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ISSUE 56 | AUTUMN 2019

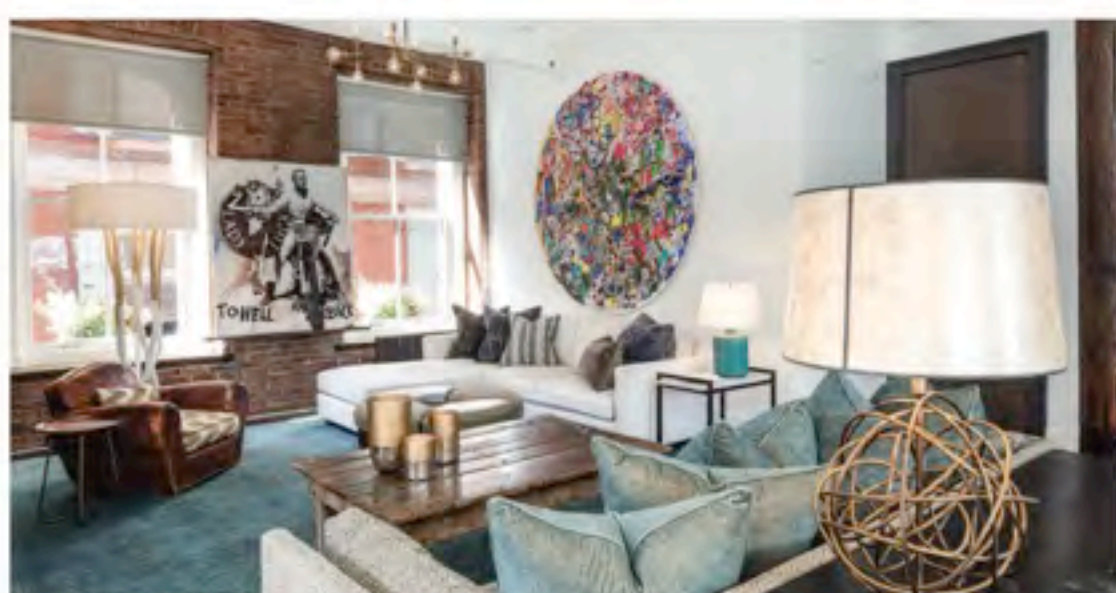
RUG PASSION BY
FORT STREET STUDIO

ISSN 2042-7069
56
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AUTUMN 2019 £5 €8 \$10
cover-magazine.com
Hali Publications Ltd.

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cover



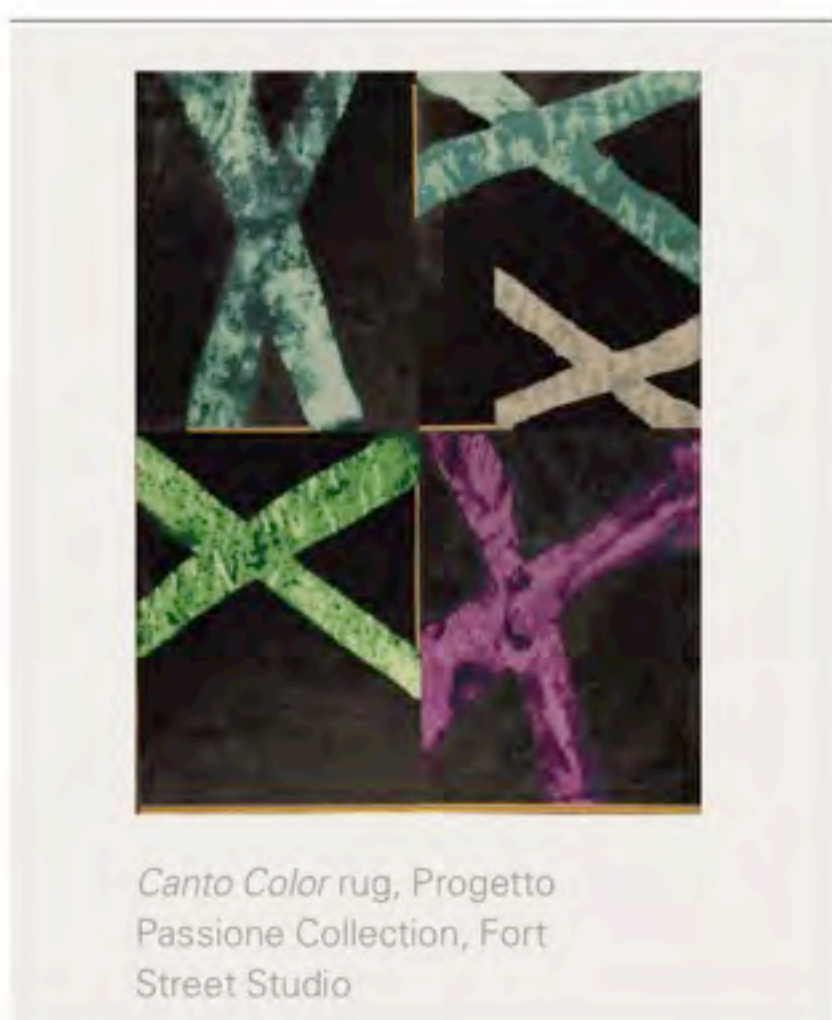
AUTUMN 2019

In Autumn the pace picks up again as a number of important international design fairs return to the rug agenda. Catch up on what is coming for the next season and beyond.

