

Flora underfoot

A digital artist creates abstract rugs inspired by Mother Nature



In her Brooklyn workspace, Amy Helfand uses the latest tools of technology to morph images from nature into high-art rugs.

THE BROOKLYN STUDIO is unmistakably that of an artist, with a drafting table covered by paintbrushes, colored pencils and a rough sketch, plus completed works leaning against the walls. But there's also a computer partially buried under a smattering of papers, and that—surprisingly—is where Amy Helfand does most of her work.

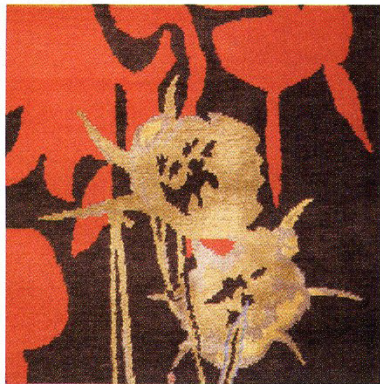
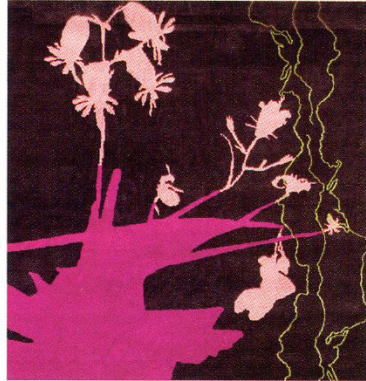
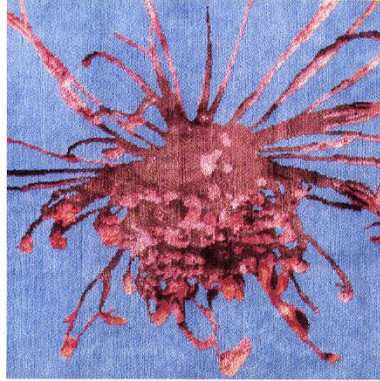
It's a tool she has been using to create digital collages, often incorporating those designs into custom rugs. It's a far cry from where her artistic career began and only a phase, she says, in its continuing evolution.

Helfand studied photography in college. That two-dimensional art segued into three-dimensional sculptural installations during her graduate studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. A move to New York 10 years ago was followed by time off to start a family, which now includes three kids. In 2000, Helfand re-entered the artistic realm with collages crafted from magazine images—direct precursors of her current creations.

No matter the medium, the one constant in Helfand's work is the inclusion of nature and landscape. "It's the thread that's stayed with me in many different forms over the years," she says.

Her current style debuted in 2004 with a collection based on the Wild Garden at the Bronx's Wave Hill. Her featured works included digital prints as well as her first rug, created from a site plan of the garden.

CONTINUED



Rugs in detail, clockwise from top left: *Mum*, *A.T. Voyage*, *Trail Runner* and *Non-Site Plan*.

Maps, flora and fauna also figure in Helfand's latest work, the A.T. Collection. The prints and rugs are based on the Appalachian Trail, which she calls "a fascinating interaction of culture and nature."

Helfand begins by tracing and drawing forms found in a particular natural environment. For example, a piece inspired by the Appalachian Trail in North Carolina includes only plants and flowers found in that state. The drawings are scanned into the computer, where she layers, rotates and alters the images, continually abstracting them to create her compositions.

The colors and organic feel of the works are what primarily attract fans such as Manhattan interior designer Ghislaine Viñas, who often includes Helfand's pieces in her projects. "Art is such a difficult thing to buy because it's so personal," Viñas says, "but I almost

always show Amy's art to my clients."

Helfand's prints are made in editions of eight, and prices range from \$150 to \$1,500. And while various rugs from the Wild Garden collection are available, the majority of her textiles are custom pieces. Manufactured in Nepal by Rugmark, a nonprofit organization working to end child labor in the carpet industry, the hand-knotted Tibetan wool pieces start at \$100 per square foot. Chinese silk is also available. Helfand's work can be seen at Bklyn Designs, May 11 to 13, and the International Contemporary Furniture Fair, May 19 to 22.

Given her strong affinity for landscape and nature, it may seem odd that Helfand's is an urban existence. "I really long for a more pastoral environment," she admits. For now, she's at home in her digital landscapes. "I think that's what I'm doing in my work," she says, "making an environment where I can exist in my mind." □