

cover

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COLOUR AND OPTIMISM FOR 2022

JAIPUR RUGS



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CHRISTOPHER FARR X COMMUNE • CLAUDIA AFSHAR
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Rug therapy

Dena Lawrence creates soulful vibrant rugs based on her own expressionist paintings. Rachel Meek unearths their multilayered therapeutic qualities



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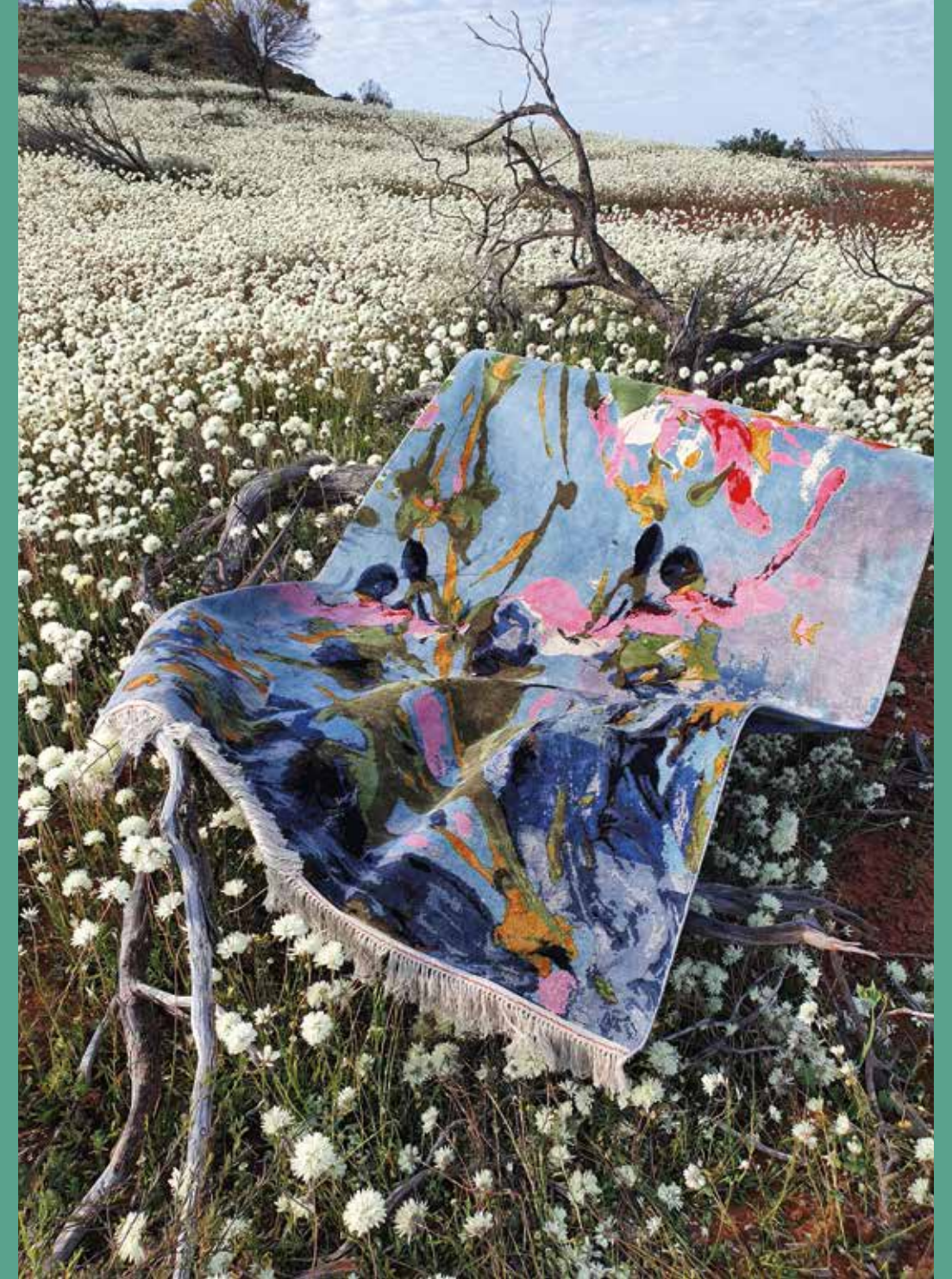
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“Often, born out of darkness and difficulty, is something beautiful and inspiring

