

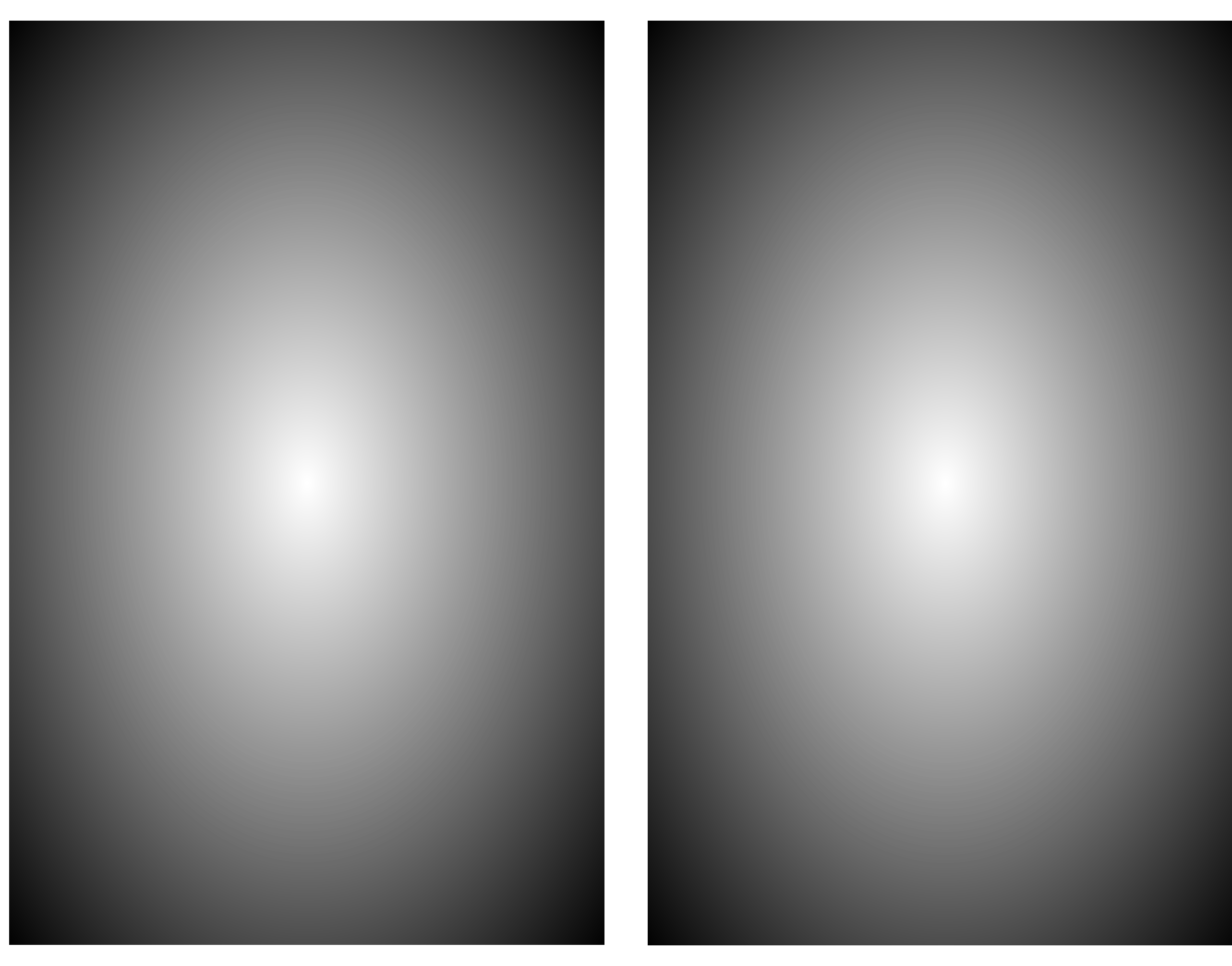
# Textilising Tales with Slow Production

