100 stitchers, some of them across the border in Tennessee, who work from home to produce beautifully made one-of-a-kind pieces that are sold at tony stores around the world, like Barneys in New York, Browns in London and L'Éclaireur in Paris.

The first Project Alabama collection was created while Alabama and Marone-Cinzano produced a documentary called "Stitch," about the rich quilt-making tradition in the South. The 22-minute film was later used to showcase the range at a presentation at the Chelsea Hotel during New York's fashion week. In the ensuing year and a half, the company has continued its practice of eschewing the runway in favor of unconventional

fashion presentations — in collaboration with creative types like the art photographer Sissi Farassat (who is publishing a book that includes an account of her journey to the Project Alabama headquarters), the electronic musician Khan and the D.J. team kitty8n'dirtycub.

In November last year, Alabama was introduced to Schnabel by Marone-Cinzano, who saw in the artist's drawings and boho jewelry designs a youthful sophistication that was a good fit with Project Alabama's haute flea-market aesthetic. Having agreed to collaborate on the collection, Schnabel headed to Alabama in early February to produce 200 sketches at the label's base, a small brick 1940's home in Lovelace Crossroads — a ma-and-pa community where a clean tank top





Schnabel's dark, almost sinister-looking artwork, far right, at first frightened the local women, above, who do their sewing at home, in and near Lauderdale County. It is so rural and isolated, Schnabel says, that all you can do is work.

Schnabel recalls the initial reaction to her often-provocative sketches. "I think they thought that it was a bit like witchcraft," she says. "It definitely scared them. So I tried not to draw overtly sexual things, or things that were too demonic. I have so much respect for the women who work on Project Alabama, and I really wanted to draw something special that they wouldn't be put off by. But some of the first drawings that I did with naked girls were politely sent back to me. There were some things that the ladies didn't think were appropriate for them to work on."

For the 20-year-old art-world *précieuse*, who grew up in Manhattan and has traveled extensively, the time spent in the sleepy Southern town was far removed from the circles she normally travels in. "The place is so detached from reality," Schnabel says, "that you have no option but to work all day. There's something to be said about going to bed hearing coyotes howling — it makes for intense dreams."

Perhaps there was something in the homemade cinnamon rolls that one of the ladies made for Schnabel for breakfast each morning, because the resulting sketches have a sinister quality to them that a psychiatrist would have a field day with. So does she see a shrink?

"I do, as it happens," Schnabel says. "I think some of the ladies were wondering the same thing. In one of the series of T-shirts, the illustrations featured zombies and horned aliens and their babies. I had to explain to the ladies that I was making a comment on diversity and the different kinds of families that are out there, because they thought that something terrible must have happened to me to make me draw such dark, disturbing things."

In her lilting Southern accent, Alabama recalls: "They felt so much for her. They'd look at her and say, 'Precious girl!'"

Like therapy, Schnabel's handiwork doesn't come cheap. Project Alabama garments normally range from \$300 to \$3,000, depending on the amount of stitching, and the shirts

featuring Schnabel's artwork begin at \$600 and go up to \$1,500. "You have to remember that the clothes themselves go through an incredible voyage," Alabama says. "Not only are they preloved, but in being cut up and re sewn they literally go through hundreds of hands. They're very labor-intensive because every garment is cut by hand, and everything from the dyeing to the sewing of the labels is done by hand. One woman might stitch for up to three weeks on one garment."

And, just as Dolly Parton's mother sewed her love in every stitch of her famous coat of many colors, the Project Alabama women embroider their Southern comfort into each garment. "The women talk of loving their thread," Alabama says. "It's kind of a mantra that each woman performs while stitching the shirts. They run their fingers over the thread again and again, so that it releases the tension and keeps the thread from knotting. And while they stitch they talk to their thread, and tell it that it's being

used to sew the most beautiful shirt ever and bring good fortune on the wearer. You know, they sign their names on every garment; they're extremely proud of their work."

Schnabel adds: "They're lucky, all those shirts. I truly believe they feel lucky, plus they're so soft and smell like Tide. I could never have imagined that my drawings would be rendered so beautifully as embroideries."

For the coming season, Alabama is again collaborating on a collection, this time an evening-wear range created in conjunction with the designer Fernando Sanchez. "He's here in New York," she says, "and I don't think we have much of a chance of getting him to come to Alabama. But we're going to show again in Paris, in the same Oscar Wilde suite. And while none of the women are coming to Paris, we're in talks with Barneys to bring them to New York for a stitching-for-charity event. Maybe in the fall. They're very excited about that. Talk about a journey." Sounds like quite a yarn. ■

is considered dressy.

"I knew from the outset it was not going to be your typical trip," Schnabel says in her global-citizen accent, over lunch in Manhattan. She's wearing a Sophia Loren-style floral dress made by her friend Zac Posen. "The flight itself is only two hours, but it's about a six-hour journey in total, and in that time I managed to meet all sorts of characters, including a Mesopotamian guy, who was an expert in Armenian cooking and designed spaceships for NASA."

Relishing the irony that her homespun operation is located in such a technologically advanced outpost, the soft-spoken Alabama says of her home state: "A lot of the space shuttles were built there. We like to joke that we're all so high-tech."

Of Schnabel's arrival, Alabama says: "It was a great eye opener. I think the women loved working on the drawings. But it was like a journey for them, too, to understand Schnabel's drawings. In the end they connected to them, but for some of the women, it was their first experience with modern art. In many ways, it was shocking for them."

