



Not All Rugs Are Square

From earliest childhood I have wanted to be an artist. My inspiration is drawn from childhood memories of walks in the woods, hikes in the mountains, and canoe trips over lakes and rivers throughout New England. In more recent years, the Adirondack Mountains have become a place of both physical and spiritual renewal for me.

Irregularly shaped hooked pieces—why not?

BY LIZ ALPERT FAY
Photography by Brad Stanton

Tree Skirt: Tail Feathers, 29" x 29" x 16", hand-cut wool and chenille yarn on linen with found wood. Designed and hooked by Liz Alpert Fay, Sandy Hook, Connecticut, 2013.

A chokecherry tree, native to this part of Connecticut, was the first to capture my imagination. I knew the turkeys would miss this tree, as they feasted on its berries in the dead of winter. The wood was so beautiful that I brought it into my new studio, peeled off the bark and used it to create a few sculptures.





Tree Skirt: Inside Looking Out, 19" x 36" x 40", recycled, cut, felted, and hooked cashmere sweaters on linen with found wood and reclaimed brass wheels. Designed and hooked by Liz Alpert Fay, Sandy Hook, Connecticut, 2013.

Nature can have profound negative effects on our lives. I've had recurrences of Lyme disease many times over the past few years, and the fear of yet another tick bite sometimes keeps me indoors. Being inside on a beautiful day feels incredibly confining. To ease my frustration, I designed my own rustic seat by the window. Instead of grass between my toes, I can now treat my feet by wiggling them in cashmere!





Tall Trees, 89½" x 109" (installation size), recycled and hand-dyed wool on linen. Designed and hooked by Liz Alpert Fay, Sandy Hook, Connecticut, 2013.

Another series entitled "Tall Trees" began in 2011. Here, I want to learn more about the variety of trees I am working with, and to visually interpret how I feel in the presence of these majestic trees. The pieces in this series comment on our relationship as humans to our surroundings, and the personalities I see in both man and nature—both real and imagined!

Just like people, some trees demand attention, while others are content to remain in the background.

For several years I have been creating mixed media sculptures that enable me to combine found objects with my textile work. These found objects are gathered in the outdoors and at local flea markets.

In 2006, when preparations began for the construction of my new studio, we had to cut down some of the mature trees. It was then that I realized how we felt about those trees. They were precious to us, and losing them was like losing old friends. We made a conscious decision to not waste the wood from these trees and to incorporate it into our lives.

This was the beginning of my working three-dimensionally and I found it exciting. As I worked and experimented, I could not keep up with my ideas, and so began the "Tree Skirt" series, which is still ongoing today. Each piece in the series celebrates the beauty of the natural world and expresses my concerns for our dwindling natural resources, especially the trees. By surrounding ordinary pieces of wood with textile "skirts," I am isolating these pieces of wood and asking the viewer to take another look. My intention is to showcase the beauty in nature, which may be overlooked in our everyday

lives. Observe closely, and clues to the meaning behind each sculpture can be found in the surrounding skirt.

To recreate the feeling of walking deep in the woods, these sculptures are displayed on large, circular pedestals close to the ground. In this way they are observed from above as you navigate between them.

I carry my camera everywhere I go and use my photos as reminders of what I have seen. Sometimes it's the unusual combination of colors, an interesting shape, or beautiful pattern that catches my eye. The positive and negative shapes created by branches of trees, the ever-changing colors of leaves, and the annual rings which so beautifully tell the life story of each tree, interest me. When I create an artwork inspired by something I have seen, it's rarely a literal translation. I express my experiences abstractly and portray my own vision of the world.

My formal training is in textile design and I like to experiment using many different techniques. I'm curious about the old way of doing things and intrigued by techniques that are almost forgotten. I enjoy learning these old skills and try to keep them alive and relevant by incorporating them into my own work in a contemporary way.

The organic shapes in my hooked art echo those found in nature. My approach is intuitive. I draw from images stored in my mind while trying to convey a thought or a feeling. I find the clearer my intention is, the more successful the finished piece will be.



Sycamore Trees: The Human Connection, 102" x 102" x 36", recycled and hand-dyed wool on linen with sycamore branches; three-dimensional arm with hand is wool stuffed with polyester batting and needlefelted with wool fleece. Designed and hooked by Liz Alpert Fay, Sandy Hook, Connecticut, 2013.

The American sycamore tree is easily distinguished from other trees by its bark. Because it lacks elasticity and cannot stretch to accommodate growth, the bark flakes off in irregular pieces, leaving the surface looking mottled. With increased age, these majestic trees become rough and scaly at the base and the patterning disappears. High above, however, where there is new growth, each branch displays its own unique pattern.

The soft angles of the branches and the rounded protrusions of growth resemble the human form.

Liz Alpert Fay is a full-time studio artist with a degree in Textile Design. She is co-chair and artistic director of Newtown Hooked Art Shows (www.NewtownHookedArtShows.com) where she actively promotes innovation in the work of contemporary hooking artists and produces annual juried shows. She is planning future exhibitions of her own work, consisting of hooked art pieces and mixed media sculpture. To see more of her work, visit www.LizAlpertFay.com.

Tree Skirt: Moss and Lichen Series #1, 23" x 27" x 1 1/2",
hand-cut wool and nylon on linen with found wood, gesso, and paint.
Designed and hooked by Liz Alpert Fay, Sandy Hook, Connecticut, 2013.

To be fully appreciated, *Tree Skirt: Moss and Lichen Series #1* requires not only close observation, but that the viewer walks completely around the piece. The painting on the wood changes from one side to the other, and would be missed if only viewed from one perspective. And the skirt must be seen up close in order to appreciate the small bits of brilliant color not evident from a distance.

Here I am recalling the feeling of discovery and surprise when coming across the unexpected. When we walk through the woods we have to watch our steps in order to avoid tripping over exposed roots and loose stones. This focused concentration gives us the opportunity to observe hidden surprises we might otherwise overlook. For example, clumps of delicate mushrooms or brilliantly colored lichen may be nestled in the moss at the base of a tree. These might go unobserved if we look straight ahead instead of gazing downward.



I am often asked how I finish the edges of these organic shapes. I don't have one set method, but rather use whatever seems appropriate for each piece. In general, I stitch twice with a zigzag stitch around the outside edges of the hooking. Then I decide the best way to proceed.

Sometimes I will whipstitch a cord around the edge and then finish the back with binding tape—the same method I might use to finish the edge of a rug. Or I might just fold the edges under and stitch on the binding tape. I do clip the edges when going around curves, as I would in dressmaking.

In my new studio, I continue to be inspired by nature, its beauty, and all that I can learn from closely observing the natural world. As an artist, it is important to me to interpret the world from my own perspective, while encouraging others to find their own voices. **RHM**