



PROENZA SCHOULER – Native American-inspired motifs, with their alluring geometries and autumn-friendly hues – russet, desert, mustard! – regularly crop up in fashion collections. Recent iterations include the hipster renaissance of the Pendleton trademark, and in farther reaches, the Brazilian label British Colony, whose designers clearly mined the Navajo visual language for its fall collection. In most cases, however, the patterns are used literally, and ultimately, a print is just a print. For their fall ‘11 collection, Lázaro Hernández and Jack McCullough of the New York label Proenza Schouler were also inspired by textiles of the American West, specifically blankets seen on a car trip from New Mexico to Wyoming. What sets their appropriation of the folk-derived aesthetic apart is the way the designer pair combined it with an obsessive interest in fabric development to create something assertively modern, though not gimmicky. As Hernández told *O32c*, “We are not so interested in inventing new shapes or silhouettes; that feels old to us. Most people wear the same simple shapes every day. What we find interesting are all the material possibilities available today to make clothes – that’s where one can push boundaries.” To that effect, the designers deconstructed and manipulated the Navajo forms with the help of computers. The blanket patterns’ two-layer structure (a background of horizontal color stripes overlaid with black geometric shapes) provided the basic concept for complex fabric designs, which were converted into novel, highly textured materials for the label’s latest collection. In one case, the graphic foreground shapes were embroidered and then cut out with a laser, a subtractive method that resulted in a new kind of “lace.” Another elaborate process turned the flat computer sketch pictured above – two zigzags forming a diamond – into something rich and dimensional. On their road-trip, and in Edward Curtis photographs they had looked at, Hernández and McCullough were surprised to see how common it was among Native Americans to wear velvet, and decided to produce the diamond pattern in the lush material. But velvet jacquard could only be mechanically painted in one color, not the variation of fiery yellow, orange and brown the designers envisioned; so, the fabric was sent to Lyon, France, where it was hand-painted by specialized artisans, “little French ladies,” according to Hernández. In the Proenza Schouler fashion show last February, the results could be seen in a body-skimming long-sleeve dress worn by model Jia Jing. The journey from computer design to runway exemplifies the melding of traditional references, old-fashioned labor, and advanced methods that make the label so interesting right now. As Hernández explains, “Technology is everything to us; the computer lets us know whether we want to go forward with a certain idea. At the end of the day, however, most processes are manual and take a lot of time – that is, by definition, what designer clothes are about.”