MAGAZINE | PHOTO ESSAY

Fruits of the Loom

Text by RIVKA GALCHEN JAN. 10, 2014

In 1776, America didn't have a single textile mill. There were no spinning mules, no water-powered looms. There were only rumors of what such things might look like and a few nonfunctioning models built from those rumors. Nearly every American woman, except the wealthiest, knew how to spin her own yarn and weave her own cloth, even as across the Atlantic women were moving out of the home and into millwork as England — bent on protecting its export market by safeguarding its trade secrets — industrialized the manufacturing of textiles.

Samuel Slater was 14 when he began working at a cotton-spinning mill in Derbyshire, England. Seven years later, in 1789, he disguised himself as a farmer to pass English customs and board a ship to the United States. When he arrived in America, he got a mechanized loom up and running, then a textile factory and later factory towns, eventually becoming known as both Slater the Traitor and the father of the American Industrial Revolution.

For a time it must have seemed that every waterfall in New England was becoming the center of a new town, and Philadelphia, with its Schuylkill River, became "the workshop of the world" for at least 90 years, until steam power replaced water power, and the textile industry drifted South, where labor was cheaper. Today, of course, most textile production takes place abroad. In Guangzhou, China, they have had whole streets devoted to selling yarn. A century ago, there were more than 800 businesses related to textile manufacturing in Philadelphia alone; today there are around a hundred.

Christopher Payne has spent much of the past few years photographing more than 20 of the mills that make up what's left of America's textile industry. Three appeared to have closed midproduction, looking like soft, bright Pompeiis, the colorful yarns still piled on the factories' floors after the doors were permanently closed; others continue to function, often with machinery and techniques valued precisely because they are decades or even centuries old. Many of the machines in the mills Payne has documented are embossed with the names of defunct machinery companies not far from where he grew up near Boston.

He uses a large-format view camera — just a lens, a bellows and a ground focusing glass — that exposes individual sheets of 4-by-5-inch film; the setup for his long-exposure shots often takes hours. He describes his work as an attempt "to convey the significance of places and processes, once marvels of their time, that have now fallen into obsolescence" and yet remain vital to the few people left who employ these methods and purchase these goods. Payne has a background in architecture, to which he attributes his interest in "how things are purposefully

designed and constructed, and how they work." In 2010, he came across a yarn mill in Maine and was transfixed by the way it seemed to exist both in the past and the present; it became the first textile mill he photographed.

Langhorne Carpet Company, in Penndel, Pa., used to share its building with a hosier, but that business closed long ago. The building, from 1907, is a technological innovation: among the first mills to have a free-standing roof, leaving floor space without the obstruction of supporting beams. The building now houses 10 broad looms and eight narrow ones. On the day I visited, a young man in a hooded sweatshirt and jeans was making a five-color runner on one of the narrow looms, while an older man in a denim smock was restringing a broad one; 5,040 spools of yarn needed to be knotted on. "We've stayed in business because we'll take a 20-yard order, that's our niche," said Langhorne's president, Bill Morrow, whose grandfather and great-grandfather founded the company in 1930. "Henry Ford had some looms he wanted to get rid of, and my great-grandfather went and bought them, and that's how we got started. Ford had wanted to make all the parts of a car, even the textiles for the interior, but I guess he gave up on making the textiles." Langhorne has made reproductions of historic carpets for the Frederick Douglass house in Washington; the Congress Hall of Philadelphia; and the Rutherford B. Hayes home in Fremont, Ohio. It also makes carpets for individual homes: "We recently did a family crest. That's an example of the kind of thing we like about being a small-batch mill."

Langhorne employs about 40 people, whom it trains in-house. When a machine needs a new part, it is specially forged. "We've bought a lot of this machinery from other companies that have closed down," Morrow said. "These jacquards" — punch cards with holes that code the design the loom will produce — "come from the former Downs Carpet Company. It was a five-story building that took up a whole block. They were like a city, their factory. That kind of scale of work though is now done abroad."

It's unsettling to stand in those mills, looking at the historic equipment and the worn floorboards and the diffuse light over workstations that probably looked much the same 150 years ago. The workers themselves, with sneakers and tattoos, prevent the place from feeling as if you might step outside into the Civil War era, but you do get the sense of having eddied out of time. The past, we keep relearning, does not necessarily look like the darkened oil paintings for which we mistake it. Textile factories, on certain days, make you remember that Matisse came from a textile town. Fuchsia hanks of yarn contrast brightly with the faded wood of a loom, and even basic white threads take on a glow in spooled array.

At the dye house of G.J. Littlewood and Son in Manayunk, Pa., there are labeled barrels filled with powdered dyes — Intracid Blue A, Nylosan Scarlet, Lanaset Green, Intralan Bordeaux. They can make "a thousand different oranges," Richard Littlewood told me, pointing to a pile of acid-orange wool destined to become scarves, which sat next to a heap of familiar deep blue that would become peacoats for the United States Navy. When I asked him how the mill remains in business, Littlewood said: "We try to stay flexible and learn new things. We worked very hard to figure out how to dye this fake fur that is produced in Japan.

It was very tricky to work out how to get it to hold a dye. Kanecaron, it's called. I just got my wife a coat of it."

Over the course of this project, Payne came to know the workers and mill owners well. They all happily let him shoot and reshoot in their spaces, though they were sometimes puzzled by the shots he chose. "When you've worked around spinning frames, looms and dye kettles your entire life, it's hard to reimagine them as art," Payne said.

Last August, a fire broke out at the Langhorne Carpet Company, and much of its stock was lost. "Would I have wanted this to happen?" Morrow said. "No. But it was a good chance to clean everything up. We've just about restrung all of the looms. You've heard of the Luddites, right? It was looms that they tried to destroy. Those were the first machines they were against."

Correction: January 10, 2014

An earlier version of the caption for picture No. 1 in an accompanying slide show misstated the name of the textile mill shown. It is Fall River Knitting Mills, not Northeast Knitting Mills.

Christopher Payne is a photographer whose book "North Brother Island: The Last Unknown Place in New York City" will come out this spring.

Rivka Galchen is a fiction writer and an essayist. Her collection of short stories, "American Innovations," will be published in May by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Editor: Claire Gutierrez

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