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## LINES *of* THINKING

Modern creatives who do it all



WITH \_\_\_\_\_ MARTE MEI VAN HAASTER, TROYE SIVAN, CHRIS BLACK, MAGNUS NILSSON, BILL BENSLEY, CATHERINE FITZGERALD









# THE SUPERMODEL MAKER

When she's not walking runways, Marte Mei van Haaster is revolutionising sustainable design. *Mark Smith* visits her Amsterdam home. Photography by *Amélie Ambroise*

Left: Marte Mei van Haaster in her art studio surrounded by ceramics and samples





Van Haaster with phytoresin and cherrywood Short Shelf and phytoresin mirror prototype – both from the Mending Lands collection debuting at St Vincents gallery in Antwerp – and a handmade ceramic cup, all by van Haaster. Right: a ceramic vegetable storage unit by van Haaster in the kitchen. Throughout: all designs by van Haaster, POA, unless otherwise stated



**M**arte Mei van Haaster is as tall and beautiful as you'd expect of someone who has just walked the catwalk for Givenchy and Gaultier. Her face may currently be on the cover of *Vogue NL*, but the 33-year-old model is not especially animated by talk of the latest machinations in the fashion industry. "I guess I do look like a boy," she shrugs. Dressed today in a white pincord band-collared shirt and brown newsboy trousers, she welcomes me into her Amsterdam kitchen, where her long-haired ginger cat Jonas (the "token carnivore" in her more or less vegan household) pads around regally. Van Haaster's passion subject of late are pollutants of which the fashion industry happens to be one of the world's biggest emitters: PFAS.

The average glass of Dutch tap water – such as she has just served me – should not exceed 4.4 nanograms per litre of the man-made "forever chemicals". Used to make products, packaging and clothes resistant to water and oil, PFAS accumulate in the body and have been linked to certain cancers, immune disruption and fertility problems. "Everyone has that stuff in their blood now. It's everywhere," says van Haaster, who has been researching the subject for the past year. At her home – a traditional dike house overlooking a wild bird sanctuary in the Kadoelen neighbourhood of the blustery Noord district – she is preparing design work for an exhibition opening at St Vincents gallery in Antwerp in May. A curvy occasional table with a sculptural arch-like base and a cherrywood top sits in a corner near the giant window. She unpacks other creations from the same series – "the same mould, actually" – from clouds of bubble wrap in the kitchen. "This is a shelf, here's the mirror," she says of the Flintstonian, organic pieces made from a dense and waxy substance called "phytoresin" – a composite of bioresin and hemp. Other more angular items are made from flat tiles of the same substance that may be arranged in grids, for example as the top of a long rectangular wooden table.

The ground floor of the house is open-plan, and the ceiling above the kitchen sink cleverly cut away to allow in light from above. The kitchen tiles, handmade during a stint teaching ceramics in Amsterdam, are evidence of an eye trained across every surface. The home was extended and redesigned by van Haaster and her ex-husband Max Daalhuizen, now a landscape architect, whom she met at art school and collaborated with under the joint name Max/Mei. "We got pretty experimental, for example making a tapestry with all kinds of fibres and introducing a moth colony to eat patterns within the weave."

Van Haaster grew the hemp, which is known for its ability to cleanse soil – a process called phytoremediation – 160km away in the Belgian municipality of Ranst, on a fire-department site where fire-extinguisher usage had led to PFAS contamination. Her quest for "lands I could heal" was supported by Nesse, a publicly funded cultural hub in

Right: van Haaster's living room houses (from left) a Martin Visser Osaka chair refurbished by van Haaster (not for sale), a vintage lamp, an *Imprint in Essaouira* photograph, 2019, by van Haaster, €210 (unframed), a phytoresin and cherrywood side table from her Mending Lands collection, a gardening tool and spoon from her Polluted Plants to Pottery collection, a wood box by Thomas Roger and a vintage Poul Cadovius Royal System shelving system. Bottom right: van Haaster in the garden, wearing an Extreme Cashmere sweater



the Dutch port city of Terneuzen, a region acutely alive to the PFAS problem given the chemical industry that lines both banks of the Scheldt estuary.

Van Haaster's fascination with phytoremediation has been with her for a while. The lightbulb moment came in 2023 when cycling past De Ceudel, a celebrated sustainable community next to her Amsterdam studio. She had befriended its caretaker and discovered more than a decade's worth of contaminated plants that had been used to extract heavy metals. The Ceudel Plates – ceramics glazed with that harvest, tested for food safety – were her proof of concept, and the principle that design could be a byproduct of land regeneration has been with her ever since.

