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## PROGRESSIONAL JOURNEYS: COMPELLING NEW DIRECTIONS FOR THREE “NEW BASKETRY” ARTISTS

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This paper is based upon and dedicated to three amazing artists and their bodies of work which have inspired me immensely for many years now: Dorothy Gill Barnes, Kay Sekimachi, and Patricia Hickman. This paper is essentially derived from primary research material that was gleaned from Skype and telephone interviews with the artists by the author. The first criterion for selecting these specific women to interview was their major influence upon their peers during the “new basketry” movement, in conjunction with their intense commitment to material engagement in their work. In the end, however, these women were chosen due to the fact that all three are life-long learners who continue to forge along exciting trajectories with their art practices by engaging and blending techniques that they had mastered over the decades in new and exciting ways, often with materials that were new to them.

The first artist I will discuss is Dorothy Gill Barnes<sup>1</sup>. Barnes was born in 1927 in Strawberry Point, Iowa, and holds a BA and an MA in Art Education, both from the University of Iowa. She credits John Shulze from the University of Iowa, Ruth Mary Papenthein from Ohio State University and Ed Rossbach from the University of California, Berkeley with being her main artistic influences and mentors in her early years.

After studying painting, design and ceramics in Iowa and Columbus, Ohio, Barnes took her first weaving class with Ruth Mary Papenthein and after learning how to warp and use a loom, she began to work three dimensionally using tree bark shortly afterwards.

Gathering and cultivating her materials are of extreme importance to the artist, as Barnes may only gather bark from the trees from April until the end of July. Barnes believes in honoring the trees that she interacts with, and wants to have as minimal an impact upon it as possible when gathering bark. Similarly, to create her dendroglyphs, she will mark, draw or weave on a tree for six months to eight years before a diseased tree is cut down. She does not believe in taking or altering any material unless it will be destroyed due to natural causes, and is also very careful not to harvest too much of any living plant.

Barnes (and her late husband) lived in the same home in Ohio for the past 50 years, and a sense of place is incredibly important to her artwork, in terms of where the materials come from, and that they share with her a history with the land as well. To this day, whenever she hears a chainsaw, she hops on her bike to go and investigate what is coming down that day.

In 2004, Barnes was invited to become a Visiting Artist in the glass department at Ohio State University, and this invitation continues to be extended to her in 2009. She considers that when working with the students at Ohio State, she is involved in a collaboration that has resulted in glass becoming a major component in her current work. The artist also, at times, employs a wood-turner and a wood construction specialist at the school, in order to make her artistic visions a reality.

Once she became known as an artist who enjoyed collaborations in glass, Barnes was also invited to be an Artist in Residence at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington, and the Pilchuk Glass School in Stanwood, Washington. By mixing wood and tree bark with glass, this artist has covered new ground, and has begun to create compelling mixed-media works. For example, Barnes collaborated with Rowland

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<sup>1</sup>Dorothy Gill Barnes. Telephone interview with author. Columbia, Missouri, 27 September 2009.

Ricketts, who specializes in indigo dyeing, as well as with various Ohio State students, in order to complete a recent triptych that also included glass.

By the end of our interview, I had learned that Dorothy has exhibited her work in seventeen group and solo exhibitions since 2000, which include local, regional and international exhibitions, such as From Lausanne to Beijing: The International Tapestry Art Exhibition in 2000. To say Dorothy is a dynamo would be an understatement, as I could hardly keep up with the exhibitions, honors, residencies and new opportunities that she already has in the works for the future.

Kay Sekimachi<sup>2</sup> is the next artist that I had the pleasure of interviewing. Sekimachi was born in San Francisco, California in 1926. Her artistic training includes courses at the California College of Arts and Crafts, and the Berkeley Adult School. Sekimachi considers her mentors and artistic influences to be Jack Lenor Larsen, for whom she was the teaching assistant one summer at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, and Trude Guermonprez, whom she heard speak at Pond Farm, and later studied with. She was also involved with local weaving guilds and studios, such as Ahrens Studio, where she spent time as an apprentice.

When weaving, Sekimachi developed a keen sense for materials including linen, which she determined was the perfect fiber to use for creating her double weave book series and her woven boxes. Similarly, after being given samples of nylon monofilament, she realized it was the right material to employ to create her sculptural eight harness woven art works, as it would allow the viewer to see through the woven layers, yet it was stiff enough to hold its shape while hanging in space.

Sekimachi began to create paper bowls, in order to further explore sculptural work that could be constructed without a loom. Once she had mastered her basic technique, which usually employed a base of Japanese (kozo) paper, she then came to add such diverse materials as hornet's nest paper, sent to her from Canada, flax fibers, and skeleton leaves. Sekimachi used a specific form or mold for each bowl that aptly suited the materials from which it was made.

Sekimachi's late husband, Bob Stocksdale, was also an artist, a wood turner who created spectacular pieces from trees and their component parts. His skills with wood allowed him to assist her - when she was looking for a perfect mold, she would describe it to him, and he would create it for her.

