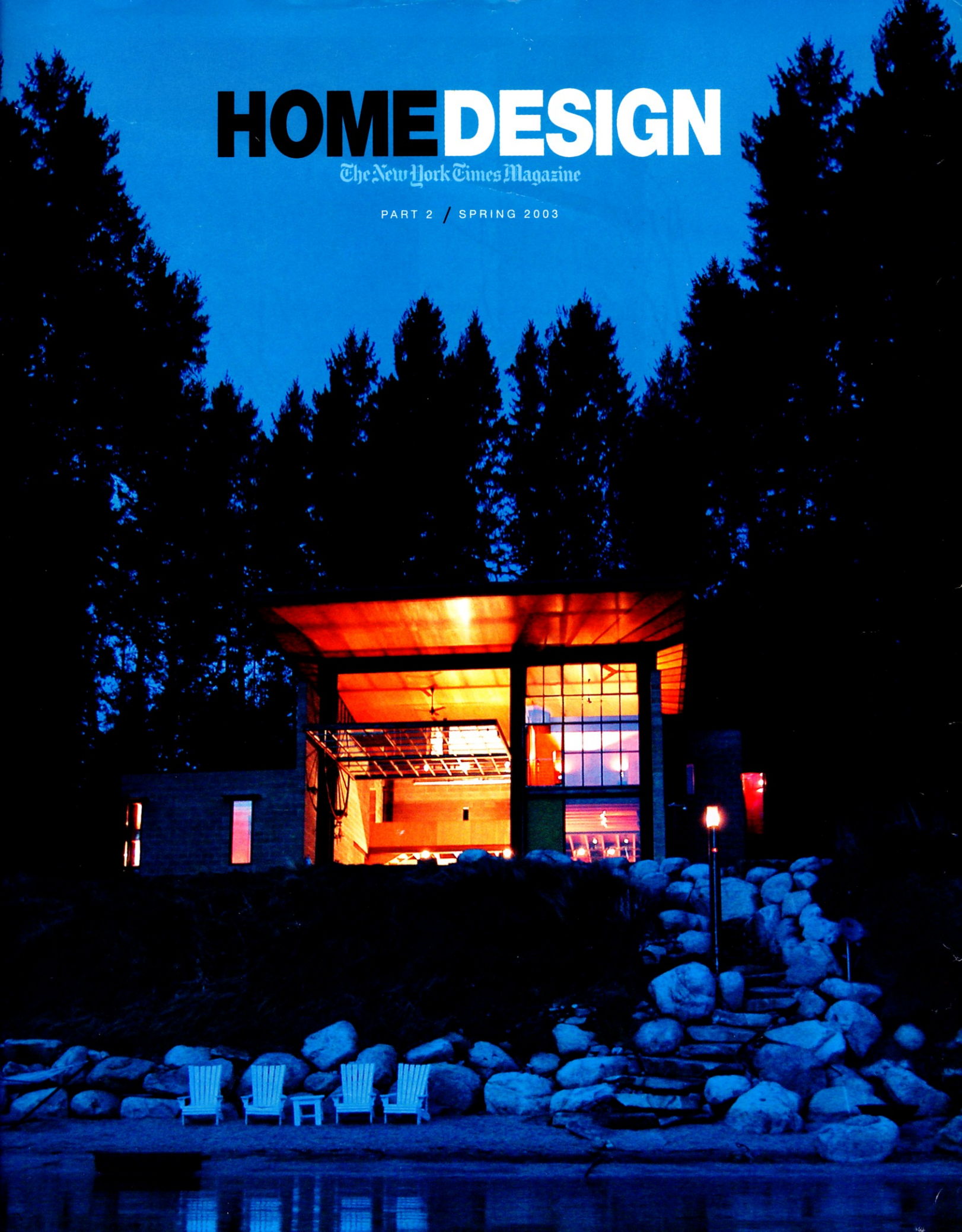


HOMEDESIGN

The New York Times Magazine

PART 2 / SPRING 2003



DREAM WEAVERS

After a trip to China, the painters Janis Provisor and Brad Davis exchanged one art form for another. Steven Henry Madoff on their magic carpet ride.

When the artists Janis Provisor and Brad Davis went to China to make woodblock prints, they had no idea that within a few years the floor would be their canvas and they would be painting in silk.