But how does a model working as the face of one of the most polluting industries on earth find herself at the cutting edge of sustainable design? "People often say, 'Oh, you must have grown up in a forest or something,'" she says. "But actually the opposite is true. I was brought up in the city. I just found nature within that – going cycling or playing in the mud." She was raised in Amsterdam-Oost, the only child of separated parents: her father an industrial designer, her mother the long-serving director of city-centre theatre De Kleine Komodie. Inspired by her grandmother's knack for quilting, she started making her own clothes at the age of 12.

By the time she turned 17 and had enrolled at the Royal Academy of Visual Arts in The Hague to study fashion and textiles, she had already been scouted as a model and was signed to an Amsterdam agency. Her work was "less than occasional", she says. But when she was encouraged to take a gap year before transferring to the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam, she decided to lean into modelling. "I was broke, I really had zero money," she recalls. Two months later she had secured a coveted "Prada exclusive" and was walking the catwalk at Milan fashion week.

One gap year became three before she returned to school. "I don't want to be the model turned designer," she insists. "I'm the designer turned model." She's since

**"AS A CHILD I FOUND NATURE WITHIN THE CITY – CYCLING OR PLAYING IN THE MUD"**







Above: plates from van Haaster's Polluted Plants to Pottery collection and vintage scales in the studio atelier. Right: a rainbow chard from her garden. Below: a phytoresin and smoked oak coffee table from the Mending Lands collection and a Polluted Plants to Pottery gardening tool and spoon. Opposite: van Haaster sits by an Offcut Puzzle waste marble and oak coffee table and ceramic ring, both made by her



managed to strike a balance of doing both: “Everything just collides. I don’t feel like there needs to be a label any more.” As her friend, fellow Dutch model Rianne van Rompaey, puts it: “Marte never treats an obstacle as an obstacle; rather a chance to create a new way. She’s a life force.”

**G**eraldine Jackman, co-founder of St Vincents, has been interested in van Haaster’s work since seeing her Companion Species Cabinet, a project from 2023. “She made it from the wood of an Austrian forest that had become a monocrop, suffering from pests and other problems,” says Jackman. “There she made a diversified forest by planting pine, beach and oak.” For the phytoremediation project, van Haaster chose hemp because the fast-growing plant has long been used in the technique. But a 2024 field trial found it removed only two per cent of PFAS at most. Van Haaster worked with C-Biotech, her hemp supplier, to introduce a “soil enhancer” of enzymes and fungi – and “increased the bio-absorption of the hemp by a factor of 30”, in some cases reducing the PFAS content by 67 per cent.

The cherrywood table was the first piece from the phytoresin collection that she started using. “A baby can lick it,” she smiles (the pieces have been tested by Eurofins, an independent testing laboratory). We are sitting on her giant sofa in the wooden side of the house. The interior walls are a warm, muted sage-olive, monstera plants and bookshelves abound, and the long garden, visible through a huge picture window, morphs seamlessly into a golden pastoral worthy of Aelbert Cuyp.

The phytoremediation project required van Haaster to act as much as a producer as a designer: assembling scientists, biotech firms, documentary film crew and testing laboratories to co-operate into a working consortium where none had previously communicated. “I knock on many doors,” she says, cheerily. “A lot are going to stay closed, but some will open generously.” Adriënne van der Werf, artistic coordinator at Nesse, agrees. “Marte knows how to connect a wide variety of partners while staying focused on the artistic end result,” she says.

## “I KNOCK ON MANY DOORS. SOME STAY CLOSED, SOME OPEN”

Although modelling allows her the opportunity “to have in-depth conversations with influential people in fashion on a monthly basis”, van Haaster doesn’t proselytise on shoots. She is aware that, like her, creative directors and other fashion high-ups have a balance to strike between critiquing the industry and staying within its ranks (“If all the good people left because fashion is a stinky business, then what hellish hell-fire would be left?”). But her work has attracted commissions, including a table made of puzzled-together marble offcuts in Bottega Veneta’s Milan HQ.

For van Haaster, the scope of her new exhibition – with its deep-dive, ultimately optimistic approach to the thorny subject of industrial land (mis)use – is potentially bigger than the fashion industry. Her goal, she says, is “to show that phytoremediation can be done. To attract attention and then say: OK, this is possible, now let’s scale it up.” What might that look like? “It means hundreds of acres of land cleaned. It means making street lanterns, public benches and motorway sound barriers from this material, instead of out of plastic.” She pauses. “That is literally my dream.” ■ **HTSI**

*Marte Mei van Haaster: Mending Lands is at St Vincents, Kleine Markt 13, Antwerp, from 7 May to 26 June*



