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## Bringing Fiber to Art and Art to Fiber

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NEW

*DIRECTIONS: Examining the Past,  
Creating the Future.*

## Bringing Fiber to Art and Art to Fiber

Jo Stealey

As witnessed by the presentations of Catherine Hunter and Patricia Malarcher today, Lillian Elliott and Joanne Segal Brandford were two artists who were instrumental in the development of the contemporary basketry movement. They along with Ed Rossbach, Pat Hickman and a number of other now well-known artists, raised awareness of the potential of the techniques that could be utilized to create sculptural baskets. These artists, along with a many others were the movers and shakers of one of two art movements that began on US soil (the other was Abstract Expressionism and there is a debate among some historians whether it actually began in the US or not).

In the early years of the basketry movement (the late 1960s) the use of traditional techniques with non-traditional materials (John Garrett) and non-traditional techniques with traditional materials (Gyonky Laky) had an explosive impact on textile artists, which in turn influenced all textile media. As a result of this event and the many artists who have followed in the footsteps of Elliot and Brandford, contemporary basketry has spread beyond the realm of baskets and entered into the art world at large in a little over fifty years.

The use of fiber to create sculptural basketry began with the first and second generation of basketmakers, and has contributed to the acceptance of fiber as art today. Artists of this movement were instrumental in the blurring of lines that historically defined drawing, painting and sculpture. Basketry techniques and materials were utilized by artists in inventive ways so that today a painting can be integrated into the weaving of sculptural form (Jane Sauer) a line drawing in space (Marku Kosonan) could be a basket, or an imitative still life could be made from basket materials (John McQueen). Sculpture is no longer defined by traditional metal objects, but can be made from any material such as cloth (Kay Khan) reed (Richard Goodwin) zippers, scotch tape and lentils or just about anything that can be manipulated to create form (Jan Hopkins).

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, contemporary basketry artists also defined how a process or material itself could become a language and contribute to the overall meaning and visual impact of the object (Karyl Sisson). As a result artists who consider themselves to be associated with the contemporary basketry movement as well as many who do not define themselves as basketmakers incorporate elements of the basketry movement into their work.

Because of these innovators, the field of basketry continues to evolve: it now defies definition. The growth in styles and approaches to sculptural basketry has been so rapid it is difficult to pinpoint what is a basket. The field has been pushed in every possible direction causing it to expand to a point where labels such as "basketry" or "textile construction" are very open as seen in the work of Lanny Bergner. Polly Ullrich (2006) suggested an object could be referred to as a basket simply because of the application of particular techniques or historical connections or the fact that it contains "space" or alludes to containment in some fashion.

As a result of all these influences, the predictions of Elliot and Brandford have become reality; the use of basketry materials, techniques and precepts of the first generation of the basketry movement have become ubiquitous to the field of sculpture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and has had far reaching implications within and outside the world of baskets. Four examples of artists whose work illustrate this premise are Ann Coddington Rast and Nathalie Miebach who align their work with textiles; and Rigo 23 and Janet Echelman who suggest how basketry has permeated the art world at large.

### **Ann Coddington Rast**

Ann Coddington Rast is an artist who aligns herself with the basketry movement but works within a larger narrative to push the boundaries of basketry into large-scale narrative sculpture. However, Rast explores the techniques of basketry in new ways. There is still a reference to “basket”, but the form of the work is used to further concepts and address ideas of memory and the fine line between physical and emotional states. Coddington Rast chooses her materials and techniques based on their ability to achieve her intended forms. She also, purposefully intends for the whole to be stronger than each part. When a body of work is viewed as a whole, the installation is poetically narrative from a variety of physical and psychological points of view that each piece when viewed in isolation does not reveal. It is this element that makes her work distinctive.

“Endless Sky” was an exhibition at the Sheldon Art Galleries in St. Louis, MO in 2009, and explored “. . . the incredible beauty and variety of the sky, how it is a metaphor for moods and feelings, from hope to fear, happiness to danger.” As a child, Coddington Rast equated the sky with infinity and was terrified by the concept. Her techniques – twining and random weaving, and materials – waxed linen and reed were used to create metaphors for human feelings and experiences. In this exhibition she explored dichotomies such as: the known and unknown, strength and fragility, ephemeral and eternal, masculine and feminine, life and death.

