

# cover

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# A tale of rugs

The new Rizzoli publication *A Tale of Warp & Weft* is the story of premier rug brand Fort Street Studio, which began with Brad Davis and Janis Provisor's trip to China back in 1989. **Lucy Upward** follows the thread

Photo: Jonathan Leijonhufvud



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01 Border rug in a custom colourway, Fort Street Studio, part of a 2016 installation designed by Michael Lewis

02 Janis Provisor and Brad Davis

03 At the Fort Street Studio factory

04 *A Tale of Warp and Weft*

Photo: Jonathan Leijonhufvud



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**T**he opening paragraph of Janis Provisor and Brad Davis's Acknowledgements and Thanks at the end of their new publication reads as such: 'While an artist can or may work alone in the studio, making a carpet, building a company, or producing a book is the work of many. *A Tale of Warp and Weft* could not have come together without everyone who helped us fashion this story, and tell it in the best possible way.'

The book—which not only details the history of the couple's rug brand Fort Street Studio but also the process of making a rug—is testament to this idea, that no one's story can be told without being intertwined with another's. Here, many lives become connected and the tale is enriched. Through a series of interviews, texts and many pages of beautiful photography, the full story of the brand is told—from the first trip to China to Fort Street Studio rugs being photographed in beautiful interiors. This engaging tale is made more so through the addition of serendipity and good fortune, the trials and tribulations and the protagonists' perpetual energetic desire to move forward.

Back in 1989, Provisor and Davis were successful American artists travelling to China with a love and passion for the country and its art but no knowledge of, or particular interest in, making a hand-knotted carpet. Provisor was there to make woodcuts of her work for Crown Point Press, the owner of which, Kathan Brown, was with them on this journey. In the book's prologue, Brown describes the profound effect the time in China had on the couple. 'I'm going to try to come back here with my family and live for a while,' Provisor told her.

Several years later, the couple did return with their son Alec and were soon busy producing prints at the woodblock studio they had set up in Hangzhou when along came a crazy idea. In the book Davis describes this pivotal moment in an interview with Suzy Annetta, editor-in-chief of *Design Anthology Magazine*: 'I thought—Hangzhou is a center of the silk industry—why not make a silk carpet for our loft in New York?'

In his interview with Annetta, Davis is clear about the difficulties they faced in trying to make a rug from a watercolour painting in a country where there were plenty of





**05** *Shado Deep*, Progetto Passione Collection, Fort Street Studio

**06** *Blocks* rug featured in an interior by Wheeler Kearns Architects, Symbiotic Living Architecture + Design

**07** *Aura Blue* rug in wild silk, Fort Street Studio, 2009

**08** *Ring Red* rug in wild silk, Fort Street Studio, 2007



weavers but none with experience of trying something new and non-traditional and where dyeing focused on bold colour, not progressions of dark to light. Despite retired carpet manager Mrs Lu's reaction to their ideas: 'Meiyou, meiyou, meiyou' (in other words, no way), the plan did not lose steam. Along the way luck came in many guises including a mention of Photoshop, an influx of wild silk on the market and the discovery of the 'hero of Fort Street Studio' dyeing master Wang Shan. One rug became a collection, which in turn became a brand: Fort Street Studio—named after the road on which they lived in Hong Kong in 1996 when the first collection was finally ready.

In Ben Evans's foreword to the book, he states: 'Revolution is the word that comes to mind when I think about the work of Fort Street Studio.' The use of the word revolution may sound dramatic but when one understands the work that Davis put into translating their artwork of the first rug *Cross and Stripe* into a readable rug pattern for the weavers, prior to the advent of the dedicated software that is available today, one can appreciate that it was a big moment for rug design. *A Tale of Warp and Weft* illustrates how not all revolutions are fast or easily won! What is clear is that the best results emerge from hard work and determination. 'If any elements had been different or opposite...we probably would have given up. But we all persevered because we wanted to make it work,' Davis explains to Annetta.

In an interview with Michael Boodro, we discover more about Provisor and Davis's art and design oeuvres and what has made them tick over the years: jewellery to ceramics, rugs to Chinese painting. They are collectors as well as designers and makers. Further shorter texts in the book give insights into processes such as dyeing and the use of metallic yarns, designs such as *Glimmering*, *Aura* and the ever-popular *Border*, the Mirage Carpet Studio in China and working with Hermès Maison, Louis Vuitton Singapore and David Gill Gallery.

My article 'Painting with Passion' from COVER 56 about Fort Street Studio's recent limited-edition Progetto Passione collection also features. A culmination of 25 years of rug-making experience, it is a collection not to be missed but one that also sadly marks the end of production in China. As we close this story and this book, the next chapter opens up for Fort Street Studio and the artists. Provisor and Davis's final words read: 'Now it is time to dig deep, make work, and rediscover our individual voices without abandoning what we've created together'.

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