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A fine balance

Artist **Deirdre Dyson's** career in carpets took off after a chance meeting in the 1990s. Denna Jones finds out how one of London's leading rug designers found wool



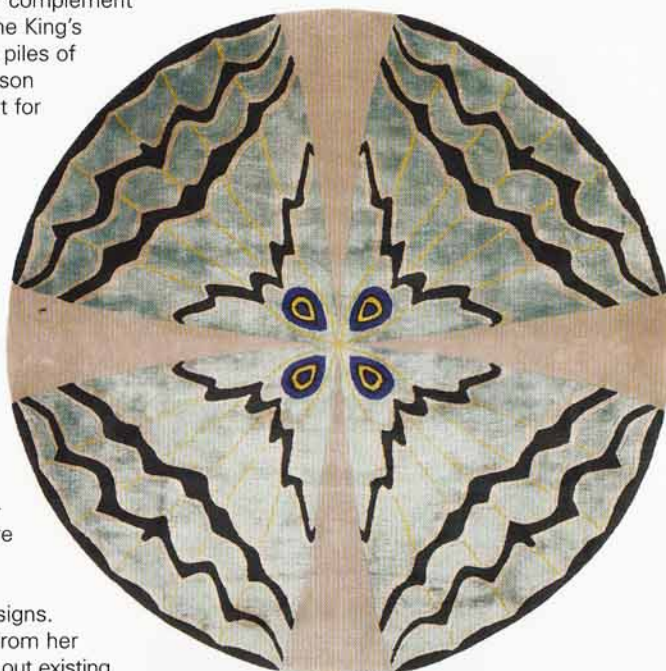
A short stroll westward down the King's Road, past famous London locations the Bluebird and World's End, is the bijoux corner shop of an exceptional rug designer. Seated at a small white Tulip table, Deirdre Dyson greets me warmly in an airy, bright client showroom and atelier on the first floor. Her associate Nicola sits nearby, translating Dyson's drawings into digital files so clients can easily tweak colour, size and fibre combinations to create a bespoke carpet. When happy, the digital file becomes the guide for Dyson's UK and Nepalese manufacturing partners.

The professional yet comfortable townhouse feel and warm welcome, make it easy to understand how Dyson's desire to be an "approachable business where the customer is part of the process" has been achieved. Polished and understated, Dyson looks more in the mould of the youthful Parisian chic of Carine Roitfeld, than the ladies who lunch in wealthy west London. But she is neither average nor resident in Fulham. Home is in an idyllic country setting near Bath.

