

ARTIST PROFILE

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The Rug Project

01 [L-R] Yosi Tal, Virginia Wilson, Newell Harry, Kirsteen Pieterse in the Designer Rug showroom
Photograph: Peter Panopoulos

A new collaborative project brings together a renowned rug maker with some of Australia's most celebrated contemporary artists all in the aid of charity.

Story Paul Flynn

ON 27 AUGUST, the Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney will be the venue for a contemporary art auction with a twist. Brainchild of independent art advisor Virginia Wilson, the auction will be the culmination of a remarkable project that has brought together seven visual artists with the workshop of Designer Rugs to create a set of extraordinary one-off pieces.

"The brief was pretty broad, in fact most of my projects tend to be like that," says Wilson. "The artists were encouraged to do what they wanted on six square meters of New Zealand pure new wool and within that to be as interesting as possible."

The list of participants is rich on talent and on surprises, a mixture of younger and more established artists, none of whom have attempted a rug before. For Wilson, this was the point. "We chose the artists we thought wouldn't immediately be associated with this medium" she notes. "I mean, Shaun Gladwell's last show was photography and video. As it is, the rug he's making will still be quite identifiable as a Shaun Gladwell but I really didn't know what he would do – the same with Hossein Valamanesh. Their dedication to the project has been incredible."

Designer Rugs Managing Director Yosi Tal started the company with his father 21 years ago and has built it into one of the most successful and innovative specialist rug makers in the country. Over the years, Tal and

his team have worked on numerous successful collaborative projects with local artists and designers across a range of fields, including a recent limited edition collection with fashion designer Akira Isogawa. However, Tal admits, "this is certainly the biggest art based project we've organised" and indicative, in his view, of a shifting definition of what constitutes an artwork. "I think people increasingly recognise things other than paintings as forms of art in their own right" he says.

Tal echoes Wilson's enthusiasm for encouraging the artists to be creative with the medium. "We're not trying to just take a painting and copy it. It's actually for the artist to try and work in the medium, in the scale and in the texture, rather than trying to translate a piece of art they've created in their style into a rug – the rug is the art form in whatever manifestation they come up with. The artists are also conscious that they want to make something that people will want to buy. It's fun – they've been so excited and all really enjoyed it."

The rugs will be auctioned by Mossgreen Director Paul Sumner to raise money for a range of deserving charities, all chosen for their assistance of children, including Cure the Future and the Museum of Contemporary Art's Bella Program.

Artist Profile spoke to two of the participating artists about their experience working in collaboration and in a new medium –

NEWELL HARRY

So how did you approach this project?

I wanted to not be hesitant, to try out things that I might not normally do but that had relationships with my work, which is generally quite tactile and textural and has involved working with traditional weavers from the Pacific. My drawings are generally quite brash and scrubby and only in black and white so rather than go for something quite clean, I thought I'd play with texture as a starting point. Also, I wanted to arrive at something that I would be comfortable to live with – that was the premise.

So it wasn't simply another artwork – you had a sense of it being functional?

I didn't want it to be a simple translation of a drawing. I work with text a lot so initially I did start with that, then I knocked that text out. I collect shields, specifically from New Guinea, so I took elements from an [West Papuan] Asmat shield and from another one of my drawings and put those together.

I understand your rug will be monochromatic.

I was initially discussed using three or four colours but that created other issues to solve, so one morning I woke up and thought why not just play with the wonderful textures they had available, so I decided to make it just black on black – because my work is so textural, even within black there are an infinite amount of variations. I like to set myself confined parameters with materials to work within and then let things open up so I approached this on a level of solving things through the monochromatic.

So how do you feel about the process now?

It was a leap into the void. Working out the tonal issues created a little anxiety at the time but the decision to make it black was an easy one to make because you can wear black to a wedding but you can also wear black to a hip-hop club in the same day, so it was that kind of solution I guess [laughing].

● For more on Newell Harry:
www.roslynnoxley9.com.au

KIRSTEEN PIETERSE

How did you approach the idea of making a rug?

It was really refreshing and quite confronting at the same time. Actually, I was a bit stagestruck! I'd had a discussion with Virginia a while back when she'd brought clients to see my work – she made the comment that my sculpture was a bit like weaving and that thought had sat in the back of head for a while. There are similarities between how I work and weaving in the repetitive addition of small piece on small piece to create a whole.

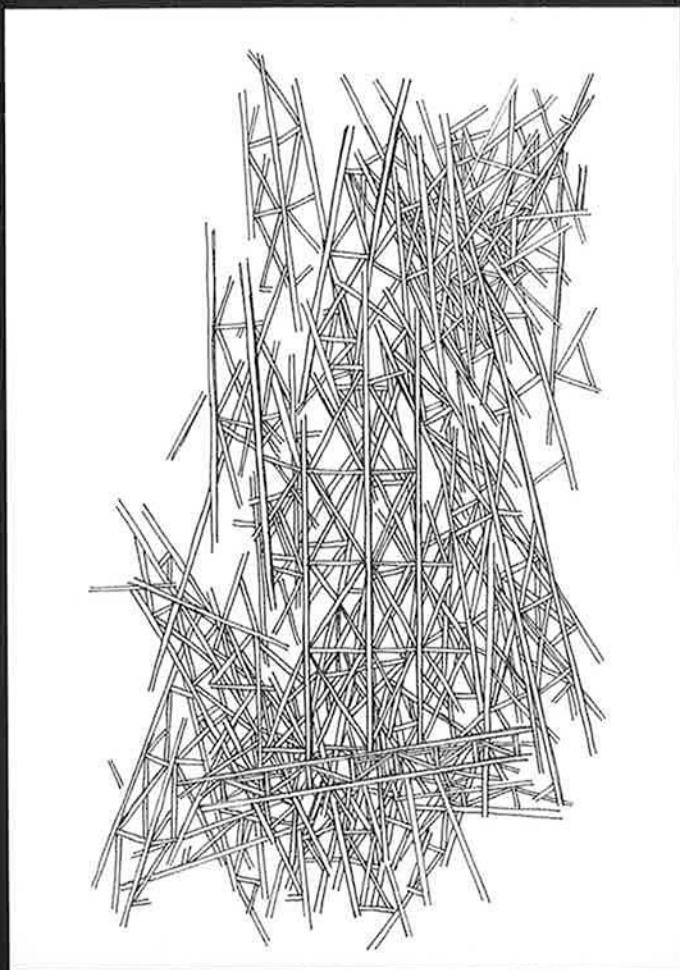
Do you create much two-dimensional work?

Yes – I do quite a bit of drawing. For me, it's a parallel activity to my sculpture – I like to create sketches of sculpture that I will never build. It allows to a freedom I don't often have because I don't have to make it stand up, I can just allow the forms to float and not deal with technical restrictions.

How much information did you give the design team?

I took along a lot of ideas along when I first met with them and then we settled on one of my ink drawings of a sculptural form – one of the 'freedom' exercises. They were reassuringly firm about what was possible and what would work so it was a close process of collaboration.

● For more on Kirsteen Pieterse:
www.martinbrownefineart.com



02 Kirsteen Pieterse design drawing

The rug is the art form, in whatever manifestation they come up with.

AUCTION

Artists

Hossein Valamanesh
Shaun Gladwell
Justin Trendall
Gemma Smith
Newell Harry
Kirsteen Pieterse
Clinton Nain

27 August 2008

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
www.designerrugs.com.au
www.virginiawilsonart.com.au
www.curethefuture.org