Words by Anna Roos van Wijngaarden



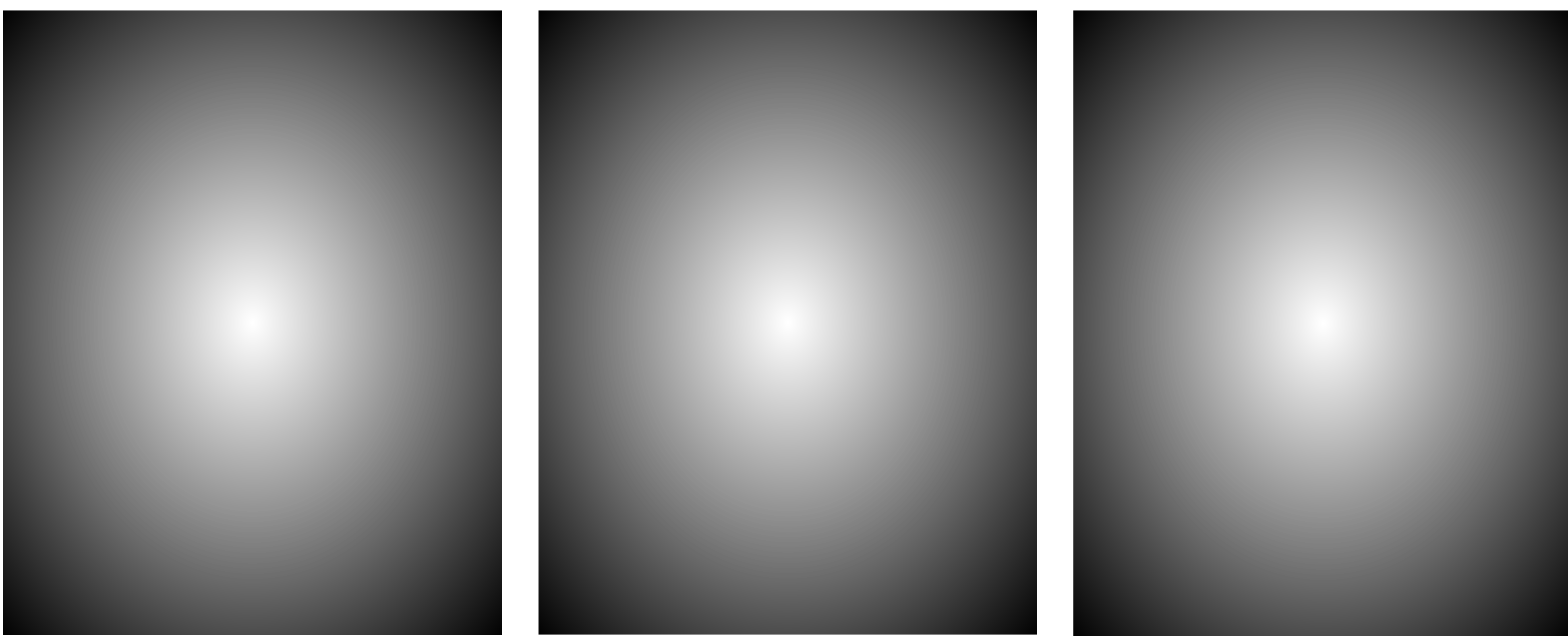
In *The Art of Narrowing Down*, we delve into the sustainability stories of brands scouted at Milan's WHITE show, seeking proof that focus catalyses meaningful change. [Part one](#) spotlighted the journey of Oyuna Tserendorj, preserving nomadic livelihoods with her namesake label.

As we stride through the different halls of WHITE, seeking the "secret" room number 3, we pass a wide variety of colours and zesty designs. We are meeting with a young entrepreneur who surprised us with her humbleness. "I don't know the real meaning of sustainability fashion," Kehan Yang admitted via email. "But I don't want to be fast. I like the traditional ways." As she finishes her conversation with a buyer, the lustre of Yang's kimono catches my eye. Similar pieces hang on the racks, and a few are exposed on mannequins, accentuating the technique she masters: drapery.