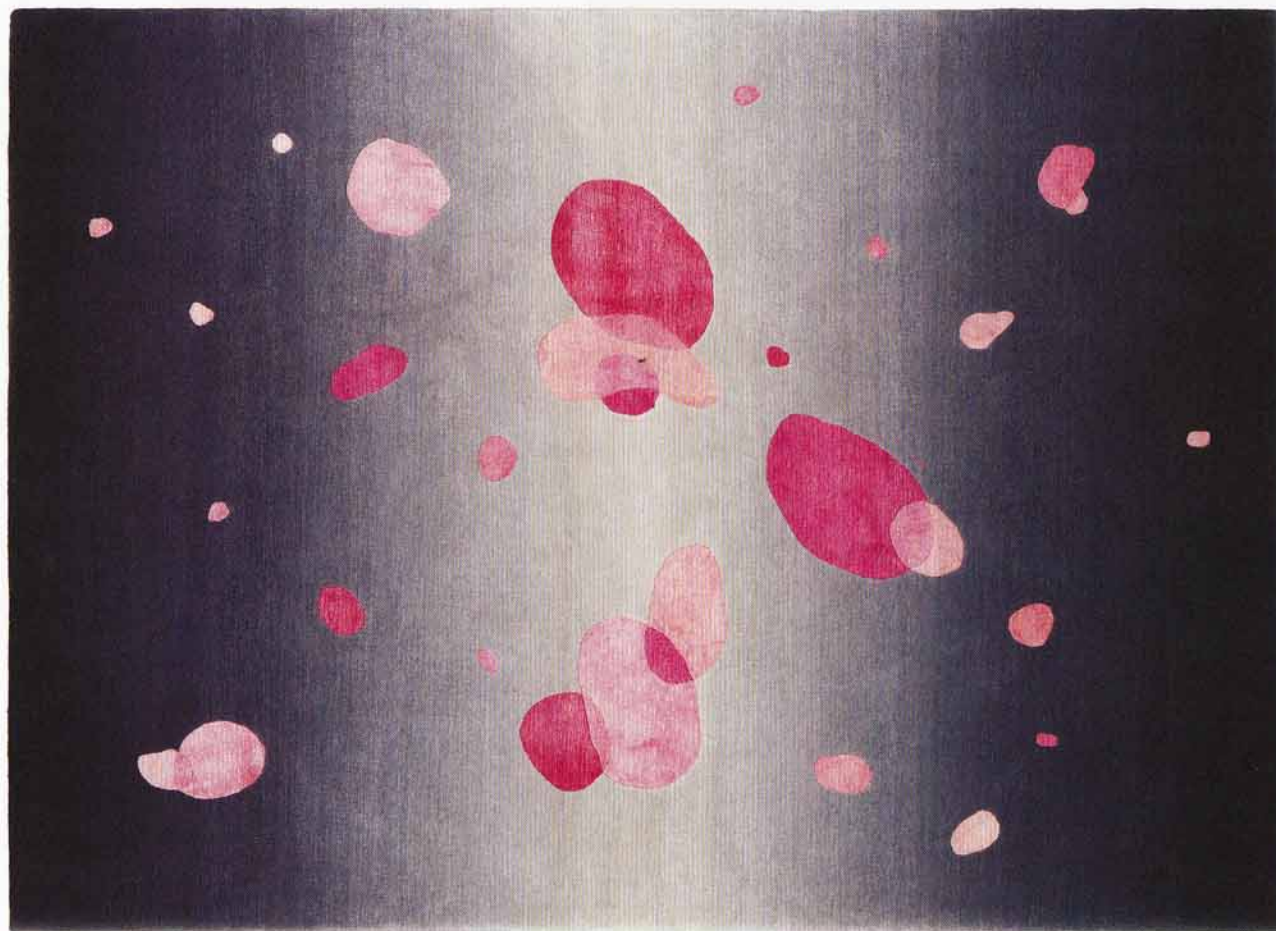
"I was never interested in carpets," Dyson replies when asked if her interest began in childhood. Prosaic lack of choice was the reason for her initial disregard for whatever pile was underfoot. "We had plain fitted carpets growing up," she explains, "and they made no impression on me." She studied painting at Byam Shaw School of Art in London, followed by Illustration and Graphics at Wimbledon School of Art. Her early career as an artist included solo painting shows in New York and London galleries. Although she didn't know it at the time, her foundation and degree courses were the perfect partners for her successful design business.

Her interest in free-standing carpets came about in the early 1990s when the home she shared with husband and fellow Byam Shaw student, James Dyson (now Sir), needed floor coverings. "I didn't want to hide the beautiful wooden floors," she explains, but "complement them." She window-shopped on the King's Road and found a shop with "just piles of pretend antique ethnic things". Dyson wanted contemporary carpets, but for those too young or forgetful, the wide range of choice for carpets has been a relatively recent phenomenon. Dyson laughs and shakes her head when she remembers the owner had "one palette card with about ten colours". She chose the only three colours that worked together, and when her nominally bespoke rug was ready, the owner delivered it. Sneaking a peak at Dyson's paintings, he asked if she'd design a collection. That serendipitous home delivery is how Deirdre Dyson Contemporary Handmade Carpets was born.

Her first collection was ten designs. Dyson tried to galvanise interest from her new business partner. "Let's chuck out existing designs" she suggested, "and get Adobe Illustrator (software design) so we can show customers what their rugs will look like." Charmingly self-effacing, she will likely demur, but she is an innovator, not an early adopter, and definitely not a follower. Her talent became



01



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01 *Psyche* rug from the Butterfly Collection 2010

02 *Bubblegum* rug from the Permanent Collection

quickly apparent to her new business partner, and he allowed her to shape the direction of the business. Bespoke was key. Drop-in customers were welcomed (as indeed they still are) but they would target interior designers. Eighteen months later the owner retired, and a few years later Dyson moved the business to its current location. She quickly realised creativity is essential to business success and segued smoothly into smart marketing to ensure her business thrived.

The technique behind Dyson's nuanced but spare designs is captured in the Chinese proverb "Idea present, brush may be spared performance." Dyson knows precisely where to stop. Her designs appear effortless, but as good designers will confirm, knowing how and where to edit and stop are skills that many never master. Her carpets are an exploration into abstract art. Simplicity of line and exceptional use of colour added to compositions made without the use of repeats, are Dyson's calling card, but her stealth weapon is the way her colourist supremacy is highlighted through technique and fibre selection.