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My clients tend to understand that a well-made rug or beautifully woven fabric in an interior can provide a sense of luxury that is both inviting and comfortable

Michael S. Smith



Canto Color rug, Progetto Passione Collection, Fort Street Studio

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Fort Street Studio's recent Progetto Passione Collection aims to elevate rugs to the level of art and collectable design. Janis Provisor and Brad Davis explain all to **Lucy Upward**

Painting with passion

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The pleasure and good feeling we had in Italy gave us the sense of greater freedom and led us to do a project much freer than before

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01 *Strada Blue* (wall) and *Lulu 2* (floor), Progetto Passione Collection, Fort Street Studio. On show at the Fort Street Studio showroom in New York.

02 *Canto Color*, Progetto Passione Collection, Fort Street Studio

It seems somewhat remarkable that the revolution in rug design that happened in the 1980s and 90s—when carpet design broke free from the confines of repeating tradition—was deeply impacted in the US by two artists who had no connection to rugs whatsoever. Janis Provisor and Brad Davis’s need for a rug for their Manhattan loft back in the early 1990s changed the face of modern rugs. If you are a fan of the ‘painterly’ look in rug design, this is where it started.

While working in China, a chance meeting with a former manager of a silk carpet factory refocused the artists’ attentions to a rug project. How to translate their watercolour designs into a pattern to be woven, at a time when there was a no software to help with the process? With indefatigable spirit, Davis found a way. Two and a half years later the luxury rug brand Fort Street Studio sprang into existence with the first seven designs coming off the looms in 1996. They debuted in Hong Kong and New York, the two

locations where the brand set up showrooms (a new office in London opened in 2018). After many years of endless travel interspersed with brief stays in their Hong Kong base, it was in January this year that Davis and Provisor finally moved back to their former home New York to set up house and studio. It is there that I spoke to them about Progetto Passione, a recent project and collection that launched at the New York showroom, in collaboration with the Design Department of Sotheby’s, in June last year.

Three years in the making, this super-deluxe collection of eight limited-edition silk and metal thread rugs represents not only the pinnacle of Fort Street’s 25 years of weaving knowledge and the duo’s ongoing artistic endeavour but also a full stop of sorts. Provisor and Davis have been making rugs in China since that first collection back in 1996, but with only seven weavers left who are able to weave the high knot counts the rugs require—and all reaching retirement age—the company’s production is slowly moving to

other parts of the globe. This collection not only shows off the amazing capabilities of Fort Street's dedicated factory weavers but also says goodbye to an important relationship. 'We have worked with many of our weavers for a long time plus our factory manager, the dyer, the cutter—it's very sad that the relationship will come to an end,' explains Davis while Provisor adds, 'Our factory has never worked with another company, when they don't have production we give them production, we support them. We thanked our weavers in the Progetto Passione catalogue, to give them as much credit as we could. We wanted these rugs to have impact, to be meaningful and to have a lasting quality.'

Back in 2015, seasoned travellers Provisor and Davis began spending time in a small medieval village northeast of Rome. The duo relocated their design studio to Rocantica and immersed themselves in the local Italian culture. The plan was to develop their own individual artwork—they are clear to point out that their personal styles are very different from each other and from the rugs they design—but what soon emerged from the time away was the idea to collaborate closely on 'a unique collection, a limited edition, without any restrictions of the marketplace'. The idea was to unite the realms of art and design and it indeed became a Progetto Passione (passion project).

'The pleasure and good feeling we had in Italy gave us the sense of greater freedom and led us to do a project much freer than before,' says Davis. 'We used a variety of methods, Janis painted watercolours, we collaged different elements, we used transparencies, we created parts of drawings, there is no one painting that made a specific design, it was about collaging, overlaying and coming up with a satisfying resolution.' Fort Street's *Glimmering* rug design of 2008 was not only an experimental and complex statement piece made during the recession to 'make ourselves feel good' but also design that informed a significant collection ten years later.

