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 clair, 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 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 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’Eclaireur 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

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.
Schnabel recalls the initial reaction to her often-provocative sketches. "I think they thought 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 25-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 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. It sounds like quite a yarn."

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