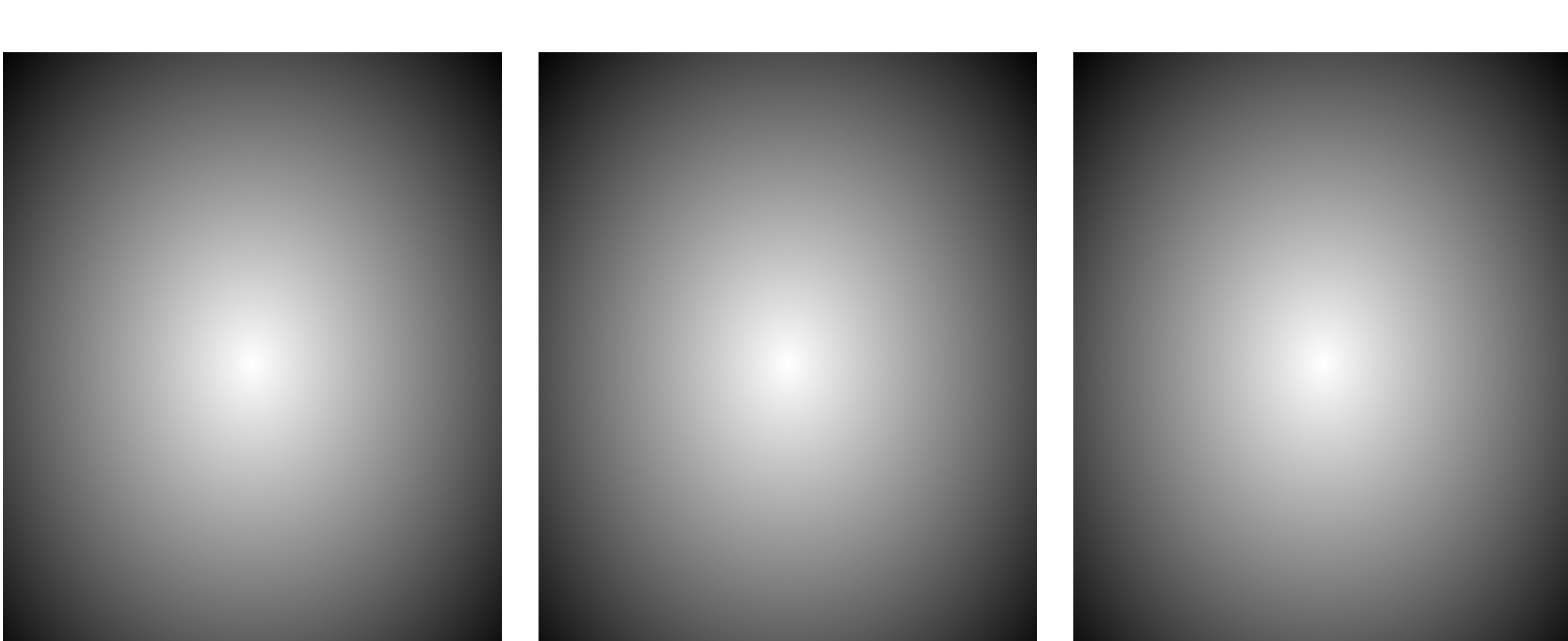
"Most of the woven pieces are draped by me. I don't like clothes that feel tight; I prefer something loose, but also very elegant. Most of my designs have pockets." Upon finishing her MA in textile design, Yang returned to China, closer to the textile hubs and technical knowledge. There she built her label, Yangkehan, on her terms: slow and independent. "A distributor from Europe told me I had to believe in myself; that my work is excellent." Five clients later, Paris was calling.

Yangkehan's soft wovens are made with natural materials like silk (or cotton blends), wool, and cashmere. Bi-annually, she works with special heritage fabrics that require months of preparation and intricate handiwork. She shows us an example on her tablet – *Song Jin*, an unusual silk weave that was common during the Song Dynasty (960 to 1279 AD). "We still have people engaging in deep cultural practices in China. They live in small villages, and inherited these techniques from their great-grandparents." Each fabric Yangkehan debuts comes from a different area, as the crafts themselves are locally taught. The *Song* brocade comes from Suzhou, *Yun Jin* (cloud brocade) is made in Nanjing, while *Shu Jin*, potentially the most complex yielding only 20–30 centimetres a day, is crafted in Sichuan. "It is produced by a large machine with two operators. The one sitting on top is responsible for controlling the lifting of threads to ensure the accuracy of the pattern. If we order the fabric now, we receive it next season, and it is very expensive."



