

# RUG LIFE

Not surprisingly, the words “text” and “textile” share the same Latin root word: the verb *texere*, meaning to weave. Just as sentences are created by stringing words together to create meaning, cultures throughout time have carefully woven strands of wool or silk into designs rich with meaning. Sentences are stitched together to create anything from a sweeping fictional saga to a dry didactic text. Similarly the rugs in the exhibition, *RugLife*, range from a formal approach to the subject matter to rich cultural critique and are representative of the unique and vastly different cultures and/or identities that the fourteen artists represent.

Rugs and carpets have defined the character of space since animal skins began to warm and adorn cave dwellings; the earliest known Persian rugs are nearly 2500 years old. Given this long history—entwined with religion, culture, and nature—it follows that artists continue to find potential in the form of the rug. It offers artists and designers from around the globe a forum

to take on the appropriation of cultural, racial, and gender roles and stereotypes within the framework of a decorative object turned art object.

Guest Curators, Ginger Gregg Duggan + Judith Hoos Fox, c<sup>2</sup>-curatorsquared

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## **INTERWEAVING PAST AND PRESENT**

Because the rug is an object of daily use throughout cultures, and across societal stratifications, it is familiar and widely approachable by all, offering an entry point for artists' manipulations, reinterpretations, and new creations. This provides the context to merge past

with present, serious history with pop culture, and stereotypically Eastern and Western ideologies.

## **Oksana Levchenya**

born 1975, Bershad, Ukraine; lives in Kyiv, Ukraine

*Pac-Man and Cossacks, 2022*

Hemp thread and natural dyed wool

Courtesy of the artist

Oksana Levchenya lives and works in Ukraine, where she produces traditional kylym rugs, a technique for carpet-weaving dating back to the 16th century. Tradition stops at the process, however, with unique designs that combine folk ornament and ethnic patterns with characters from gaming, television, movies, and other elements of pop culture. Levchenya's hybrid-symbolism seamlessly merges the two in a way that is not immediately noticeable. It is only upon closer inspection that one notices the historic Cossacks are actually fighting Pac-Man. These elements of humor belie the serious concern the artist has for historic preservation and ecological cleanliness. The hemp thread that forms the base of the kylyms is made of dyed natural wool from Carpathian sheep or vegetable yarn from nettles which is then intricately hand-woven.

## **Ali Cha'aban**

born 1988, Kuwait; lives in Kuwait

*I Fought the Internet and the Internet Won II*, 2019

Silkscreen on Persian carpet

Edition 2/3

*I Fought the Internet and the Internet Won II*, 2019

Silkscreen on Persian carpet

Edition 3/3

Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai

Lebanese artist Ali Cha'aban uses the rug in a multitude of ways to explore socio-political events and cultural representation in the hopes of sparking dialogue.

By incorporating symbols of Western pop culture with the nostalgia of the well-worn Arabic rug—both immediately recognizable and relatable—Cha'aban is inviting all parties to the table. In his *Broken Dream* series which features Superman, Wonder Woman, and other American pop icons, he silkscreened directly onto the surface of Persian carpets. Cha'aban views these works as a way for him to confront what he refers to as inner-struggle, "about indulging in other traditions without letting go of your own culture."

As a result, neither element takes primacy over the other. Superman's vivid primary colors do their best to overwhelm the more subtle palette of the rug but ultimately this push/pull creates a dynamic composition

that mirrors the experience of younger generations of the Middle East.

## **Slavs & Tatars**

Collaboration founded in 2006

Kasia Korczak

born 1976, Łódź, Poland; lives in Berlin, Germany

Payam Sharifi

born 1976, Austin, Texas; lives in Berlin, Germany

*Qatalogue*, 2018

Wool

Courtesy of Beata and Tom Majewski

Slavs and Tatars, founded by artists Payam Sharifi and Kasia Korczak, describe themselves as "a faction of polemics and intimacies devoted to an area east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China known as Eurasia." Often focusing on language as the context for identity, they frequently utilize humor and pop culture to offer an entry point for a discussion about cultural traditions. Their rug, titled *Qatalogue*, is a great example of this approach. Cyrillic letters are tangled in amongst a swirling red tongue, referencing sounds which did not previously exist in Slavic languages. As with other work by Slavs and Tatars, the notion of a "mother tongue" is a recurring theme, and a reminder

of the role that language plays in both uniting and separating various groups.