01 Dena Lawrence

02 *Ocean*, Firesun Collection, Dena Lawrence

03 *Peace*, Firesun Collection, Dena Lawrence



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As a professional art therapist and mental health nurse, Dena Lawrence is a great advocate of creative activity and its potential positive effects. In her career, over more than 30 years, she has facilitated acts of creativity for individuals suffering from trauma and has seen the remarkable results this can have upon their mental health. So when, in 2009, she encountered large numbers of people suffering from stress and anxiety as a result of living in in Kashmir—a region that has seen decades of violence amid political chaos—her natural instinct was to offer her services there. She set up a far-reaching art therapy programme in Srinagar in 2010, and in doing so, met weavers making incredibly fine silk rugs. She admired these greatly and commissioned a series based on her own expressive paintings. Over the past decade, two signature Dena Lawrence rug collections have blossomed: the exuberant Firesun comprises vibrant silk rugs made in Kashmir, while designs

woven in wool and silk in Rajasthan and Pakistan make up the comparatively mellow Watermoon. ‘I got sidetracked,’ Lawrence laughs, when explaining the origins of her rug collections. But it was an encounter with a rug seller in India that led her to visit Kashmir in the first place. She would walk past his carpet emporium every day on her way to regular Ayurvedic treatments in Alappuzha, Kerala. ‘He’d yell out, “come and have a cup of tea”,’ she recalls. ‘I was always interested in crafts, so it was easy to persuade me. Before we knew it, my friend and I had bought two Kashmiri rugs and, within the next six months, were on our way to Kashmir to stay with the rug seller’s family. It’s a very beautiful place, very aesthetically pleasing, but at the same time there was a lot of military influence, barbed wire and constant police surveillance. I was overwhelmed by the amount of sorrow and sadness that I felt there. I’m not afraid to get myself into situations that can be quite extreme. Often, born out of darkness and difficulty, is something beautiful and inspiring.’ Out of her



She has practised using music and painting to calm and comfort since childhood



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04 *Splash*, Watermoon Collection, Dena Lawrence

05 *Bold*, Firesun Collection, Dena Lawrence

initial experience came 'A Path with Art', a series of mostly self-funded art-therapy workshops delivered in colleges and orphanages and to individuals in Kashmir, with some sponsorship from the Hollywood Private Hospital in Perth where she works. Financial support was later secured from the Rotary Club of Western Endeavour, and it became a Rotary Australia World Community Service (RAWCS) project. Between 2010 and 2013, Lawrence returned to Kashmir eight times. At Kashmir University, the workshops reached several hundred students and fifteen were trained to teach art therapy techniques to their peers. The participants learnt to tap into unspeakable emotions and to channel them into expressive paintings which provided much needed stress relief. 'Living in a conflict-ridden area takes a toll on your psyche, but after finishing my artwork, I felt quite peaceful and contented,' one workshop participant said.

The method of using art as a soothing tool comes naturally to Lawrence. She has practised



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using music and painting to calm and comfort since childhood. Her time at a strict boarding school in Western Australia—in stark contrast to her home life on a remote farm in the bush—necessitated some form of creative escape. 'It was really difficult, being sent off to a school run by nuns where there was a lot of discipline and control, but the education was excellent. That's where I learned to get in touch with my creative side. I could get lost in playing music. It became an important self-soothing activity as well as being fun,' she says. While acknowledging that her formal education provided her with the skills and theory to progress her talent, unbounded, free flowing, energetic expression is the style that has continually provided her with the most emotional and creative satisfaction. Spending time in nature, particularly among wildflowers, is a big source of inspiration. 'I practise what I teach in the art-therapy process,' she says. 'I don't start with any plan, other than a certain energy and a few colours. The image starts to tell me where to go. Sometimes it can get chaotic, other times it becomes something more pleasing that comes together as a rug design.'

The gestural paint daubs, flicks and spatters are faithfully translated in Dena Lawrence rugs, capturing the surges of boundless energy channelled into the original artworks, but transforming them into shimmering renditions in wool and silk, reminiscent of stained glass or jewels. The rugs have proven popular among art collectors in Australia and Lawrence is keen to expand the reach of her work by partnering with international galleries. She regularly produces around fifteen paintings a week, working with acrylic paint on paper, so has an enormous portfolio of potential rug designs. She is currently experimenting with introducing more formal elements to the colourful mix, without relinquishing her signature joyful style.

www.denalawrencerugs.com.au