

FUZZY THINKING: ARTIST-DESIGNED RUGS

by Tim McKeough



The artist Jonas Wood in his Los Angeles studio, with his rug "Yellow and Orange Orchid Clipping," 2018. Credit...Melissa Lyttle for The New York Times

As the line between art and design becomes increasingly blurry, one type of product is emerging as fertile turf for cross-disciplinary collaboration: rugs by artists.

A Manhattan gallery, BravinLee programs, is making bold, graphic rugs from hand-knotted wool and silk by artists such as Christopher Wool, Jonas Wood and James Welling, with more in the pipeline from Deborah Kass, Julio Le Parc and Wangechi Mutu.

Joseph Carini Carpets has collaborated on painterly rugs with the ceramic artist Yuki Hayama and graffiti-inspired floor coverings with street artists like DAIN, RAE and Jim Joe. Brintons developed a collection of rugs with the multimedia artist Shezad Dawood last year. The Rug Company, which frequently works with fashion and interior designers, introduced a collection by Jaime Gili this summer.

The rug manufacturer Christopher Farr, which has been working with artists for years, made a limited-edition rug with Howard Hodgkin as part of the painter and printmaker's exhibition at the Hepworth Wakefield art gallery in England last year. Now it is at work on limited-edition rugs with Gary Hume, Anish Kapoor, Maya Lin and Kiki Smith for "Tomorrow's Tigers," a fund-raising exhibition organized by Artwise and the World Wildlife Foundation, which will be presented at Sotheby's London in January. Produced in editions of 10, the rugs will start at about \$13,000 each.

"The appeal is to match the particular practice of an artist with the complexities and subtleties of weaving," said Christopher Farr, a co-founder of his company. "We wondered whether that would add something, in the way that a print, a bronze, a video, an installation or a performance expresses another facet of that artist's practice."

The fruits of these efforts aren't mere reproductions of an artist's paintings, or rugs designed to coordinate with your furniture — they are intended to stand as artistic pieces in their own right.

The process of working with an artist is fundamentally different from working with a designer, said Mr. Farr, who invites artists to invent freely, within his company's capabilities.

"With a designer, I can assert myself a little bit; with an artist, it's a labyrinth of passion and ego," Mr. Farr said. "They stretch you and push you. That tension, that heat, is what attracts me. It's kind of masochistic crazy."

John Post Lee, the co-founder of BravinLee programs, started producing rugs as an outgrowth of his work as an art dealer eight years ago. "We're interested in this idea of going beyond the white box and creating a transition from just being a traditional art gallery to helping artists make things," said Mr. Lee, who works with artists who design the rugs, which are hand-knotted in Nepal.

Mr. Lee continued, "At every step, the artist maintains the control over the project. If at any point they don't like what happens, that's just the end of it."

The current proliferation of artist rugs grows out of a long tradition. In the 1960s Alexander Calder designed a hand-hooked rug with playful creatures and celestial bodies. During the Renaissance, Raphael and Bernaert van Orley worked on elaborate tapestries depicting Christian scenes with the exquisite, lifelike detail of paintings. At auction, the finest examples of antique Middle Eastern and Indian carpets are recognized as works of art and can cost six or seven figures.

In comparison, the price of new rugs designed by contemporary artists can seem reasonable, even if they aren't exactly cheap. The Howard Hodgkin rug Christopher Farr produced is about \$4,500, and the company's other artist editions run from about \$10,000 to \$25,000 (about double the price of its other rugs). BravinLee's rugs range from about \$3,000 for a wool prayer-size rug by Keltie Ferris to about \$30,000 for nine to 10-foot-long silk rugs by Christopher Wool and Jonas Wood.

Mr. Wood first approached BravinLee after seeing one of Mr. Wool's rugs at Gladstone Gallery's Upper East Side location. He hoped to buy one for himself. The rug was already sold out, but Mr. Lee asked if Mr. Wood might be interested in making a rug of his own. (Mr. Lee later sold an artist's proof of the Wool rug to Mr. Wood.)

"I was already interested in making usable, functional multiples," said Mr. Wood, who has made blankets with House of Voltaire and scarves with Massif Central. "I like making editions and prints as an extension of my practice. Even though it's very high end, there's still some accessibility to it: Instead of just one painting, there are 30 rugs. People live with it and their dog sleeps on it."

Mr. Hume, the artist, began working with Christopher Farr when he wanted to create a one-off rug as part of an art installation for the 1996 Bienal de São Paulo. More recently, he has developed a series of rugs based on his paintings of doors, as well as a new design for "Tomorrow's Tigers."

The process of making rugs is "so physical and elemental," Mr. Hume said. "You have to decide on the length, the cut, the technique of weaving to get what you want," he said. "There's an awful lot of fiddling about, which is very creative and exciting."

Manufacturers say most artist rugs currently sell to art dealers and art collectors. Bill Arning, director of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, for instance, bought a white rug with intersecting black lines by James Welling from BravinLee after seeing it at an art fair in Miami.

"I love his work, but I've never been able to afford a painting, so I said, 'This is my chance,'" Mr. Arning said. "The image is really powerful and super graphic. I love having it on the floor."

At first, he installed it in his master bedroom. But, later, worried that it was getting worn, he moved it into the guest apartment above his carport. “With two dogs and two bearded guys, it looked like it was getting a lot of traffic,” he said. “It’s safer to have it up there.”

Buyers of Christopher Farr rugs have included Karl Lagerfeld and Cliff Fong, founder of the Los Angeles interior design firm Matt Blacke. Mr. Fong purchased a rug made by Louise Bourgeois for the den of a client who already owned numerous pieces by the artist.

“Normally, I default to really beautiful old tribal or Oriental rugs that have a worn, faded pile,” Mr. Fong said. “To have a rug with a slightly more graphic sensibility and conceptual edge was fun.”

Compared to run-of-the-mill contemporary rugs, he added, “It’s just more interesting.”

Will a rug designed by Gary Hume or Jonas Wood appreciate in the same way that paintings by those artists might over time? Probably not, said Richard Wright, the owner of Wright auction house, who has hosted numerous auctions devoted to 20th century carpets in recent years (Sotheby’s sold a painting by Mr. Wood for just over \$2 million in May). Yet they may hold their value and, depending on the trajectory of the artist, it may rise somewhat.

“When fine artists do decorative arts items, they tend to be considered as a different tier,” Mr. Wright said. A painting is likely to appreciate much more than a carpet, he noted, but, “I do believe there will be a future market for a Jonas Wood carpet.”

However, worrying about the investment potential of artist rugs is largely beside the point — more important is how they look against your hardwood floors.

“They really are the perfect hybrid” of art and design, Mr. Wright said. “They look great in your room and make an artist’s statement, but still function perfectly well.”