

cover

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ORIGINATORS

FORT STREET STUDIO





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In the 1990s accomplished artists Janis Provisor and Brad Davis introduced 'painterly carpets' to the market and have not looked back

How did you first manage to translate your paintings into rug designs?

When we first began in the early 90s there was no software available to us to translate a pattern into a weavable pattern, so we went searching for help. Through networking in Hong Kong, we met a man who was the chief graphic designer for the Space Museum, and was one of the team who translated Photoshop into Mandarin. He sat down with Brad to figure out a way to transform a pattern with a reduced number of colours and still maintain the integrity of the artwork. What they thought would take a month or two took about six months to get the initial seven designs. The resulting translation required a new type of coloured pattern that was a challenge for weavers to read. Fifty per cent of our weavers quit after one week. We encouraged them to learn by paying the remaining weavers double for three months to learn to read these new coloured patterns. In the end, they preferred our patterns. But this was one of the biggest hurdles in realising the carpets. Up to that moment neither of us had ever used a computer, but Brad used to joke that he learned to drive a Ferrari at top

speed without knowing how to turn on the ignition. Our *Boudoir*, *Starfield*, and *Checkerboard* designs were in the initial seven, and are still in production today. All were transformed from our watercolours.

What kind of rugs could you see on the market when you produced your first designs?

There were, of course, oriental carpets and tribal carpets, but modern carpets were either super-graphic or based on traditional Tibetan motifs. There were no painterly carpets on the market whatsoever; we were the first. The idea of modern carpets hadn't really changed much from Art Deco design.

How did the public respond to your early designs?

We were living in the small pond of Hong Kong when we began, with little outside exposure. We came out of the art world, and so it seemed normal for us to work for two and a half years before getting a single carpet. It began as a personal project. There was some confusion whether these were carpet designs at all and not just art, but there were a couple of instances of immediate validation by people in the design community (like Stark Carpet and the *New York Times* critic), which led us to believe that we were on to something. Clearly, if you look at what has happened in the contemporary carpet world, we were absolutely right!

What were your aims when making the first rugs?

I think our aims were quite simple at first: to make a group of designs that were non-repeat patterns, bleeding colours and large-scale motifs that evoked what we called a 'soft-edged modernism'. We wanted to create pieces that could rest easily between different design sensibilities, and we weren't interested in making collections, but individual pieces that would remain relevant for years.

Has your aesthetic and design process changed?

I would not say that the Fort Street Studio design process has changed, rather that it's expanded. When we began with our first carpets off the loom in 1996 we had no idea that we would devote the next twenty years to producing hand-knotted carpets. In the beginning we thought this was a short detour from our primary world as studio artists. We continue to design painterly carpets, but try to be discreet in what we want to say in each piece. We're more in tune with how they work with interiors. When software made it easy for anyone to technically do what we do, we thought we should think about other avenues.

Several years ago we started designing a group of pieces that we called at the time 'New Traditional', and now we see that direction becoming a trend. In the last few years, we've been producing wool textural pieces and flatweaves that are designed on the ground with the weavers. Up until about five or six years ago we only worked in our own China factory producing carpets in wild silk pile. We then went looking for small suppliers in both Nepal and India who do quality work, and were willing to experiment with us. This added a completely different dimension to our portfolio, and we're quite excited about it. Regarding our process, I can

01 *Cavern Deep* rug, Fort Street Studio

02 Janis Provisor and Brad Davis

03





An iconic design of ours is *Border*, and from there we went to *Ring*, and then *Cavern*...but years apart. We meander in both how we plan, and how we design, and we play off of each other. When we first began the watercolour was sacrosanct. Now we see it as the starting point instead of a faithful rendition.

When we designed the carpets for Hermes Maison, we went deep into their archives, and then thought about the symbols and ethos of the spirit of the company. Then we dropped all that, and got to work painting. One of the designs was our take on their signature herringbone design, another on the beautiful patina of a worn leather, and the third from the dappled coat of an Appaloosa horse. All three, and in all colour variations, reference Hermes, but have our signature quality, and all go well together. Sometimes a design will sit in the computer or a watercolor in a drawer for several years to all of a sudden seem right to develop at the moment of rediscovery. However, we do think of our design as 'carpets to be used'. This means that it must look good from any angle and has to also work with furniture on it and hold the room together. Our feeling is that it has to 'cooperate' with the room and not stand out as an individual.

In your eyes how has the rug market changed since you started designing rugs?

The art market has changed and grown enormously. Rug companies have sprung up everywhere, and many eponymous designers have their own showrooms. There were a few when we began but far more multi-line carpet shops everywhere; in large cities I think the reverse is now more common. Software and the internet has also changed everything...everyone knows what everyone is doing right away.

There are no secrets, and honestly, from an image on-line it's hard to discern real quality, but this is the world we now live in. Also, hand-knotted carpets are waning as there are fewer and fewer weavers; in China there is almost no one left weaving. Knock-offs are rampant, and while there seems to be fewer weavers, there are many more rugs out in the world at every price point. In this regard, I would say it's far more difficult to be original, so perhaps that should no longer be the issue.

What exciting projects and designs are you currently working on?

The most exciting thing we've done of late are a group of eight limited-edition pieces in 150 knot wild silk pile with metal sumac. We only have six weavers left who can do this weaving, and so over the last couple of years we've been stockpiling them, keeping them under wraps. These pieces exist in that space that's defined as Collectible Design, they are not paintings/art, but not made necessarily to fit comfortably into someone's interior design project, either. They are statements in style and design. They're quite emphatic, and less tonal/neutral than a lot of our standard collections. We just launched them in conjunction with the Design Department at Sotheby's in our re-installed showroom in New York and opened with a party on 31 May 2018.

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say that Brad and I are both intimately involved in the design process of everything we produce, the designs all begin with us and end with us, either from an initial watercolour, or an expressed idea from something we've seen in our travels. We've continued to go on 'design trips' of several weeks time where we try to shut out everything else and work on design, collaborating but each bringing our own point of view to the table.

How important is being original to you?

This is a very tricky question. When we began we never even thought about being original, we were looking to make a single carpet for our loft in New York that had characteristics that we couldn't find in the market. We began this as a lark, and I honestly feel that if we had found something we liked enough to buy, then Fort Street Studio would not have happened. So, when we began, we were originators in creating a whole new vernacular of painterly carpets, and now I would wager that most people have no idea that we were the first. That being said, we don't like to be directly copied, and it's frustrating to see something you've designed years ago now done by someone else as their 'original'. I think you can only move forward to your next idea or design, and try not to look too often over your shoulder. We do enjoy working on new things and play the role of innovators. That is the fun of it all.

When you paint do you have a rug design in mind or do the rugs emerge out of the artwork?

Sometimes yes, sometimes no. We often have a discussion about what we think we're missing in the overall collection or we want to continue with one idea.

03 *Ring Red rug*, Fort Street Studio

04 *Desu Light rug*, Fort Street Studio