## **Azra Akšamija**

born 1976, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina; lives in Boston, Massachusetts

*Palimpsest of '89*, 2017

Single channel animation

21:00 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

Azra Akšamija's single-channel animation installation, *Palimpsest of '89*, is an excellent example of this reframing of history. Commissioned by the Museum for Modern Art, Ljubljana, for the exhibition *Heritage of 1989*, it offers a meta take on attempts to preserve Yugoslavia's history. Each layer of an animated digital carpet corresponds to four major historic periods: the Pre-Ottoman, the Austro-Hungarian, Modernist/Socialist, and Post-Dayton. The digital carpet is then projected in the center of the gallery to represent, in Akšamija's words: "a model for thinking about the creation of a common heritage through the weaving of integrative and disintegrative narratives and policies related to cultural institutions." Over the course of the 21 minutes, more symbols or layers are added, removed or erased, highlighting the revisionist nature

of history.

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## **PATTERNING A COMMUNAL EXPERIENCE**

Perhaps because our world is incredibly interconnected and there is an open exchange of ideas on a global scale, many artists at this moment in time are choosing to turn to more personal and communal histories—stereotypes even—when addressing this functional object. The range and richness of voices embedded in the simple carpet illustrate that these objects are not inert, but are often complex expressions of ideas and points of view. Instead of mixing symbols from various cultural sources, these artists highlight particular elements of unique communities to show that despite trade and cultural exchange, referencing our personal experience can be incredibly powerful.

### **Nicholas Galanin**

born 1979, Sitka, Alaska; lives in Sitka, Alaska

*Signal Disruption, American Prayer Rug, 2020*

Wool, cotton

Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery

Nicholas Galanin is a Tlingit and Unangax multi-disciplinary artist who addresses racism head-on in his piece, *Signal Disruption: American Prayer Rug*. Hung

on the wall like a television in any American family room—a version of a prayer rug for media—rendered in wool and cotton, is arresting. The title, *Signal Disruption*, references the error image that appears on a television screen during a broadcast signal disruption. In an attempt to disrupt what he sees as the status quo proliferated by American politicians and media, Galanin's prayer rug pulls the plug on regular programming—America's genocidal past and racist present—in hopes of breaking the communal trance, triggering a recommitment to land and community. In addition, the vibrant colors and striking pattern, when displaced from tv screen to woven rug, also reference traditional indigenous weaving designs and heritage, adding to the pointed critique against the flawed history of America.

## **Sonya Clark**

born 1967, Washington DC; lives in Amherst,  
Massachusetts

*Comb Carpet*, 2008

Combs, cable wire

Courtesy of the artist

Sonya Clark refers to hairdressers as heroes, saying "the poetry and politics of Black hair care specialists are central to my work as an artist and educator. Rooted



in a rich legacy, their hands embody an ability to map a head with a comb and manipulate the fiber we grow into complex form." Black vernacular hair designs serve as inspiration for a number of works by Clark, some made from black hair, some addressing the subject, and others looking at the tools of the trade. Her unconventional rug, titled *Comb Carpet*, is quite literally made of hundreds of standard black plastic combs, teeth facing up, forming a rug of sorts. This strong statement of cultural identity—Clark identifies as African-American, Caribbean, and Scottish—is loaded with layers of meaning about racial stereotypes, the power of reappropriating cultural symbols, and understanding hair as a literal carrier of DNA as well as a metaphorical connection to one's roots.

## **Nevin Aladağ**

born 1972, Van, Turkey; lives Berlin, Germany

*Pattern Matching (purple-blue)*, 2016

Collage with carpets of different origin

Courtesy of the artist and Wentrup Gallery, Berlin, Germany

As a Turkish artist who immigrated to Berlin as a child, Nevin Aladağ often questions, through her work, what it means to be foreign. Searching for sources of cultural identity rooted in heritage can seem antithetical to

forming the new social connections often required when relocated. However, it is these fault lines that inform Aladağ's work. Her series of rugs, titled *Social Fabric*, are vivid collages of carpet scraps from different origins and styles pieced together onto wood panels to create various geometric and abstract patterns. Despite pairing often-discordant colors and styles side by side, the overall design comes together to create a cohesive whole, referencing the melting pot sensibility of many communities. *Pattern Matching (purple-blue)* is created in the same way, but culminates in the form of a basketball court. The reference to the American sport of basketball—often pick-up in nature and something that can bring people together—may seem at odds with the decorative florals and symbols of the rugs of origin, but each component speaks to merging while retaining authenticity.

