



The winners of the 2018 Domotex **Carpet Design Awards** (CDAs) will be announced on Saturday, January 13, 2018 in Hannover, Germany. Editor Michael Christie spoke with the **Chairman** of this year's Jury, **Michael Mandapati**—founder of Warp & Weft—about his background, what makes a “great carpet”, and how it feels to be judging the work of others.

The CHAIRMAN

BY MICHAEL CHRISTIE

MICHAEL CHRISTIE (RI): Firstly, I want to say congratulations on being chosen as the Chairman of the Jury this year.

MICHAEL MANDAPATI (MM): You know Michael ... well first, thank you, but as I was saying, when they [the organizers of the Carpet Design Awards which includes Domotex as well as **COVER** Magazine] first emailed to see if I was interested I thought to myself: “Wooooo. What am I getting myself into?”

RI: From my perspective you're getting yourself into a rare opportunity to award internationally recognized accolades. Obviously you are not going to be able to please everyone with your selections, but then again, is not that distinction what separates great carpets from the crowd? But before you answer that, let's talk a bit about Michael Mandapati and his background. Most people know you as a maker of very refined Nepali-Tibetan carpets via your firm Warp & Weft, but that's not where you started is it?

MM: I've only ever been in the carpet business. Starting in 1988 while I was still in India and continuing once I moved to the United States in 1989. I was working for other companies of course, Eastern Exports in India, Pasargad and ABC Carpet once I was in the US, but I always knew in my heart I would do my own thing. I remember buying a book, *The Oriental Carpet* by P.R.J. Ford and early in the book the author is describing how carpets are made. The warp and the weft... This is the simplest, truest form, the bones

and structure of a carpet. I said, 'That's it!' and that's how 'Warp & Weft' got its name.

RI: Just like that?

MM: Just like that.

RI: So when did Warp & Weft open its doors?

MM: I opened my original gallery on Madison Avenue in May of 2001. All antiques, only antiques. Carpets like the spectacular Persian Bidjar from the 1880s shown in the background of the portrait I'll send you. I picked that spot for the photograph because Bidjars have always been one of my favorite carpets.

RI: It's interesting to hear you say that given the contrast between the aesthetic of say a Bidjar, and the look of your modern/contemporary collections. What was the impetus for adding what initially came to be known as Warp & Weft Modern?

MM: It must have been about 2003 or 2004 and there was a change happening in the industry. Designers and Architects increasingly asked for custom sizes, colors, shapes. People would encourage me to make carpets in India—which would have been the natural thing to do of course—but something wasn't right. I wanted to carry carpets from other companies, but I never wanted the entire line, just select pieces, the choicest, but firm's didn't want to do that. They wanted me to take the entire line. I believe less is more and that's what I wanted to offer my clients. Do you understand where I am coming from?

RI: Of course. Taking on an entire line can almost feel as though you are subjugating yourself to another aesthetic, to another creative force not your own. For creative people such as yourself, your team, myself, and if I can relate it to the Carpet Design Awards,

those entering what is in their mind their best work, giving up this control can be quite hard. So in lieu of taking on these other lines, what did you do?

MM: You know Michael, I didn't really have a plan, I just knew I needed to do something. My wife and I were out shopping in the city [New York] one day and we happened into a bookstore. It was there I saw the book *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* and I was struck by the book jacket. Bold, colorful, unlike anything I knew. As I flipped through the book, image after image just spoke to me. It was like lightning. That's what gave birth to our first modern collection.

RI: I recall the book and the period well. There was such an exploration

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of design—regardless of origin—going on at the time and rug makers were adapting these traditional elements from one genre into another—as is still the case—creating new forms if you will. I think it was Mimi Lipton who in *The Tiger Rugs of Tibet* described the 'apparent modernity' of borrowed motifs—either literally or through adaptation—as part of the appeal. Stripping an element down to its barest form.

MM: In my first few years making carpets I learned I am a minimalist, which is in stark contrast to the traditional carpets, e.g Haji Jalili Tabriz, I had been selling. I knew this new aesthetic I wanted required Nepali-Tibetan weaving; matching the look to the technique.

RI: I feel that is one element which really differentiates a ... well I won't say mediocre, but a perfectly attractive, sellable, broadly appealing carpet, from say a so-called great carpet. An ideal pairing of technique and design. So if I may then, as you're to be judging all of these submissions for the Carpet Design Awards, is that pairing something you'll be looking for when searching for a great carpet?

MM: It's everything. First you have to look at the technique. For example, take a Tabriz, or a Kerman, Sultanabad, what have you, and now imagine those same designs made using a different technique. It would not look right. Second you must love the design. Third you have to examine the design, the colors, the weave. And finally, the texture of the carpet—including the

materials—must match the design intentions. It's the whole package, not strictly the design. That's what makes a great carpet.

RI: I would likely be one of the first people to proclaim the supreme art and craft of carpet making, but as all of this takes place in the realm of commerce, what about salability?

MM: Carpet making isn't just art but a numbers game as well. Have you heard the term 'value engineering'? It's when you ask the question: "How can you making this [in reference to any carpet] for \$XX instead of \$XXX?" Designers nowadays have to be aware of this component as well and it's something we consider in the judging process.

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RI: Alright then, straight to the point: How do you judge all of these carpets?

MM: I'm called "picky" but I don't know what that means. For me, I have to fall in love with the carpet and it has to speak to me. The design, the quality, construction, the details, as I said, it's the whole package. Experience informs the ability to gauge quality from imagery so that will play a role in winnowing the submissions down to the finalists. Plus, it has to be original work. Even if the design is re-interpreting an existing motif, the designer has to be telling their own story. A rug must speak, in its own voice. It's a bit like a game I like to play with myself when I walk trade shows. I walk around and I try to find one rug that is the singular stunning standout. The scale, perfect proportions, the twist of the yarns... .

RI: So if there is some detail about rug design and construction I can think to name, that is a consideration as well?

MM: Yes, everything. If a carpet is to speak to you there must be some realness to the carpet. What is the idea [behind it]? What is the vocabulary? The combination of materials, technique, the entirety of the carpet. Designers need to be careful to avoid the shark frenzy of following trends, they should develop their own signature look and avoid chasing the tail of the dog.

RI: It seems you have a clear mindset as to what makes a great carpet and how to find one amongst others, so if I were to ask, and I am, if there is anything you would like to close with, personal thoughts, advice for would be designers, what would it be?

MM: For me this is a great honor to be asked to judge the spectacular work of my peers, especially given the advances in carpet making over the past twenty years. As for advice ... "Be bold and do your own thing."



Pieced Quilt by Lucy Mingo, Gee's Bend, Alabama. Mingo made this spectacular pieced quilt in 1979. It includes a nine-patch center block surrounded by pieced strips in an exuberant display of color and form. The Gee's Bend quilts first gained prominence and appreciation for many of the very same reasons as so-called modern carpets. Examined in abstract and ex-situ the motifs and patterning express an 'apparent modernity' to the unfamiliar eye.



The Carpet Design Awards—The International Competition for Outstanding Carpet Design—occur annually during Domotex in Hannover, Germany, with the accolades serving as bellwether for the direction of

the industry. *RUG INSIDER* Editor, Michael Christie will be in attendance from January 12th-14th (the show runs through the 15th) reporting on what the future seems to hold.

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