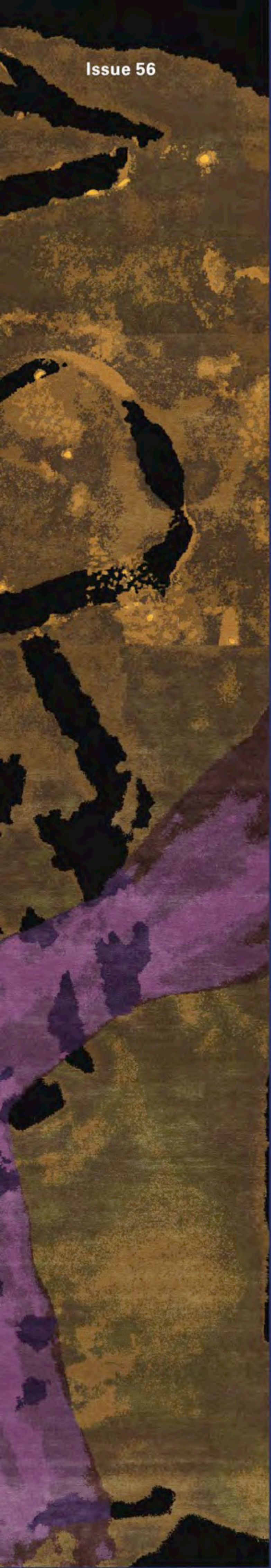
In terms of production the Progetto Passione designs once again aimed high, with higher knot counts than the usual Fort Street wild silk rugs, and over thirty different colours per carpet, including some very subtle hue changes. 'It was a dyeing feat. For our dyer it was the project of his career, he was very proud,' says Davis.

Furthermore, each of the eight designs features details in metal sumac weave—in copper, tin, and brass—a job for only the most adept of weavers. It was fortuitous that on one of the artists' many flights Davis read in an airline magazine that during a recent renovation of the Qianlong Emperor's private quarters in the Forbidden City in Beijing, the silk and metal thread carpets had been reproduced. He soon got his factory manager on the case and through this connection found the perfect super-fine metal thread. With much experimentation the designs could move forward another step.



03 *Borgo*, Progetto Passione Collection, Fort Street Studio

04 *Shado*, Progetto Passione Collection, Fort Street Studio



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For Progetto Passione we say no custom colours, just sizes. They are what they are. Each rug would lose its specificity if changed, it would then be a designer-driven product

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05 *Lulu 1*, Progetto Passione Collection, Fort Street Studio

06 *Strada Pink*, Progetto Passione Collection, Fort Street Studio

While the idyllic village of Roccantica was the place from which the collection grew, there are only a few details in the final eight rug designs that link the rugs to the location. The two versions of *Lulu* (meaning crazy in Farsi)—one featuring organic shapes, one more geometric—were based on a jewelled cummerbund belt in the window of fashion designer Valentino in Rome. Other rug titles—*Strada* (Blue and Pink) *Borgo*, *Canto* (Grey and Color) and *Shado*— are named after real and fictitious Italian words. Rather than being a direct influence on the work, Roccantica created the right environment for the art to be born and to thrive. 'We went with no agenda, no idea to work on a collection or project but in time it was revealed to us,' explains Provisor. 'It was a joy working there!'

After three years in production, Provisor and Davis were keen to get the final rugs on show. While an exhibition at Sotheby's New York had been on the cards, the Design Department was under renovation and rather than wait a year for the space to be finished, Fort Street used their own impressive West 19th Street showroom for the collection debut, with sponsorship from Sotheby's. Two to three rugs of each design were made and several sold from the show. With a future exhibition in mind, Fort Street have kept one rug of each design. The chapter on these meaningful designs has not yet closed.

From start to finish this project has proposed the notion that rugs can be art. The collection is not about adaptation but statement and identity: 'For Progetto Passione we say no custom colours, just sizes. They are what they are. Each rug would lose its specificity if changed, it would then be a designer-driven product,' Provisor explains. I ask whether it is easy for the public to understand rugs as art and she replies, 'People will spend a lot of money on a limited-edition chair but often not think of the rug. These rugs are art and high-end design but design needs to be useable, the rugs are to be used on the floor.'

Progetto Passione has given Davis and Provisor the passion to get back to their own artwork in the new New York studio. They are also working on a book about their experiences in China. In terms of rugs, Fort Street Studio is developing new wool and silk and pure wild silk production in Nepal and India. Alongside this, their small production of textural silk flatweaves in northern Thailand gives the brand an even broader range of product. Experimentation and artistic endeavour continue in every corner of Davis and Provisor's lives but while we look to the future, Provisor is keen to reflect on the last 25 years: 'We came to designing rugs through the back door, we tried to make one for our loft in New York and here we are, but I would be remiss in not saying that it has been a great adventure.' And it is clear that this passionate rug adventure is far from over.

www.fortstreetstudio.com