

Reviews

Basketry: A View from the Outer Edges

Seen outside of the context of the exhibit at St. Louis's Craft Alliance this spring, most of the sculptural baskets in "Exploring Along the Outer Edges" would be considered sculpture first, baskets second if at all. Yet all cling to the furthest boundaries of basketry whether by virtue of technique, materials, or form. With a two-show format, the works of some 28 innovators were exhibited alongside the vessels of 12 other transitional artists whose work was termed "Bridges, the path from traditional to sculptural basketry." This review will concentrate on the "Outer Edges" show.

St. Louis' Jane Sauer curated the exhibit. She succeeded in her goal of bringing the best avant garde basketmakers together in this exhibit, with the exception of her own work, which was missing. "The main ingredient in my choice was that each person had to really find his own voice and show consistency over time. They are each exploring some personal issue with passion, be it structure, social commentary, or human relations. My interest is to push toward the outer edge." In her honor, the most talented basketmakers working in the country today contributed their best and most recent work. Basketry's finest, both artists and collectors, gathered in St. Louis in March for the symposium that Sauer masterminded to accompany these two shows, including tours, speakers, and four other impressive exhibits at local galleries and museums: "Intimate Threads" at the Center for Contemporary Arts; "Material Transformed" at R. Duane Reed Gallery; "Contemporary Fiber from St. Louis Collections" at the St. Louis Art Museum; as well as "Fiber Focus" (a regional juried exhibition) and "Homage: Inspirational Leaders in Regional Fiber Arts" (covering the years 1970 through 1980).

The sculptural baskets fall into several categories, depending upon how many of the characteristics of

traditional basketry they employ. One group has no formal or functional relation to basketry, yet uses traditional materials and techniques. These works are huge, far beyond basket scale. They include two huge abstract sculptures by Linda Kelly—arresting, hulking shapes standing six-and-a-half feet made of plaited reed. Although they are lightweight and hollow, they have an incredible presence, like the great silent stones of Brittany or Stonehenge.

Barbara Cooper's abstract **Plexus**, also huge, bursts with life and femininity, allying it to the classical metaphor for the basket as female vessel. And Claire Campbell Park's **Patience**, a great coil of raffia, looks like a flourish of cursive handwriting in space.

While this first group of artists create sculpture with the materials and techniques of basketry, the next group use original methods and materials to create works that retain the vessel

awkward deformation of a basket. It is about containment, with a handle and a hole, yet the pieces are separate and detached so they are virtually nonfunctional. In shape it resembles a hand and an arm holding fingers together to enclose and cup space.

Dorothy Gill Barnes' pieces hang on the wall and look more like primitive musical instruments than baskets. Yet they include a container, an interior space with an opening into it, however small and hidden. Her large untitled wall hanging is ripe with contradiction. Made of the most rigid material, wood and bark, its overall effect is soft and flowing.

Hideho Tanaka creates gourdlike shapes more similar in form to a basket than anything discussed so far. Made of a jillion interlaced wires, they are completely permeated by air, yet they are not functional for they have no hole large enough to put things inside. Tanaka sees them in terms of "philosophy from China—how to disappear, how to appear. I am searching for the vanishing point. I build, cover with paper fiber, burn into it. Wood gives birth to fire, fire gives birth to earth (ashes). It is about transformation: earth, air, fire, metal."

Like Tanaka, Jerry Bleem, a Franciscan friar, creates sculpture very like a basket in form. All of his pieces have openings, but his materials and method are unique. Bleem uses staples as the only means of connecting the parts. The staples cover infinite bits of cardboard or exposed film, anything "ordinary, nonprecious, discarded, found," like a fur. The end result of this rough, rigid, disparate, shaggy technique is a swelling, bulbous shape, like the abstract sculpture of Arp, anthropomorphic, yet not identifiably human.

John Garrett makes the most conventional looking vessels of all: garden-variety basket shapes—until you look up close and their materials shock you. **Banana Skin Basket** is made of dried banana skins



Carol Eckert's *The Fish Ceremony*, 1994; cotton and wire; 8 by 9 by 6 inches. Photo: courtesy the artist.