"It was May 1989," Provisor begins. "We'd gone to Hangzhou.

Steven Henry Madoff is the author of a book on the artist Christopher Wilmarth, to be published in 2004.

It was the time of the Tiananmen demonstrations and —"

Davis cuts in almost unconsciously, as couples do after nearly 20 years of marriage: "And it was like the 60's, this feeling of possibility, of things opening up, of potential. It was infectious."

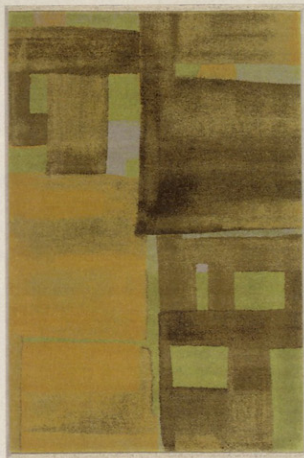
Then Provisor cuts back in: "We just ran out onto the street in the rain as soon as we got there, and both of us, within the first hours of being there, had this overwhelming feeling that we would go back there and live. We both just knew it."

The artists came to the second act in their careers — founding the Fort Street Studio carpet company in 1996 — as many creative people do: through the luck of their talent and by the chance of events. Their instincts would turn out to be true, but life intervened. There was a young child to raise, art to make, homes in Colorado and New York to care for and taxes to pay. Still, China hung like a childhood moon, big as imagination. They had long admired Chinese art, debating its meanings, painting under its influence and falling in love in the process.

Then their chance came. It was 1993, the economy was crashing, and the two looked at each other, thinking: China. Why not? If this was the prospect of guilty

Brad Davis and Janis Provisor, below, with their Vine rug and a necklace of her design. Left, their Mata Hari carpet shares their TriBeCa loft with an Eames Eiffel Tower Bikini chair, a Florence Knoll console and a Provisor painting, "Daddy's Girl."





The wild-silk rugs, like this *Blocks* design, blend modern color schemes with traditional weaving techniques.



Davis's acrylic on paper "Red Tree and Rock" (1993) was inspired by traditional Chinese painting.

too expensive, and the market wasn't there. But the carpet — the carpet we just kept working on." Then Provisor says, "It was like a rubber band that we stretched and stretched and couldn't let go."

Their idea was to make carpets based on watercolors — painterly abstractions without the repeating patterns of most rugs or the usual hard-edged lines. They found a woman who had run a carpet factory, and they showed her 40 images. She covered her eyes. No, too difficult, she said. No, can't be done. Months passed. This was 1994. Davis knew a man in Hong Kong who could write software, and he flew to see him. They thought it would take three months to draft a design program.

"You're meant to touch it."

Seven months crawled by before the program was done: a way to blow up each colored knot of thread in a weaver's map. (There are more than one and a half million knots in a 9-by-12-foot rug.)

The software worked, but achieving the subtle gradations, the change of hues, called steps, was like learning a new language, and the colors were from no palette the dyers had used before. After the first grating mess of purples, turquoise and gray, Davis had to sit at the factory with a Bunsen burner to make the dye lots himself. Two years passed with experiment, training and revisions, getting the look and the "hand" of the rug as soft as an otter's pelt, with four weavers working three months on each carpet. By Year 3, the well was drilled.

"I remember the first order coming back, seven

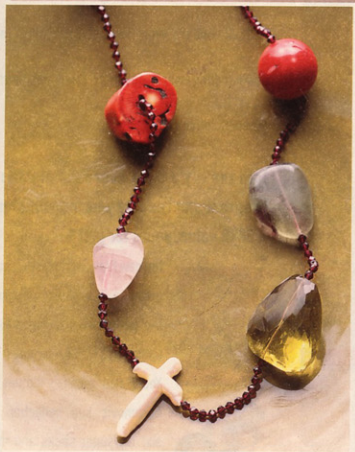
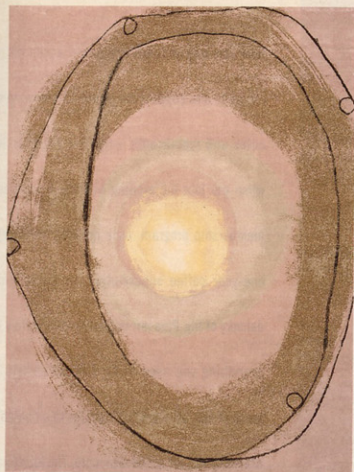
patterns, three each," he says. "They came in May '96, and I was so happy that I literally danced on them. I thought: Wow. We can do this." They had found a way to release the dense imagery and the charged colors of their canvases into something literally more grounded — rich to the eye, sinking into comfort, the way Matisse famously wrote, "What I dream of is an art of balance . . . a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair."