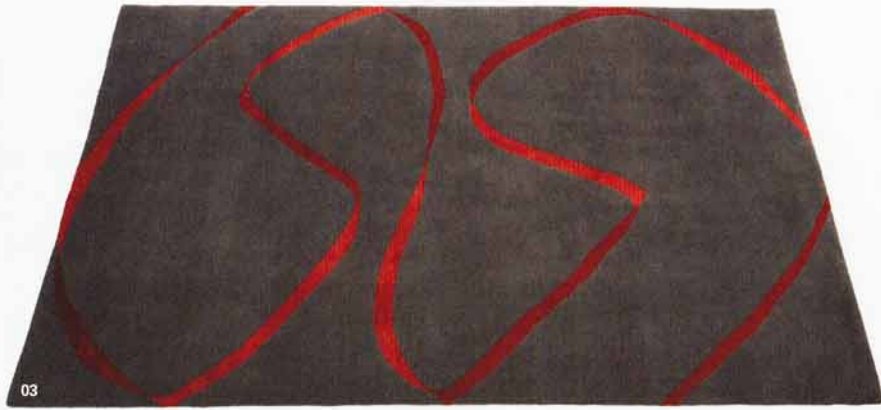
When I mention how much I like *Fleur* Dyson excitedly tugs her chair closer and shows me her new design ally. *Fleur* was created in the software programme Sketchbook Pro on her iPad. She scrolls through designs that look like paintings and watercolours. "It's really quite exciting what you can do". As a painter she instinctively creates in layers, so the software became second nature quite quickly. "David Hockney uses Sketchbook all the time!" she adds.

My tour leads to the main showroom, and Dyson and manager Edison, leaf through the carpet rack of evergreen bestsellers. She stops at *Mariposa* – a field of butterflies. "So successful and so enjoyable to create" she remembers. I suggest people find it hard to articulate what they like. "Exactly, exactly" Dyson confirms. "Which is why even the interior designers like to look through the rack for inspiration." Colours often dictate Dyson's designs. She draws with pencil on A3 pads then adds colour with paints. Thousands of design permutations are achieved via fibre choice (wool, silk or both), 1500 colour choices and tufting techniques.

Hand-tufting allows infinite innovation. Up to twenty colours can be mixed or single threads implanted. Texture ranges from shag to velvet, carved or uncarved, cut to loop, thick to thin fibres. Silk adds vibrancy and shimmer with sumptuous texture. Dyson shows me several carpets that have been tufted with two or three colours, where the combination of technique, and silk and wool deceives the eye into thinking there are many subtle hues. "Look" she says pointing at *Rose Mosaic*. "It's quite subtle how the silk petals come out, combined with wool 'grouting'. It was not easy to perfect this technique," says Dyson.

The makers were thrilled with what they achieved; hand-tufting is indeed tricky, exacting work. Workers wield tufting guns (about the size and shape of a home drill) and depending on size, stand two abreast as they work the height and width of the carpet. Her Scottish supplier is experimenting with 'auto tufting'. The design is input into a computer and the tufting gun is computerised. The finish is "a bit more even", Dyson says, comparing hand-tufting outcome to hand-knitting where tension and technique can vary between makers.

How does she choose her titles? "They tell me". Dyson's smile is enigmatic, although she



03



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03 *Streamer* rug from the Permanent Collection

04 *Hawk Moth* rug from the Mosaic Collection 2011

05 *Fleur* rug from the 2011 Collection



05

quickly adds, "it's the abstract ones that are a little more difficult". Titles are elliptical or more straightforward. She turns over A4 preview sheets of plant designs that form her 2012 theme, which augments new and evergreen lines. *Autumn Leaf*, *Plantain*, *Hairy Sedge*, and the purple seed globe head of *Devil's-bit Scabious* are delicately sketched in her lyrical style. She stops at *Salad Days* and declares, "I'm going to do some abstract ones to go with these". Dyson's *Bubblegum* carpet is decidedly not a girly confection, but is a good example of how titles for her abstract carpets are decided after the design is created. "I chose 'Bubblegum' because they were misshapen" she says, pointing to a hypnotic collection of un-tethered pale and shocking pink nodes floating in a graded, narrow spectrum of dusky violet tones. If only it were possible for London's gum blemished pavements to look like a Dyson carpet!

She is always aware of her surroundings; always ready to find inspiration. "You've got your eyes open all the time, always looking for things that might make paintings." But sometimes it's not just surroundings that suggest a new work. Sometimes it's a friend. She points to a framed *Hawk Moth* design from her mosaic series. When he saw Dyson's butterfly series, Sir Terence Conran immediately commanded her. "You've got to do moths!" She has, and it confirms what she believes. Inspiration comes from all quarters. www.deirdredyson.com 