

Island Weaves

Traditional Artistry, Alive & Well on Nantucket

By Kelly Knight | Photography by Zeldi Cahill

When Karin Sheppard was a young girl, she would accompany her mother, Lia Marks, to Nantucket Looms to deliver jackets that Lia had sewn from the shop's own hand-woven fabrics. It was during those visits that Karin developed a fascination with the looms and the weaving process. Since then, Karin spent 20 years in her early career perfecting her craft at Nantucket Looms, weaving everything from rugs to shawls to upholstery fabrics.

Eleven years ago Karin established her own business, Island Weaves, out of her home on Hooper Farm Road. What started out as a small studio has evolved into a thriving hub of fiber creation. In the basement of her home, and in the shanty behind her house, stand four looms of varying sizes. A second location at 15 Old South Wharf houses a fifth loom and a variety of Karin's woven items for sale.

The fibers Karin uses are soft and fine, but also inventive, sustainable and substantial. There is an elegant side to her work, for example: wraps of blended silk and merino, lightweight and drape-able, that are modeled after a wardrobe staple worn by women in Ireland. There are scarves and shawls woven from alpaca, silk, angora; blankets in mohair, cotton and chenille. There is also a fun side: the rugs that she fashions from recycled wool blankets, or towels (Madaket Mall Mats), or khaki pants, or jeans. She recently wove a piece from discarded Nantucket Reds pants - a project she hopes to repeat in the form of rugs or bags (provided she can amass a large enough quantity of the pants, which tend to remain with their owners until threadbare).



There is another aspect of her calling that brings fulfillment to Karin, and that is sharing her knowledge with others. Karin has taken on a good number of apprentices over the years, many of whom have gone on to open their own studios. She sees her South Wharf studio as a great forum for demonstrating her craft to the children and adults who wander in and often observe in amazement as she sits working at her loom, never before realizing that such a thing could be done by hand. That same sense of wonder often comes through from shoppers at Karin's table at the Sustainable Nantucket Farmers & Artisans Market. In fact, Karin credits a certain amount of her success and her ability to open the shop on South Wharf three years ago with her time spent as a Market vendor. Karin sees her business as an example of the Sustainable Nantucket mission in practice.

To hold one of Karin's woven pieces in one's hand is to hold some piece of island history, and traditions that are perhaps fading, interlaced with the passion and joy of the weaver. To own one of Karin's pieces is to weave these elements into the fabric of one's own life.

Island Weaves
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