

MAKING IT LOOK EASY

The EasyMe Collection by Rug Star was the creation of three collaborators: rug designer Jürgen Dahlmanns, rug retailer Christiane Millinger and architect Michael Howells. The trio also became part of two Rug Star projects, Intimacy and KingsRobe, which both feature the captivating *EasyMe* designs. Lucy Upward talks to all three about the making of the collection, the associated projects and how this successful collaboration resulted in joyful rugs

Jürgen Dahlmanns

Collaborations are about the meetings of minds. Here the head of Berlin's Rug Star brand offers the lowdown on the EasyMe project and how designing together with Michael Howells was a successful and synergistic experience

'It all started with the Intimacy Portland project with Christiane Millinger in autumn 2017. I flew all the way from Berlin to Portland, Oregon. My goal was to visit various homes of friends and clients of Christiane to scout the locations for our big Intimacy shot in May 2018—the first one in the US.

If you allow life and even business to move and develop with an open heart, it starts to become like a free jazz performance—at the right moment the right people enter the scene and add what is needed to create excellent flow.

I might have met Michael before this during one of my visits to Christiane Millinger's rug store, as an architect he often pops in with a client or sometimes only to talk about hand-knotted rugs. I could see from the beginning, this was—and for sure now will be—one of his favourite interior items to help bring individuality into a client's home.

Michael started to send me modified pictures he shot in nature and converted these landscapes into rug patterns. We started an aesthetic discussion about the meaning of pattern and their ability to guide movement or to create atmosphere, for resting areas to serve their purpose. Michael and I can both be very obsessive about a visual discussion, so we are talking about the beginning of a long process. The first *EasyMe* designs were the result of one year's communication. Around October 2018, Michael made a decision, changed his technique and took his first digital brushstroke on a digital canvas. Within two weeks he had created the full collection.

Architects—which we both are—never come up with something easy. There is always a long process of consideration, but usually the final results appear easily. Sharing the same profession, the same ability to discuss, all these very personal details led me to seal our cooperation with the collection name EasyMe.

In November 2018 I started to transform Michael's digital drawings into functional graphs for Persian weave in 9/9 knot count. Most designs are 100% wool while for some we mix wool and silk. In the end you can see that they all work perfectly in interior spaces, as an architectural mind set up the artwork. I think this is the connecting link between Michael's collection and the artwork I create as Rug Star.

Production started on fast looms in Jaipur, north India, as we were aiming for an early summer exhibition in Christiane Millinger's gallery on Portland's Lovejoy Street. I invited Michael to join me in April to visit the production, so he could learn more about the hand-knotted rug directly at source.

On that journey I also took Berlin-based photographer Carolin Saage with me to Jaipur. With Carolin I developed the campaign KingsRobe, which before then had only been shot in Berlin. I had in mind to extend this campaign and shoot directly in the village of the weavers, to involve and to talk visually about where the rugs had been produced. We wrapped Michael, myself and the weavers into the rugs, and in the background of the images you can often see the original loom on which the specific rug was knotted. It was hot, very hot, maybe 47 degree Celsius and to have a rug of 35 kilograms on your shoulders is not easy, besides the fact that models must not sweat. Despite this, it was a highlight and I will never forget the joy we brought to the village that day. Our weavers clapped their hands and were full of excitement, everybody was asking to come in-front of the camera. We were a very joyful team and left with many beautiful memories.

www.rugstar.com



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01 *EasyMe 01 Original*, Michael Howells for Rug Star, 100% wool, 9/9 Persian weave produced in Jaipur

02 Rug designer Jürgen Dahlmanns, rug retailer Christiane Millinger and architect Michael Howells in front of *EasyMe 05 Original* during the opening of the exhibition 'Color is my DNA' at Millinger's gallery in Portland in June 2019



Photo: Laurie Black

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Christiane Millinger

The EasyMe Collection is the result of Portland-based rug retailer, Christiane Millinger, bringing the two great minds of Rug Star's Jürgen Dahlmanns and architect Michael Howells together. Here she discusses the collection and her involvement with Rug Star's Intimacy Portland photography project that features EasyMe

How it has been being involved in the development of the EasyMe collection?

Michael is my client. He is an independent architect who also offers interior design to his clients. He is interested in all things art and beauty and it was a natural extension of his creativity to develop some rug designs, informed by many years of learning about and loving art. It was a fortuitous moment when Michael and Jürgen met here at my store. The collaboration happened because my good friend Jürgen was excited to develop these rugs with us. He and Michael went to India to visit the looms, which only deepened Michael's love for rugs. I am thrilled by the patterns of the collection; a celebration of colour, a bold homage to Bauhaus and Mondrian. Personally, I enjoyed introducing these rugs to the world here in my gallery in Portland. We hosted a marvellous party in June.

