

## AT HOME WITH TOOS

Fashion designer Toos Franken on coming home, on art and fashion with gut feeling.

BY LENE KEMPS

She lives in the middle of the nowhere. “I want to be able to go outside, walk and ride bikes.” She lives in a house where fashion is only moderately present. “One day we might build an additional studio, but for now the house is a project in development. Nothing is fixed, everything can change, at any time. That’s how I like it.”

We are both children of the Kempen, a green and dry area north of Belgium, that’s why we first share some stories about people and villages. About moving away (me) and eventually coming back (she). About that funky regional dialect. About who we knew, still know, and who we have lost sight of. Her sister lives in my birthplace, Balen, and Toos used to have a store there, which is why she is invariably called ‘the Kempish designer’. She originates from one of the smallest villages: Postel, a postcard-sized village with maybe 200 inhabitants. “I’m a farmer’s daughter,” she says. Which is a slight exaggeration; her father ran a turf business. “But I really grew up outside. In nature. I want the same wealth and freedom for my children.” So after five years in Antwerp, she chose a house in Retie, among trees. “It was coming home. I would have preferred to live even deeper in a forest. But it’s beautiful here, I like coming here. I wanted to be closer to my parents again. And I need air to be able to function. My head is so full sometimes and then the view here brings some lightness. My husband has lived in America, South Africa and Australia. I have lived in Australia and New Zealand. And now we are happy in a cul-de-sac in the Kempen.”

‘I didn’t want a cool interior, it’s a home for young children’

## ART AND CHILDREN

She leads me around a house full of children’s drawings and art. “I painted this ten years ago, the night before one of my many moves, on a piece of denim that I found.” Creativity was encouraged in the Franken family. “My mother was a graphic designer and we were one of the first in the village to have a computer at home, she needed it job-wise. Among other things, she made advertising panels and signs. She painted them in the garden by hand and airbrush, and then - left them against wall to dry. It’s a vivid memory, those colorful panels side by side. I was in drawing school as a child, started when I was six. The smell of new brushes and paint can instantly bring me back there, the nostalgia. A blank page, a new canvas, an easel.... It gives a sense of freedom, of possibilities. I love painting a lot, but I rarely have the time for it today.”

A hut here, a fort there, and the occasional dinosaur. This is not a designer’s show-off home; this is the warm and cozy home of a young family. “I did not want a cool interior. It is a home for young children. There’s still a Christmas decoration here that the boys absolutely don’t want to see removed. Okay, well, - it stays. These gymnast rings on the ceiling belong to my husband. He actually does exercises here too. I sit and watch him with my mouth open.” Sons Bear and Anakin are six and ten. “My mother just said: enjoy this time in their lives, because this is very special. And it’s true, they already breathe a bit of independency and can do a lot on their own, but they still like to be close to me. I hold my heart for how they will be in five yearstime, but now it’s wonderful.” Opposite the large closet - “Straight from the thrift store. One day I want to paint it white and mount lights behind the windows” - is a wall full of frames.

Toos points out a drawing of Anakin. “Look how powerful a child’s drawing can be. A little man with a crown and - caption: ‘I am king.’ What a great line that is. The innocence, and the self-assurance at the same time. Sometimes I wish I could see life like that again, that I could look at the world with ease.”

## MOTHERS AND FASHION

Toos’ biography reveals that she had to interrupt her fashion training at the Antwerp Academy for the birth of her son. “Yes, ‘had to’, it always says. She ‘had’ to stop her studies. While having a child was a real choice. I love being a mom, and I think raising children is the best school in efficiency. My sons keep me grounded. I can have difficult days - accounting issues, difficulties in production - but they don’t care about any of that at all. Kids are a healthy dose of reality and they remind you of what is really important. I became a mother when I was still young, at 22, which was not a walk in the park. But that is how I wanted it. I made a very conscious choice, and it made me to who I am today.” Does she sometimes think about that other life of graduating as a designer and exploring the world? “Sometimes I do. But I don’t think of it as a missed opportunity, because I am far too excited with the life I lead. Maybe curiosity, yes : what would I have done, how would I have coped? Becoming a mother has forced me to map out my own route. It has brought a lot of beautiful things. Sometimes I think I live life in reverse: children before the house. A flagship store at first, then the other points of sale. I briefly considered going back to the academy, but it turned out to not be really necessary. My dream was to have my own collection, and that is an actual reality right now.”