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## **DELINEATING A SENSE OF PLACE**

From area rugs used to divide or decorate a room, to prayer rugs marking a personal sacred place for devotion, rugs serve to delineate space. That notion of space also extends into the global realm, early on through trade, up to today via displacement and emigration. Highly-valued carpets signaled wealth and

worldliness for their owners on the opposite side of the world from where they were created. On the other end of the spectrum, refugees fleeing their countries, could roll up and take their prayer mats as one of their very few possessions as they settle in new lands. For some of the artists in the exhibition, this aspect of signaling “home” despite global mobility is at the heart of the work.

## **Wendy Plomp**

born 1977 Wilnis, Netherlands; lives in Eindhoven, Netherlands

*Cardboard Carpets*, 2009

Cardboard, paint

Courtesy of the artist

Dutch designer Wendy Plomp brings the notion of portability and place to the streets, addressing both homelessness and sustainability in her project, *Cardboard Carpets*. Utilizing the ubiquitous cardboard box, she unfolds them into their flat shapes and prints them with decorative designs that transform them from trash to rug. The functional tabs, flaps, and perforated fold markings add to the unique shape and design of each carpet. In Plomp’s words, “I noticed how people gave cardboard new functions—like to beg or sleep on, to draw on or use for hitch-hiking signs, even to break

dance on, which gave me the idea to print the inside of a used box with a carpet pattern so that wherever you are, this carpet can be your temporary clean space, your home." Just as prayer rugs are meant to demarcate a boundary between sacred and profane space, for the unhoused cardboard is often the only separation from a dirty street and the only way to stake any sort of personal space.

## **Ali Cha'aban**

born 1988, Kuwait; lives in Kuwait

*Grandpa's Monobloc*, 2023

Plastic chair, Persian rug

Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai

Ali Cha'aban manages to create a profound statement on Arabic identity through the simple act of covering every surface of a standard white plastic chair with carpet. These inexpensive stackable Western style Monobloc lawn chairs are frequently seen in Arabic communities, particularly where there has been resettlement or in refugee circumstances, where temporary homes are made from very little. A semi-circle of chairs can provide a setting where members of the community can gather, socialize, exchange ideas, and enjoy a meal or tea together. In an attempt to reclaim some of the sensibility of home, Cha'aban

reinserts elements of the culture that serve to dignify the design of displacement.

## **Stéphanie Saadé**

born 1983, Beirut, Lebanon; lives Beirut, Paris, France, Amsterdam, Netherlands

*Stage of Life*, 2022

Carpet cut in strips

Courtesy of the artist and Marfa Projects, Beirut

Stéphanie Saadé often mines her memories of and nostalgia for her life in Lebanon, where she lived with her family as a child. Her conceptual installation, *Stage of Life*, consists of a carpet from the family home that has been cut into strips and then reassembled visually in space into a new configuration that incorporates the element of distance as a shape in and of itself. The width of the strips was carefully measured and laid out to equal the distance from Saadé's current bedroom and entryway of her building in Paris. In this new arrangement, she has brought her faraway childhood into her current home, a nod to leaving home yet still holding it close. This seemingly simple manipulation effectively adds the weight of distance, memory, and longing to a functional object that typically symbolizes grounding, stability, and home.

## **Andrea Zittel**

born 1965 Escondido, California; lives in Joshua Tree, California

*Carpet Furniture: Drop Leaf Table, 1993*

Silk and wool dye on wool carpet

McNay Art Museum collection. Gift of John M. Parker Jr.

*Carpet Furniture: Drop Leaf Table* by Andrea Zittel takes the role of carpet as spatial marker to a heightened level by visualizing an actual furniture layout onto the rug itself. As if seen from above in plan view, the outlines of a dining table, eight chairs, and accompanying place mats are delineated in architectural template style against the solid color of the surrounding area, the "rug." While this may seem to be a straightforward playful take on designing space and place, it also suggests a minimalist approach to living and what exactly one needs to make a home in any circumstance. Being able to pack up and leave at a moment's notice becomes more compelling as society becomes more mobile, more unstable, and resources become more scarce.

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## **LOOMING POLITICS**

Since the work of artists included in *RugLife* is both

prescient and reflective of current cultural issues, it is not surprising that many of the works are more politicized, given our highly charged and divisive political climate. The rug offers to artists a medium and syntax for expression, long after the ritual and functional roles of the rug have been supplanted. As a result, these works touch on issues that define our culture, expressed through the ubiquitous and accessible format of the rug.

