



Solo by John Reynolds.

floored by great art

Hugh Bannerman Rug-maker

Thirty-something years ago, Hugh was a low-country shepherd – one man, a stock saddle and a dog. That, in a way, was his introduction to the wool industry, he says; a real grass roots start.

As he looked for new challenges, he went from working the land in Southland to learning his trade in a yarn dealership in Christchurch, sourcing specialist wools from chosen breeders. From here, his involvement in rugs was a natural progression.

“We were ending up with a lot of redundant carpet yarns, and I suppose I was looking for a way to make them useful,” he explains. “The thing is, carpet fibres really don’t translate across to rugs – they are two very different colour cultures. The more I thought about it,

though, the more determined I was to make a really great Kiwi rug.”

Between the industry knowledge he had garnered himself and extensive brainstorming with Wool Research New Zealand, he assembled a short-list of the qualities that might go into such a product. He even came up with a name for his new business – Dilana – a synthesis of his dog’s name, Di, and the Latin word for wool.

And there, despite dollops of dedication, the idea almost foundered.

“I got some design ideas together with the help of Wools of New Zealand, and opened a showroom with a workshop above. And nothing happened,” he remembers. “Then,

Edith Ryan, who was head of the Crafts Council for many years, offered me an exhibition in Wellington... and every piece sold. The difference lay in promoting a rug as purely practical – neutral, ordinary and suitable for anywhere – or presenting it as a designed object, a piece of art.”

This may account for why Dilana’s tipping point came when Hugh took space in the Christchurch Arts Centre in the late 1980s.

“Suddenly, we had lots of visitors coming through and were exposed to all sorts of new ideas. And, quite by accident, I was rubbing shoulders with up-and-coming artists who are now some of the country’s most celebrated talents,” he says. “It was the start of a great chemistry between us: I knew wool and carpet manufacture, and these people were the future soul of the design industry in New Zealand.”

From then to now, Hugh’s rugs have been a collaboration between household function and great New Zealand art. And that’s very much how the artists see it too. Names like Hotere, Frizzell, Peebles, Chilcott, Lyall and Wells have designed not just one work, but whole series, all meticulously replicated in hand-tufted colour. For them, it’s simply now a part of their oeuvre.

“Carpet is the medium,” says artist Bing Dawe, describing the appeal. “I like playing around with images, and carpet has a nice form. You can re-create a landscape – you can walk in, around and on it.”

Hugh himself learnt a lot about form and colour over the years, he admits. The result has been the evolution of his own tastes in colour, which are typically technical in their foundation.

“I don’t personally tend to favour any one individual shade; I go more for the harmony of several alongside each other. Any one colour on its own, in a purist sense, can seem lacking without the support of one or several secondary underlying ones,” he explains.



“I see black or white as the two simplest choices to use as contrasts. For example, I find it much easier to appreciate the colour value of, say, a rich chocolate brown when it can be measured against black, rather than when it’s just

viewed on its own. Of course, any other colours can be used as that secondary contrast, and the results can be anywhere from elevating to frankly political.”

Naturally, the artists with whom he works are experts in their own palettes and forms, and when a buyer likes those shades and that style, the rug works for them as well as any painting or sculpture might do, observes Hugh.

“Don Peebles, for example, worked with us back in the 1980s and taught us so much about colour and composition,” he explains. “And we can now execute these to a really sophisticated level.”

It can, however, take forever to get the dyes right. “A lot of Kate Wells’ work is particularly tricky, for example,” he says. “That’s why we end up creating new shades, like the Wells ochre and the Hotere red.”

-  Resene Eighth Blanc
-  Resene Stonehenge



Such colours as these are now also making the transition into carpets, as Kiwi art underfoot attracts a greater following in the international market and Dilana evolves to take advantage of this new niche.

“Back in 1998, we looked at moving some of our artists towards machine-made rugs and took some Michael Reid and Kate Wells designs to Carpets Inter, which is part of the Tai Ping group. At this point, we were asked to do the Air New Zealand First Class lounges with architect Noel Lane and artist Gavin Chilcott, which is where we first came to the attention of design guru Terence Conran,” says Hugh.

“And then, three years ago, we got talking to Denmark’s Ege Carpets. We were commissioned to floor the Christchurch Library and asked Bing Dawe to do it – his was the sculpture outside. The only company that could use accurate enough digital technology to weave the eel image he crafted was Ege.”

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The company was intrigued by the design and published it, and the relationship has blossomed since.

“We’ve met with Ege’s directors, and are now feeding some of New Zealand’s top artists and our own staff into their system, working to develop our own carpet culture and taking advantage of Ege’s manufacturing technology,” says Hugh. “And Ege has a show space in Paris, which is where New Zealand woven design is headed next! In a couple of years, we’ll have our own top-quality carpet range on the international stage, showing Kiwi artists off to the rest of the world in this amazing medium.”

It’s not a bad outcome for a Southland shepherd with a passion for design. **H**

