

# Wildflowers In A Field

by Silvia Bombardini

**Based in Paris and rooted in Finland, Aalto is Tuomas Merikoski's heartfelt tribute to the invincible youth of his homeland. The Finnish designer's collections — *Young Heroes*, *Endless Sun*, and *Hellsinki* — are starting to disrupt the spotless, sometimes bland perception of Scandinavian design by giving it a twist and an edge, and bringing to the surface some of its inner depths. With a photobook published and the promise of more to come, Tuomas gives us a glimpse of Finland's uniqueness, resilience, and strength through his muse — the country's inexhaustible youth.**







**Silvia Bombardini:** Over the past 15 years, you have cut your teeth with some of the fashion industry’s biggest names, including Givenchy menswear and Vuitton, whom you still freelance for. Did you always want to start your own brand? And why now? And how does your background affect your creative approach to Aalto?

Tuomas Merikoski: Over all these years I was perfecting my knowledge while being creative and working in the industry, and it has definitely been the greatest learning process of my life. But yes, it was like an idea that gradually grew in my mind — I started to want my own brand. So I guess the best time was a sum of coincidences, when I also had a very clear idea on the identity and brand that I wanted to create. For Aalto, I intentionally looked for a new approach that thrives on my background in Finland, and mixes it with the knowhow I gathered from years in the industry here in Paris. I like the idea to carry through all the processes, the values, and cultural points of view I have as a Finnish person. The whole idea of Aalto is to create a new aesthetic that has strong influences from Finnish youth—their hidden cultural taboos are among the inspirations that I find very important. Naturally, it is very contemporary, quite raw and effortless, and direct.

**SB:** *Aalto* means *wave* in Finnish. In Paris where you’re based, the term recalls the years of the Nouvelle Vague, and with it something radical and communal, defiantly youthful. What does it mean to you personally, and what is it about Finland’s youth culture that makes it unique?

TM: That is quite literally one good reason why I called the brand Aalto — it has such a perfect meaning for me, even in its relation to water. Plus it’s a very common Finnish name. Our goal is to speak out about the way Finnish youth live and what they want to express; we want to give a new, more interesting image of the people and new generations in Finland than the more common one held by most foreigners. The youth in Finland are exceptional in that they can live freely, experiment, and search for their individuality. From a very young age there is a lot of autonomy and parents let their children find their way themselves. Sometimes it gets quite extreme, but mostly it’s like they’re wildflowers in a field — naïve but not fragile. One big thing today is that while they’re very connected to the world they still search for their own singularity, without following or emulating others. I really appreciate that.

**SB:** You’ve lived abroad for 15 years though. What else has changed in the meantime?

**Thinking back to your *Young Heroes* collection, which generation of teenagers did you have in mind?**

TM: It has changed some, yes. The youth today have a more direct view, and through that a certain influence - from popular culture to lifestyles around the world. Before, it was a bit more home-grown, with fewer references. But it’s totally okay and the Finnish youth still do the same things in the same way; they’re still somehow rooted in our culture. It’s definitely more than just a tendency for them, or for us a while back, to be a bit different. I still feel different to be honest.

**SB:** A capsule collection that season featured images by the late photographer Jouko Lehtola, who was little known abroad but extremely talented. Dubbed a Finnish Larry Clark, Lehtola had vowed to capture the “innocence and rage” of youth. You’ve released a photobook of his work. How did you first come across Lehtola and was there an image in particular that struck you? Can we expect more Aalto books in the future?

TM: I had seen Jouko’s images already many years ago, flipping through Finnish bookstores. But the meaning of it, and their importance, grew for me over quite a long time. They represent so

much for me now, and I can see myself in his pictures. They also represent quite perfectly the idea of Aalto — the energy and unpredictability it needs. There are a couple of images that are, of course, important for me, such as *Three Blond Girls* or *A Smoke in Kaisaniemi Park*. You can and should expect more Aalto books, definitely. I want to be a strong supporter of Finnish art and part of Aalto’s concept is to speak about it on the international scene.

**SB:** You seem determined to upturn a common misconception about Nordic design — the jolly and pop of Marimekko style, if you will. Yet on matters of functionality and comfort, Aalto is in line with Scandinavian traditions. For example, you have said that your clothes can be machine washed. Given your experience with top luxury brands, was this a challenge at first?

TM: I don’t consider it a challenge but a necessity. It doesn’t mean that everything has to be like that, but most of it. Aalto wants to propose fashion that is accessible and lasting, not only hopping from a superficial image to another. On the other hand, I’d like to expand the ideology behind functionality and comfort. How I experience it is that these terms are today vaster than just physical qualities. I take this as a

challenge yes, but it’s more related to business strategy than to creative philosophy.

**SB:** Your team is based in Paris, you use Italian fabrics, and you produce in Portugal. Would you still consider Aalto a Finnish purebred?

TM: I think that the most important thing is to know what we want to do, and to do it with good morals. There aren’t geographical barriers anymore. Aalto embraces diversity, from all points of view. The purest DNA of Aalto is Finnish, and in that way, a purebred. But we need the knowledge from abroad and we need to be present abroad. Our biggest challenge is to bring all this originality to the international scene in a way that is understandable for everybody.

**SB:** Your spring collection *Endless Sun* was inspired by the nightlong lakeside bonfires of the Nordic midsummer. How does that differ from what the typical urban raver would experience?

TM: It’s different in many ways, starting from the soundscape. But for me the most striking thing is that you experience it through nature — the long hours, the rising sun. It’s kind of a modern way to experience earth, wind and fire. It’s a bit more hippy and psychedelic.

**SB:** The result, however, resembles nothing of the neon mess that we see in most rave gear. There is beautiful suiting, high waistlines, droopy lapels, ribbed knitwear, glittery lashes and the Aalto logo on fire. Which look is your favorite?

TM: Looks 7 and 13. Look 7 for its mix of that *presque vintage* feeling and Look 13 for its very fresh and chic tailored pieces clashing with plastic acid birds and men’s traditional check cloth.

**SB:** You must be busy working on Aalto’s next collection. Can you give us a hint as to what we can expect?

TM: We just finished the pre-collection and I’m very excited to show it to you. The collection is titled *Hellsinki* and tells a story of nomadism and immigration, and feeling apart while being young. We have looked into Sami culture and our story follows a Sami youth emigrating to Helsinki and its modern Finnish society. There are hints of tradition and nostalgia, but most of all, the urge and power to be a strong young individual — a survivor.