

TRIBEZA

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BLEND | MARLA HENDERSON DESIGN

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Blend in the soothing tones of the Deep South with an overlay of New York savvy, and the outcome could be nothing more natural than a colorful new line of Turkish rugs from Marla Henderson Design Group headquartered in Austin.

That unlikely-sounding combination becomes absolutely clear sitting on a comfortable stack of rugs in the showroom/apartment of designer Marla Henderson on a nearly hidden downtown strip of San Antonio Street, learning how the chance to design the rugs in Istanbul led to the new venture.

"We decided not to release them to someone else to promote who wasn't in line with our philosophy," Henderson said. "Part of our whole mission is to keep the old crafts alive - the old traditions."

The "babik," produced from vintage fabrics, and the less expensive, machine-woven "new concept" line, are already available in Austin at Gardens and Bella Home. They will be presented nationally at High Point, North Carolina, in April, and at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York in May.

"Scary," joked Anne Tucker, a 29-year-old who is working on her Master's in Architecture at the University of Texas and is Henderson's colleague, about the imminent marketing challenge ahead.

"It's not scary, it's fun," Henderson, 35, replied. "It's something I've been planning for years. I had a big red file of all the products I wanted to design."

"It's funny - all that wheeling and dealing," she said. "It's not really our forte, but we're learning."

The opportunity arrived through a lucky connection, after the godson of the company's American partner in Istanbul moved to Austin and met Henderson's musician boyfriend. She traveled to Turkey to design the line - "a long process" - and ultimately chose to take on

facing page a collection of henderson design group's babik rugs

marketing and distribution as well.

Think patchwork quilt adapted to Turkish sensibilities, brightly colored in a soothing palette produced from natural materials. The production process begins with kilims, or Turkish rugs, no longer used by once nomadic villagers in Anatolia, the eastern part of Turkey. "They had these in their tents which I think is so interesting!" Henderson said.

The kilims are taken to an ~~original~~ factory and cleaned and dried in the sun in order to not shock the fabric. Damaged sections are discarded, leaving patches to be reassembled in multiple steps into Marla's designs, sized and standardized for the imperatives of a U.S. national market. They base the compositions on the colors that were most available in the vintage kilims, which is how the red, brown, orange, and sand babik came to be piled into the San Antonio Street showroom, ready for primetime.

Henderson, dressed in black pants and top, with long, dark hair falling in soft curls, and Ann, a blonde wearing lighter clothes covered by a red shawl against the morning chill, trade stories and ideas easily.

"It's really about creating a brand," Tucker said.

"They're perfect for contemporary or traditional," Henderson elaborated.

They met and decided to work together after Henderson moved to Austin from New York after September 11 a little more than two

years ago. She grew up on St. Simons Island, off the coast of Georgia, and spent about 10 years in New York as a designer with high-profile gigs like the Bubble Lounge and the Hamptons home of Alec Baldwin.

"I've always loved Austin and over the years have collected a group of friends here," Henderson said about her decision to move to Texas.

"St. Simons Island had a huge effect on me growing up, just really out in nature," she said.

"When I was in New Orleans," Tucker, who grew up in Houston, said, "the firm I worked for did a lot of preservation work. It's all sort of a weird mix how Henderson's experience and mine are very complementary."

They have been expanding into office, studio, living, and now showroom spaces spread out over three buildings separated by a fantastically terraced overgrown yard they hope will turn into a community garden for their block.

"We're really committed to creating wonderful places here," Tucker said.

Their Austin projects already include designing the common areas and curating the art collection for the new Austin City Lofts. Henderson, who has designed many media rooms for clients elsewhere, hopes to start specializing in music rooms for Austin clients that would provide comfortable spaces to listen or perform in.

They believe that good design should be accessible, not only for wealthy clients, and offer design books and consultations that will guide people through do-it-yourself design improvements and makeovers for a small space or an entire home. Both designers also pledge strong allegiance to principles of sustainable design. Indeed, Henderson said a major element in her decision to move to Austin was the city's nationally known green building program.

As a result, they work with many local artisans in keeping with their interests. Following up on the introduction of the rugs, they hope that their next phase of product development will be a furniture line built from reclaimed wood. **SS**



this page henderson design group's babik rug; interior shot of henderson's studio