How did you find working on Intimacy Portland?

To be honest I had absolutely no idea how much work this was going to be! I thought by organising five homes, a good photographer, enough staff, a bed and entertainment for Jürgen I had done my work. Not quite. I still had to run my small business and we had very intense, long work days in each home. Jürgen does not take style and work lightly; he demanded our full attention and concentration. I also had to keep my clients' and friends' interests in mind, as we completely re-arranged their homes. All in all, it was a huge task and I could not be more proud of the end result. Seeing Jürgen's rugs in spaces gives you a much better understanding of how rugs can be more than a floor covering; they are art; desirable, provocative and inspiring.

www.christianemillinger.com



Photo: Carolin Saage

04

03 IntimacyChicago, Home Tom K., featuring design EasyMe 05 Original. Shot by Laurie Black, summer 2019 in Chicago

04 KingsRobe campaign shot in the village of the weavers. Michael Howells with the producers of EasyMe—brothers Rajesch and Rakesh Agarwal. Shot by Carolin Saage in May 2019 in Rajasthan



Photo: Laurie Black

▶ IntimacyPortland featuring design EasyMe 04 Original. Interior shot by Laurie Black in spring 2018



◀ IntimacyPortland featuring design *EasyMe 06 Original*, wool/silk mix in 9/9 Persian weave produced in Jaipur



05

05 *EasyMe 07 Original*, 100% wool, 9/9 Persian weave produced in Jaipur

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I think rugs are a language, like works of art. Most people don't speak the language, it's something one has to learn

How did the design process go, and is this how you tend to work on all your projects?

When I met Jürgen we really hit it off and I couldn't resist showing him some of the landscape images. He was encouraging, which led me to begin to send him things on a regular basis. When I started doing the designs that became EasyMe, he was really enthusiastic, which further encouraged me. Each design was done in a fairly short space of time on my iPad using a drawing programme called Procreate. I got onto it because I knew David Hockney had done things on an iPad.

How did your architecturally trained mind help with designing a rug?

I would say it flowed more out of my background in fine arts. I have been interested in abstract painting all my life and this was me channelling all that seeing. People like Howard Hodgkin, Joan Mitchell, Arnulf Rainer etc. Because these were 'rug designs', I didn't feel the intimidation factor around trying to make an abstract painting in 2019.

Did you enjoy visiting the production site and learning more about hand-knotting?

To say the least. I have travelled a fair bit but had never been to India. This became a wonderful opportunity to go. Visiting the production site and interacting with the producers was magical. It was a gift (to me), really, to be there. It's mind-boggling what goes into the making of a hand-knotted rug, and I have nothing but the deepest respect for the artisans responsible.

How did you find wearing the rugs for the KingsRobe photoshoot?

Very painful! But it's a brilliant way that Jürgen has come up with for conveying the texture and presence of a rug through photography. The flat rug shots obviously have their role to play, but the KingsRobe shots really add something.

What are your reflections on the final EasyMe collection, and will you be designing more rug collections?

The whole project has been a humbling thing to be a part of. Any creative person couldn't help but be thrilled with the opportunity. The rugs turned out beautifully, and that's down to Christiane's encouragement and Jürgen's vision and risk taking. And yes, I absolutely will be designing more rugs. Christiane's and Jürgen's inboxes are jammed with further ideas already!

www.howell sarc.com

Michael Howells

Portland-based architect Michael Howells is the designer behind the EasyMe Collection. For the project, he travelled to India with Jürgen Dahlmanns to see the rugs in production and take part in Rug Star's KingsRobe photoshoot, for which Dahlmanns, Howells and the weavers wore the rugs

When and why did your fascination with rugs first start?

It has built over time, over the life (ten years) of my independent practice as an architect. Because I specialise in residential work, inevitably I end up helping some clients with furnishings. Once I started looking at rugs, a fairly instantaneous passion rose up. As I learn more, the fascination increases.

Do you think that rug design is often deemed unimportant or overlooked when spaces are designed?

I think rugs are a language, like works of art. Most people don't speak the language, it's something one has to learn. But I have found it's very easy to get people interested, both because passion is contagious and because rugs are so easy to like.

How did you decide to create your own rug collection?

In getting to know—and learn from—Christiane Millinger, I inevitably started internally speculating about what kind of image or design might make a good rug. It began with photographs, abstractions from nature that I would send her and that she liked. That led us to gradually start talking about a project.