Fashion can devour you. Did she ever think about a different path? “If I hadn’t chosen fashion, and wasn’t a mom, I would have liked to do something with more impact on the world. As a war journalist or so. The idea of being able to tell a story that - wouldn’t get a hearing, - fascinates me. I feel a huge

responsibility to contribute - to a better society. We support actions such as Te Gek, and make limited collections for charity, but my philanthropic voice is much louder and I want to do so much more. I dream that, with the brand I can build foundations on which others can rely and construct, that my company can become somehow self-sufficient and really mean something. Not that I look down on fashion; beauty is important and clothes can play an essential role in your well-being. But its impact remains limited. There are so many people who really need help, who you can’t reach with fashion. They don’t have that type of budget for beauty in their lives, it’s not their priority. Maybe someday I’ll have time to figure out a plan, when I’m seventy. My oldest son says: ‘When I grow up, we will build schools together with the money you have earned. And plant trees!’ He wants to plant trees all the time.”

‘Sometimes I wish I could think like a child again, that I could look at the world so naturally and simply’

## MINIMALISM AND MORE

Toos is often classified as a minimalist. You can see why: the thoughtful forms and lack of gratuitous ornamentation, the presence of an underlying concept. Yet that label doesn’t do her justice because her clothes are more than that. “I’m not a hardcore minimalist, but I understand that people classify me in that way. My collection is not garish. I spend a lot of time on constructing the right line. The effect of that work is almost invisible in photo; you really have to look at my clothes up close. I sometimes hear that they have no ‘hanger appeal’. On the hanger they don’t sell themselves automatically, they require some explanation. Yet I am not an intellectual designer. I start from my gut feeling and I very quickly know whether something works or not.” Her volumes are often spacious, reassuring and sophisticated cocoons. “I like that myself. There is then a beautiful movement in the garment, and the fabric speaks very much for itself at that moment. I like clothes that are super elegant and yet

comfortable. Clothes that don't make you think: oh dear, I can't breathe in this skirt, after you've had dinner in a restaurant."

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Art is an ongoing source of inspiration. For the last collection, it was Agnes Martin who inspired Toos. Martin is not surprisingly often called a minimal artist, but she called herself an abstract expressionist. Toos: "She used a loose hand to put subtle colored line patterns on a large canvas, often with a moving effect. Agnes Martin lived in the middle of the desert in America, and she was exclusively concerned with beauty, not material things. Such a vision can inspire me. Jannis Kounellis, of arte povera, managed to put real horses in a chic white art gallery as a statement. I do like that kind of statement. Could we still do it today? It seems like we live in different times."

Between collections, she likes to watch documentaries, to recharge and feed the brain. "The Palestinian-Israeli issue, life in an African village.... I just really like stories. Ultimately, that's what I'm trying to do with a collection: tell a story." Franken strives to create a sustainable-to-wear suit, but is realistic about its limitations. "I introduce sustainability and ethical business into as many facets of the production and creation process as possible. But I don't want to be bland about it; fashion, by definition, cannot be sustainable. Actually, we don't need new clothes. In the most sustainable society, you would have one garment that is made of a self-cleaning material, so you don't have to wash it. Yet I like fashion a lot. The way you capture the spirit of the times, how people build their identity with it, how they create their own story with it. That remains beautiful."

This is Toos

- After two years of fashion training at the Antwerp Academy, Toos Franken (32) took a course in pattern drawing and worked for Haider Ackermann and Ann De-meulemeester.
- She is mother of Anakin (10) and Bear (6).
- She founded her own brand at the kitchen table in 2014 and kept growing at her own pace. She was in the news when when Zara copied one of her sweaters. "What a hassle. That copy made me angry, but it didn't keep me awake at night. The whole fuss around it, on the other hand..."
- A store of her own was opened, first in Balen (2016), then the flagship store in Antwerp (2018). "I learned a lot through the contact with the customers. But having your own store is tough, and I now want to focus back on creation."
- A new project (a concept store cum restaurant) was postponed due to corona and is now tentatively scheduled for August this year.