Another classic in Yangkehan's repertoire is the *Gambiered Canton Gauze*, a kind of organza with a hint of stretch. The technique from Guangdong demonstrates how slow weaves, combined with low-impact dyeing methods using natural chemicals, produce superior textures. "I'd like you to touch it," Yang says as she walks towards one of her gauze pieces. It feels soft yet sturdy. She explains the technique behind the marbled dark shade as a chemical process between silk, mud and the juice of the *Dioscorea cirrhosa* plant: you repeatedly soak the fabric in the sap and dry it in the sun, a process that is weather-dependent. Then you apply mud to achieve a reddish-brown fabric. As its minerals react with the sap, the colour becomes richer and deepens to a dark hue. Yang: "The process takes around forty steps, with stops during rainy days. The skill is an intangible cultural heritage, and it can be used on almost every type of silk fabric, like our *Song* brocade for AW23." Yang doesn't believe heritage fabrics will die out, but they're far from mainstream. "Akin to horse riding, once a common skill in history, now considered high-class," she says. "Time is expensive in our age, and as time will continue to fly, handiwork will become even more precious."

The poetic patterns that distinguish Yangkehan are Yang's creations. "I'm inspired by stories [such as the river goddess Luo Shen], historical figures [Emperor Huaizong] and artefacts from Chinese culture. I draw my feelings, comprehensions, or imaginations about each small aspect, hoping this splendid history will be passed down to the young generation, willing to spend time with them and interpret them in multifarious ways." Yang's most desired design features a Dunhuang fresco found in China's Mogao Caves. A faded version of the temple with figures adorns the length of an empire waist dress. Other pieces from the same collection depict daily customs and tales from the Song Dynasty, reviving culture through contemporary fashion. Dunhuang served as a crucial junction along the Silk Road, the historic trade route connecting China with Central Asia, India, and the Mediterranean region.



It takes Yang three months to prepare a small collection, starting with draping and pattern-making. Then the digital drawing and placement of the prints are sent off to her textile printer in Keqiao, within the same province as the silkworm farm in Guangzhou. The finished silks are sent to Yang's small garment workshop in Guangzhou, where she guides her eight employees. Aged 38 to 65, they work from nine to seven with a 1.5-hour break, earn a living wage [1200 to 1700 euros] and go on monthly team outings. It wasn't without risk to hire staff. "In the beginning, we didn't have many clients, so the pay was a lot. I insisted, because great craftsmen are hard to find." But rather than flaunting social sustainability, she thinks treating her workers with respect is common sense.

"I hope to maintain these relationships between us for a very long time," Yang smiles. "They work carefully and patiently, and every garment is created by a single person instead of going through a pipeline. Having a place for ourselves also means we can produce flexibly, which is beneficial for our customers, and we can fix something if it's broken." Knitted pieces are created close by in Dongguan – from handmade wool, by local families, preserving local craft and affirming the approach Yangkehan intends to maintain: It takes a village to build a brand, the slow way.

---

This article is the second of a three-part series, *The Art of Narrowing Down*, conducted after The Lissome was invited to attend the [WHITE show](#) in Milan in February 2024.

[Anna Roos Van Wijngaarden](#) is an Amsterdam-based freelance journalist, specialised in fashion/textiles, sustainability and business.

Photos courtesy of Yangkehan.

---



[PREVIOUS](#) [Reviving Antiques with Modern Innovations](#)

[NEXT](#) [The Art of Narrowing Down](#)

*Nature, Fashion Vision*: Award-winning independent magazine *The Lissome* shares poetic stories at the intersection of Earth-centred design, mindfulness, ecology and system transformation – based in Berlin, created by an international community of photographers and writers.

**Follow us on:**  
[Instagram](#) / [LinkedIn](#) / [Pinterest](#) / [Substack](#)

**Slow Fashion Newsletter Guide:**  
 In our free newsletter guide, we share thoughtful inspiration for positive fashion futures.

[Subscribe Now](#)