## **Ai Weiwei**

born Beijing, China, 1957; lives in Alentejo, Portugal

*Tyger*, 2022

Hand-knotted, hand-spun, hand-dyed natural Ghazni wool

Unique with two artist's proofs

Courtesy of the artist and WWF-UK

The tiger in Tibetan culture personifies wisdom and strength and invokes fearlessness and fortitude. This genre originated with the actual pelt of a tiger, splayed, legs outstretched, its face upturned from its prone pose. Here, however, he has arranged the tiger on his back, claws curling inward in a more defensive posture. The square format as opposed to the traditional rectangle creates an equally symmetrical composition and references William Blake's poem from 1794 on



the subject, "Tyger Tyger burning bright, In the forests of the night: What immortal hand or eye, Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?" The plight of the environment and this endangered species is clear in this depiction as a victim, diminished. If the WWF achieves its goal of raising awareness worldwide, and doubling the tiger population, might Ai Weiwei depict the tiger quite differently, returning to its original posture and all it implies?

## **Liselot Cobelens**

born 1994, Deurne, Netherlands; lives in North Brabant, Netherlands

*California Drought (from the Dryland series)*, 2024  
Wool

Courtesy of the artist. Made possible by The Netherlands America Foundation, Gemeente Den Bosch, Lighton International Artists Exchange Program, donations through Voordekunst, the Cultuurfonds Brabant, and Csrugs.

Liselot Cobelens takes on environmental issues in her *Dryland Rug* series, addressing the drought in her native Netherlands, an area often associated with water. Referencing data from climate-change-induced droughts, Cobelens translates those numbers into different textures and manufacturing processes



in the creation of the rugs. Within each unique rug, waterways are realized as loop-pile tufting, grassy areas are cut pile tufting, with different pile heights also representing underground water levels. Some portions were even burned to indicate areas that were subjected to wildfires. And areas with animal loss were literally sheared using sheep shearers. For *California Drought*, a new creation for this exhibition, Liselot Cobelens traveled to California to speak to experts on the ground, including in Yosemite National Park and at the University of California, Berkeley. She found many similarities between ecological challenges in California and in her homeland. The white threads here symbolize decreasing snowfall and melting glaciers in the California mountains. Knotted threads represent the rivers, while variations in elevation indicate the various landscape types in California, such as the Central Valley and mountain areas. This accentuates the contrast between the natural lines and those of human influence.

## **Johannah Herr**

born 1987 Reading, Pennsylvania; lives in New York, New York

*War Rug III (El Paso Shooting)*, 2020

Acrylic and wool yarn

Courtesy of the artist

At first glance, Johannah Herr's brightly-colored *War Rug III (El Paso Shooting)* does not immediately conjure its dark subject matter: the deadly shooting at a Texas Walmart in 2019. As with all of Herr's work, major societal issues, ranging from state-sanctioned violence and human trafficking to gun control and consumerism, take center stage, with each rug acting as a symbolic call to action. In *War Rug III (El Paso Shooting)*, the assault rifle used by the shooter takes center stage in front of a turquoise outline of Texas, but is rendered in cartoonish colors and fights for primacy against multiple Walmart symbols, and icons from the crime scene. The entire composition is then surrounded by a border of ammunition. As a whole, it is a jarring reminder of a day that started out joyful—families shopping for back-to-school—and ended with the deadliest attack on Latinos in modern American history. As Herr reminds us, it is about "how (and whose) bodies become 'ungrievable' in dominant power structures."

## **Noelle Mason**

born 1977 San Diego, California; lives in Tampa, Florida  
*Ground Control (Mexicali/Calexico)*, 2020

Hand woven wool

Courtesy of the artist

Noelle Mason is interested in the imbalance of power and how that impacts people of color, in particular. Much of her work focuses on human trafficking and illegal immigration, but unlike Johannah Herr's animated designs, she employs the visual language of surveillance and satellite imagery in the design of her rugs. *Ground Control (Mexicali/Calexico)* features the border between Mexico and the United States at California, rendered in hand-woven wool. The image was reproduced from the Terra satellite's Advanced Spaceborne Thermal Emission and Reflection Radiometer (ASTER). Mason poetically sums up her perspective in the following lines:

This work is about the way we are manipulated by images.

This work is about police and policing.

This work is about bureaucracy.

This work is about borders.

This work is about boundaries.

This work is about transgression.

This work is about speed.

This work is about images that form us.