Pierre-Alexis Dumas, a creative director for Hermès in Paris, says: "I think what makes their rugs so classic is that they have a huge respect for tradition, which you feel in the quality of the craft. And then they move beyond that to make something

"It carries so many memories."

no one had thought of or thought possible. It comes from painting, but it isn't painting, because of the importance of touch. You're meant to touch it. You can't resist touching it, being on it, living in it, so to speak. The one I have is like a flying carpet because it carries so many memories. We've taken it from Hong Kong to London to Paris, everywhere we've lived. My child learned to walk on that carpet. It is my Proustian madeleine."

Provisor and Davis have their own memories. At the end of the saga, they left China. Their son is fluent in Mandarin. They've built a showroom in New York, their next act — in the long history of artists crossing into craft, from William Morris to the Bauhaus and beyond — now open on Broadway. "We took a left turn by accident and kept on going," Provisor says. It took them a long way round, but it looks as if they must be home. ■



What started as a labor of love has become a business. Clockwise, from top left: Fort Street's Orbit silk rug; a Blocks carpet dominates the couple's living area; bone china on an Asian Field rug; and a Provisor necklace.

afford \$15,000 rugs, ordered two. The Hollywood producer Joel Silver, Elton John and Tom Clancy all bought them. One cropped up in Mel Gibson's movie "What Women Want," another in a Robbie Williams video. But the road was neither straight nor smooth.

The saga of the silk carpet has many characters. It sweeps over great swaths of China, from the north, where wild Dandong silk (more durable than the cultivated kind) is harvested, to a bankrupt rug factory near Hangzhou that the artists heroically revived, to Hong Kong, where they ended up settling, remarkably, for eight and a half years.

"We didn't want to just sit around," Provisor recalls, talking in the 5,000-square-foot loft the couple now rents near the Holland Tunnel in Manhattan. "We wanted to work because that's what we do wherever we are." Her features are angular and elegant, while her speech is rapid, with the slightest edge of metal. The loft is filled with artifacts of their adventure abroad and pieces they've designed from traditional models: lanterns; a huge antique wedding bed; a mottled mustard-yellow table with classically bowed legs. There are heaps of half-finished jewelry in chalcedonies, quartz, opals, freshwater pearls, rubies and gold that Provisor began making in China and that she plans to use in a sibling business.

"We wanted to make all kinds of things," Davis continues. "Furniture, lamps, fabrics, dishes." He gets up, a modest tidiness about him, thin, with cropped white hair, and brings out pieces of bone china festooned with an abstract pattern in platinum. "We made about 15,000 of these in four different patterns, because we just had the idea. But the price was

pleasure, it was also the impulse that artists have to leap into voids, to take risks in their work and see what happens. They went back to Hangzhou, their 6-year-old son, Alec, and a nanny in tow. Back to cold weather, to a tiny apartment with two only rooms that they could use and a single light bulb to paint by and to the weird little bit of destiny that was evidently sleeping in the hallway, waiting.

"It was just whimsy," Davis says. "I'd had an interest in carpets ever since graduate school, and I thought, Here we are in Hangzhou, a center of the silk industry, and if there was any place we could make a silk carpet for our place, this was it." Which, it turned out, was a little like saying, "Well, I'm in Texas, so I may as well drill an oil well." And Davis wanted to drill a kind of

well that no one had invented yet.

He couldn't have guessed what would follow down the road. Their carpets would be silvery in the light, beige like suede or the resonant blue of night skies, with drifting brushstrokes or soft squares like tiles worn by age and weather. Members of the press took note. Shows came in Hong Kong, Paris, London, New York, Los Angeles. Madonna, who can