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PROFILE

Scarves with soul

A textile designer gives the gift of warmth

Bolts of red and orange Italian virgin wool surround Hiroko Kurihara in the downstairs studio of her Oakland home. "This one is called Flow," says the up-and-coming textile designer, handling one of her scarves sewn in waves of blue and pale green. "It has to do with my own creative flow. I had to let this fabric speak for itself and trust myself in forging new ground as a business."

While a story lies behind most of Kurihara's pieces, the social philosophy of her business fires her passion for her work. She calls it the Blanket Shares Project: With every purchase, a scarf or blanket is donated to someone less fortunate, including the homeless, victims of domestic abuse, and youth getting off the streets. "This is a tangible way of feeling the warmth of giving," she says. "It's about building connections between people and their different lives."

Having grown up in New Jersey, Kurihara went to New York to get her start in the industry. But the Big Apple gave her a glimpse of more than just textiles. It was there that she met a homeless man living under her front stoop, and also became aware of the disturbing reality of sweatshops. Inspired to become politically active, she eventually moved to California, where she worked in housing and nonprofit community development before launching Hiroko Kurihara Designs in 2002.

"With my nonprofit background, there was no way I could start a business that was just about making money," she says. And with each blanket taking 6 to 10 hours to create, Kurihara is clearly focused on more important matters. "My mission is to build empathy for someone else's situation," she says. One blanket and scarf at a time. —MICHELLE LAU



Designer Hiroko Kurihara

INFO Hiroko Kurihara Designs (from \$240 for blankets, from \$128 for scarves; custom orders for the holidays by Dec 12; 510/384-3146; visit www.hirokokurihara.com for store locations or to schedule an appointment)