Sekimachi would find materials she uses in her work during her travels, or she would be gifted her raw materials by others, who knew she could truly create magnificent work with them. Her current artistic practice involves the creation of jewelry, created as Sekimachi's skills with fibers blend together with organic materials from the ocean. She and Stocksdale stayed a month in Hawaii in the same location for 20 years, allowing them to notice the changes in sea life over time, and to collect treasures and shells from their winter hideaway.

Smaller in scale than her large scale weavings, and smaller still than her bowls of paper and leaves, the necklaces and tiny sculptures she creates have a sense of preciousness about them. A sense of place plays a huge role in Sekimachi's work as well, as she often would create works that referenced her surroundings. For example, while at Haystack, she created a small tapestry that referenced the pines and rocks found in her environs. She has also created specific works in response to her stay in other locations such as Santa Fe, New Mexico and New Jersey.

Many of the necklaces, jewelry pieces and tiny baskets Sekimachi creates incorporate shells, coral, driftwood and other materials, as well as fibers using a similar technique to those which were used to create camel girths, known as split-ply twining and braiding. She has been quite successful with this

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<sup>2</sup> Kay Sekimachi. Telephone interview with author. Columbia, Missouri, 4 October 2009.

work, exhibiting it in galleries and selling it at the Velvet da Vinci Gallery in San Francisco. Sekimachi and her new jewelry work were featured in the October/ November 2010 issue of *American Craft*.<sup>3</sup>

The final artist I have selected to examine in detail is Patricia (Pat) Hickman<sup>4</sup>, the outgoing president of the Textile Society of America. Hickman was born in 1941 in Fort Morgan, Colorado. She has received a BA in Humanities, from the University of Colorado, Boulder, as well as an MA in Design and Textiles, from the University of California, Berkeley. Her artistic influences and mentors include Lillian Elliott, with whom Hickman worked collaboratively with for 11 years, an unusual occurrence in the Fibers realm. Her former teacher, Elliott, would create a structure and Hickman, who had begun working with pig intestine, would cover it, providing the sculptural form with a skin. The artists would then critique the work together. Hickman's other major influences include Ed Rossbach, with whom she studied at UC Berkeley, and Joanne Segal Brandford, with whom she studied and shared a studio with in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

As mentioned, Hickman became enamored of working with pig intestine after seeing some walrus gut parkas in an exhibition curated by Anne Wilson. Following this, she began her own investigation into how to transform and manipulate animal intestines herself. In terms of other materials she employed, Hickman for the most part purchased her other basketry and organic materials from a store close to UC Berkeley, where both Elliott and Rossbach also got their materials. There were many organic items readily available and pre-packaged, so that they did not need to go back to nature to get/find the same materials, unlike Sekimachi or Barnes, for whom obtaining their materials is most definitely part of the allure of working with them.

Always interested in textile/fiber history as well as practice, Hickman has curated exhibitions, taught textile history courses and written exhibition catalogues, as well as travelling the world and learning about ancient and diverse textile traditions in other countries.

Following her time in Berkeley, Hickman was offered a position teaching at the University of Hawaii, where she remained for over 15 years. The material culture on this series of islands was very different to what she was accustomed to on the coast, and it took some time to acclimatize to both the materials and the cultural implications of research and teaching in this new environs. It was towards the end of her time at the University of Hawaii that Hickman was commissioned to design and create the gates of the cultural centre in Maui. It was prior to this commission that Hickman had begun to mix media, adding metal components to her organic sculptural work. This has continued and currently she is heavily experimenting with the use of oxidized metal or rust, which pushes the content of her work in new directions.

Following her time in Hawaii, Hickman moved to Haverstraw, New York, a small town along the Hudson River with a rich textile heritage. Her studio is currently in what used to be a calico factory. Although collecting materials herself had not played a large role in her work, a sense of place has always been strongly referenced in Pat's work, whether using local materials, such as palm fronds in Hawaii, or rusted metal industrial parts found in the calico factory and surrounding areas.

Now that she has retired from full time teaching, Hickman has a large studio in which to focus on her artwork, and plenty of artistic inspiration close at hand, as she lives less than an hour away from New York City. Her explorations with rusted metals and animal intestine are becoming much more elaborate and successful over time. Alongside a relatively new place of residence, Hickman has also begun to meet

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<sup>3</sup> Bishop, Deborah. "Weaving the Sea." *American Craft* 70, no.5 [2010]: 42-49.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Hickman. Skype interview with author. Columbia, Missouri, 22 September 2009.

and make connections with artists, researchers and curators in New York City, resulting in increased opportunities to exhibit her work over the past several years. These opportunities also come together to allow her to create larger installation works.

As you can see, all three of the artists I had the pleasure of interviewing had much in common, especially their love for and their sensibilities with their materials, and their strong grounding in traditional textile techniques, which has given them the freedom to push their work into new areas, of glass, beach detritus, and local and industrial metals.

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