

HAPPY HOOKERS ROLL OUT THE RED CARPET

Story by Tara Ulbrich

When I first came to Tasmania, the Elizabethtown Hotel down the highway was a dusty, smoke filled masculine haunt with burly crossed-arm football teams on the walls, and a well-worn green turf on the pool table. Only a handful of patrons remained. Six years on and Elizabethtown Hotel is now "etc" (elizabeth town café) – a bustling bakery/eating stop for mainlanders blowing in from the ferry docked at Devonport and making their way southwards. Locals too, are welcomed at the cafe and, as extra hospitality, upstairs meeting rooms can be made available - fresh white walled spaces with views over the farmlands of this rich agricultural area.

On the last Sunday of the month anyone can climb the old stairs to find one such room filled with a group of women who affectionately call each other the Happy Hookers, excited to be rekindling the craft of latch hooking.

This Rug Hook Movement has had a leader in textile artist Jo Wild, well known for her screen-printing and design motifs. She encourages budding textile creators to make their own way into the medium. The momentum has well and truly taken over. Women from all over the state have participated in her workshops. I have a sense that our island is slowly being carpeted. And with several from our collective now members of *Rugcrafters Australia Guild (established 2008), a global covering could be possible.

But I do say slowly, for it is impossible to rush a rug. First the dimensions of the underlying mesh need to be chosen; then follows design inspiration and selection of colour (not necessarily in that order). The raw materials are gathered and each strand of yarn is individually knotted onto the mesh, growing the pile. Time is indeed required; it is a process worth savouring.

Local hook ruggers are blessed with a state resource: Tascot, a Northern Tasmanian wool carpet manufacturer, one of only two in Australia. Their wool wastage, while coarse, is durable - perfect for rug making. These hanks come in a lottery of colours depending on Tascot's commissions at the time. *What will be in season this visit? What did you get last time? Ohhh look at the rust red... Can I swap some of this purple?*

Rug making has a long-standing tradition of using recycled materials and lets us feel connected to the homemakers who have gone before, who celebrated thrift and the make, mend and make-do mentality. When we bring colours together and blend them, we connect beauty and function. And in the end our busy hands are satisfied, our toes are warm and a rug lies before us on the hearth.

It was somehow inevitable that our show-and-tell would move outside the pub. The Happy Hookers group has a travelling exhibition of hook rugs touring Tasmania in 2009, thanks to their connection with the local Arts Deloraine group and to its overarching body, Tasmanian Regional Arts. There is a last chance to catch the tour. Don't miss the hooking haiku tea towels on sale, and look for Maura O'Connor's rug, based on her pastures.

For more information visit Jo's website www.lasting-impressions.com.au See also www.tasregionalarts.org.au **The exhibition is at Triabunna/Spring Bay until Friday, 20th November and then it goes to Smithton/Circular Head from 25 Nov – 21 December, 2009.**

Tara Ulbrich, her partner and four children moved to the Meander Valley seven years ago. Tara nourishes a passion for textiles by hooking rugs and weaving handspun, hand-dyed cloth, inspired by the many dimensions of her home and community environment.



* The Rugcrafters Australia Guild will be holding a Progygy and Hooky Rug Exhibition in Milton, NSW on 17th and 18th April 2010. Also in Milton during April, the renowned American rug teacher, Gene Shepherd will be running rug making workshops (www.geneshepherd.com). For more information contact Miriam Miller Email: narrawillyfarm@shoal.net.au or phone 02 44556870 or go to: www.rughookingaustralia.com

Above, Jo Wild appears in the doorway of Gone Rustic Studio and Gallery, St Marys, Tasmania; behind her is Kay Lincoln. Below detail of "Iced Vovo" by Kay Lincoln. Below left, factory wool from Tascot Wool Carpet Factory. All images by Rosemary Cornish.

