

# cover

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UNKNOWN CARPETS  
X KUSTAA SAKSI

## DREAMING OF RUGS



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# Slowly does it

**Known for art-quality rugs, Merida Studio has shed mass-production mentality for thoughtful, carefully crafted products. Keith Flanagan visits the reopened Boston showroom and the mill in Fall River, Massachusetts, for a deeper look at this conceptual work**

**R**electing on the reinvention of Merida Studio, Catherine Connolly remarks, 'The main thing we started to transform was our relationship with time.' She stands at her mill in Fall River, Massachusetts, as a robo-tuftter staccatos within earshot. She's far from Merida's birthplace in Syracuse, New York, where, starting in the 1970s, the company once cornered the market on wholesale, finished sisal rugs. But the studio before her is not the one she left behind; everything is made to order now, every rug requires patience.

Surrounding Connolly are one-of-a-kind pieces that might be termed masterworks. Nearly two decades ago, she nurtured a dream to bring deeper artistry to Merida, developing eleven extraordinary, all-natural yarns that pull and reflect light in fascinating ways. Machines do the heavy lifting (robo-tufters, dobby and Jacquard looms), but the magic is in the hands of skilled artisans who incorporate hand weaving every step of the way. Their techniques are complex and can't be mass produced. Rugs take weeks and weeks to finish.

The shift in thinking started in 2007, when Connolly (a trained economist working in tech) became Merida's CEO. Recognising that competition overseas would drive cheaper and faster production of sisal rugs on the open market, she scrapped the bulk of the operation's retail channels for a direct-to-trade model. She eventually bought the business outright.

In 2017, she went further afield with an art-driven mission, after meeting Sylvie Johnson, a self-taught, Senegal-born and Paris-based weaver. Johnson's expressive

**01** *Sand*, Atelier collection, Merida Studio, 2023





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**02** 'Erosions' exhibition by Merida at its Boston Design Center showroom

**03** Accent, Yarn Unveiled collection, Merida Studio, 2024

**04** Accent, Yarn Unveiled collection, Merida Studio, 2024

**05** Rosette, Yarn Unveiled collection, Merida Studio, 2024

textiles so impressed Connolly that quality swiftly outweighed the daunting idea of working with an artist overseas—you can't manufacture affinity.

Rolling the dice, Connolly appointed Sylvie Johnson as artistic director, and Merida started the slow process of reinvention. The original works Johnson hoped to create required new blends of yarn, new dynamic colours, and new techniques that would redefine the brand—ideas that can't be rushed. 'They're now working on a technique for next year that they started two or three years ago,' says Johnson of the artisans at her mill.

And perhaps even more surprising is the unbothered and arguably uneconomical pace of the mill itself. Looms that normally run 1,000 times faster now operate at comparably meditative speeds. 'We had already slowed

them down to enable us to weave with thicker yarns,' says Connolly, nodding towards a vintage dobby loom humming in the background. 'But when Sylvie came, we slowed down again—and we slowed down again, and we slowed down again.'

Under Johnson's steady hand, Merida stopped making everyday rugs and started producing textiles akin to collectibles. New designs sought inspiration in anything from the Arte Povera movement to Renaissance sculpture, interpreted with lively medleys of precious fibres (like alpaca merino blends and thin-felted wools) in nuanced colours like thyme and nymphaea and lava.

In Yarn Unveiled, the latest collection (part of the long-running Atelier Series, Merida's most prized and conceptual works), Johnson delves into the Art Deco movement. She draws

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inspiration from the 1920s, when daily objects rose to the level of art. Rugs are both strikingly simple and brilliantly complex. In Cascade, raised lines and bold squiggles flow in all directions; crafted on a robo-tufter that works on a linear grid, these curves are all painstakingly guided by the watchful eye of a master craftsman, every movement feeling alive.

Merida will make only thirty editions of each rug, giving the new collection a connoisseur feel, which is all the more apparent at its showrooms in Boston and New York. Presenting like an art gallery with select rugs displayed on walls, Merida contextualises its rugs in exhibitions, often in conversation with other works of art and sculpture.

At the brand's newly renovated Boston Design Center showroom, 'Erosions' was the inaugural exhibition, curated by Sarah Barkowski, Merida's brand manager. In vibrant orange-rust palettes, rugs hung in juxtaposition with crumbly, earthen sculptures—an exploration of transformation by way of deterioration and decay, a necessary part of regeneration. It's a friendly nod to Merida's own life cycle.

'The intention of the space is to allow people to go into the work,' said Connolly at the opening, acknowledging that this reflection was not your typical rug showroom experience. For Merida, the gallery-like concept further showcased how the studio continues to grow—or better yet, shrink—from the original manufacturing company into an artisan workshop. 'The work that we're doing, and have been doing for seven years with Sylvie, is really profound.'

Whether they are placed on floors or hung on your walls, there's no question these rugs are of a different mindset. Merida's motifs and techniques are far from flat, always embracing a bit of life and art and movement. Indeed, you might even call them moving.

[meridastudio.com](http://meridastudio.com)



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