



W i l d e r n e s s
U n d e r f o o t
The Rugs of Amy Helfand

by Jacqueline Ruyak



Amy Helfand made her first rug for a 2004 show

at Glyndor Gallery at Wave Hill, an old estate in the Riverdale section of the Bronx now owned by the city of New York and open to the public. It was a perfect venue for Helfand, who took inspiration from the estate's Wild Garden, an interpretation of the informally planted English wild gardens championed by the Irish writer William Robinson. Made to suggest the artless chaos of untamed nature with plants growing at random, the garden is yet a carefully planned and cultivated space.

AMY HELFAND *Ragged Wandering* Rug, Tibetan wool and Chinese silk, hand-knotted in Nepal with 100 knots per inch, 4.5' x 9', 2007.

"My work has always been about the dichotomy between humans and nature," says Helfand, who speaks with a bright, brisk demeanor. "It's about our way of interacting with the natural world and finding a place within it so that we can understand it, whether that means classifying things or through magazine articles or by mapping trails or getting away for the weekend in the country."

For the Wave Hill show, Helfand created a series of digital prints in abstract shapes and vibrant colors suggested by the structure of the garden and the fantastic forms and colors of its many plants. She also designed fabric for a bench in the foyer and a rug to place in front of the main fireplace. In recent years, as her work became more and more graphic, she had found herself thinking about rugs; making one for Wave Hill House made conceptual sense. It was a success and she decided to make more.

Helfand's rugs grow directly from her abstract prints. "The artwork happens to lend itself well to them," she explains. "I don't make the prints for the rugs." Each rug is made in Nepal of handknotted wool and silk with 100 knots per inch. Since that first rug, Helfand has used the same carpet maker, which she found through RugMark, a global non-profit organization that works to do away with child labor in the South Asian carpet industry. Three years later, she is still gratified at how successful the collaboration has been.

"Basically, I send the print off to Nepal, then the rug comes back," she says. "We do everything by e-mail and DHL. Without our ever having talked, it's remarkable how well it's worked." She also receives samples from the rug makers, which allow her to check colors and the look of the design. The finished rug may have slight changes. "But my artistic process," says Helfand, "is one of continually abstracting the image