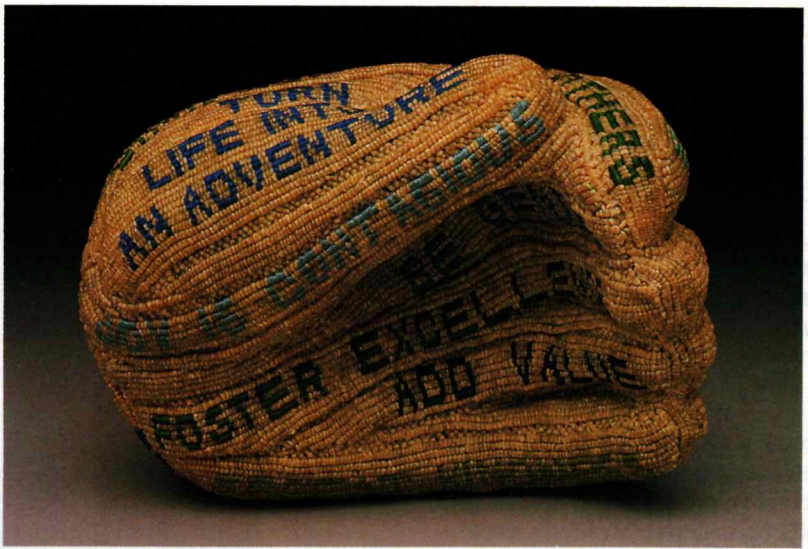
form. John McQueen sews pieces of bark together so the surface is ridged and webbed. His six-foot-long untitled piece snakes across the floor, an

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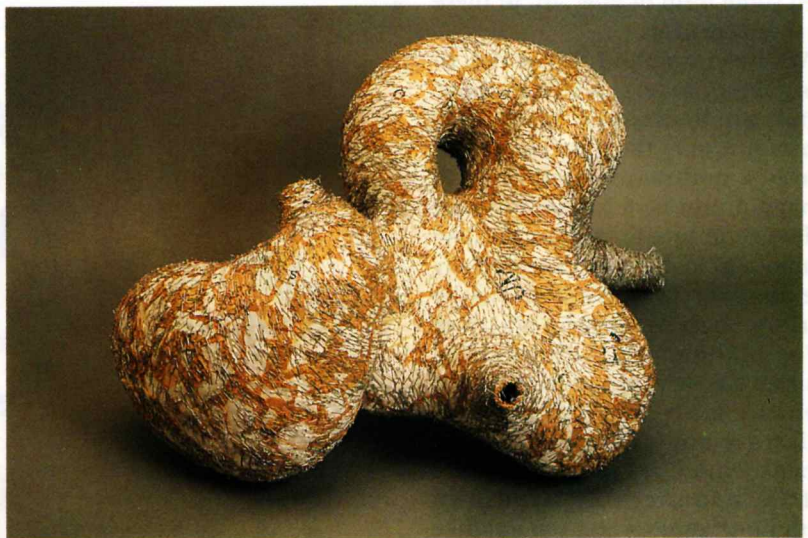
stitched together with copper wire. This radical technique has the painterly look of thick impasto brush strokes. Best of all is the allegorical piece, *Folly Basket No. 4: Failure (Addiction, Gluttony and Violence)*. The Hieronymus Bosch of basketry, this comfortable, conventional shape bristles with a thousand tiny parts, all plasticized into a whole. A close look reveals the horrific merger of toy soldiers, hypodermic needles, and a plague of grasshoppers.

Garrett's work, containers of unusual means and materials intending to serve up a pun or some other literary meaning, introduces a third group of basketmakers who use fairly conventional techniques with the goal of conveying content. California artist Leah Danberg covers her pieces with words. The three-part series started with a meditation on World War II. The "hands" in her works tell a psychological cycle from passivity to activity to nurturing.

Judy Mulford uses gourds for the structure of her containers executed in knotless netting. Each is a functional vessel that the artist calls "a nest, a womb, a secret." While this is a classical metaphorical interpretation of a basket, Mulford drives her point



Leah Danberg's *Nurture the Flame*; waxed linen and cotton; 5 by 6-1/2 by 3-3/4 inches. Photo: George Post. Below: Jerry Bleem's *Breathe*; corrugated cardboard; 13-1/2 by 26 by 15 inches. Photo: courtesy the artist. Left: Barbara Cooper's *Plexus*; wood; 81 by 20 by 19 inches. Photo: Dean Jacobson.



home with rich, symbolic details: old photographs, lots of pockets with tiny ceramic babies, scales of rusted bottle caps, antique buttons, and words.

Carol Eckert's pieces always include at least one container, although her conglomerations of creatures sometimes obscure it. Like Mulford, she includes a female aspect of her imagery and her message. Her coiled baskets create parades and piles of beasts in incredibly attractive compositions. The animals have symbolic resonance. For instance, Eckert explains that her crows "in the Middle Ages were the symbol of everything wrong with women." Her wolves and wild dogs recall "childhood fears and fairy tales." Most pieces combine animals with good and bad symbolism; for instance, storks, representing fertility and the bearing of gifts, are combined with alligators, reptiles repre-

sending evil and loathsome qualities in ancient cultures.

Craft Alliance's "Exploring Along the Outer Edges" has brought together new directions in sculptural basketry. These works have presence. No matter how sculptural their appearance, they are firmly grounded in the basketry tradition for they always maintain clear reference to the craft, however slight. While most of the artists explore structural issues, all are deeply concerned with such metaphors as the cyclical, transformation, feminine dynamism, and interior versus exterior, classical concerns of basketry.

—Carol Ferring Shepley

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