Three sculptures from the exhibition highlight these ideas. *Looking Up* speaks to the act of observation – which is a gestural stance that in this work inspires a similar involuntary action from the viewer. Two heads are realistically twined in wax linen and dominate the ghostlike grid drapery of the bodies. They are haunting and reference memory while simultaneously corporeal and ever-present.

Another work, *Dark Clouds* uses techniques of randomly woven reed to create sculptural forms at once fragile and solid. This piece suggests foreboding dark shapes that seem to ignore or penetrate the spatial boundaries of the gallery walls. They are the precursors to storm, if not the storm itself. *Looming*, on the other hand, explores the notion of presence and absence, visible and invisible. This floor to ceiling tornado-like form also makes reference to natural forces like the wind, which is invisible, yet can be incredibly destructive or delicately ethereal.

Coddington Rast often utilizes birds in her work as metaphors for a variety of ideas. For her, birds symbolize ultimate freedom, symbiotic relationships, and can serve as a portent for misfortune. In *Longing*, the series of pieces creates a paradox – the individual birds are caught, captured, and separated from the flock, providing a metaphor for the estrangement from

community and sense of isolation. She summarizes her intention eloquently for “Endless Sky” when she states: *My art is my voice, more than my words, and in my work, feeling overshadows knowing.*

Coddington Rast illustrates how a series of “sculptural baskets” build one upon the other to narrate the whole story. Each piece has merit on its own, but it is the installation of the entire body of work that reveals the nuances of the chosen concept – fear and wonder between the material and ethereal worlds. Each piece becomes a chapter that reveals another aspect of the whole story.

## **Nathalie Miebach**

Nathalie Miebach is a well-known artist who works sculpturally within the field of basketry. Her work focuses on the intersection of art and science and the visual articulation of scientific observations. She literally incorporates scientific data related to astronomy, ecology and meteorology into woven sculptures. On the surface the objects and installations appear playful and game-like. There is even a bit of a Dr. Seuss magic to them. It is through this whimsical, playful approach that Miebach draws the viewer toward her more serious intentions. Her mission is to expand the visual vocabulary of scientific data, moving far beyond charts and graphs to study weather patterns and climate change via viewer immersion with her installations and objects.

By utilizing artistic processes and everyday materials, she questions and expands the boundaries through which scientific data has been traditionally translated. Simultaneously, she suggests that scientific data and visual art can be synonymous and create powerful sculpture and meaning. Subliminally, the work even suggests the viewer question the connections between science and art.

Her chosen method to illustrate her concepts is basket weaving because it provides her with a simple, yet highly effective grid through which to interpret data in three-dimensional space. By staying true to the data used as the basis for the sculptures, these woven pieces tread an uneasy divide. They function as sculptures as well as instruments that could be used in the actual environment from which the data originates, as well as a whimsical visual playground. *Changing Waters* looks at the meteorological and oceanic interactions within the Gulf of Maine. Using data from NOAA and GOMOSS buoys within the Gulf of Maine, as well as weather stations along the coast, this piece explores the seasonal variations of marine life through a colorful swirl of carefully plotted woven sections.

In another recent project, *Recoding and Translating Climate Change*, she gathered weather observations from specific ecosystems using simple data-collecting devices. The numbers were then compared to historical global meteorological trends, before being translated into sculpture. Through the examination of the behavioral interactions of historical and current weather patterns, she hopes to gain a better understanding of the complex systems and behaviors that make up weather and climate change. Currently, she is also translating the data into musical scores, which are then interpreted through collaborations with musicians as well as sculptures.

Coddington Rast and Miebach are examples of artists who have pushed the boundaries of the basketry movement. There are also many artists who use basketry materials and/or techniques to further conceptual issues in their work but do not identify themselves with the basketry movement. Two of them are discussed. These artists, along with many others contribute to the plethora of work that has blurred the definition of “what is a basket” and illustrate how basketry has influenced the contemporary art world.

## **Rigo 23**

Rigo 23 is a well-known conceptual Brazilian artist who resides in San Francisco, CA. For him basketry became the basis for a global approach to environmental art through an innovative project organized by the international conservation organization RARE and sponsored through the Berkley Art Museum, Pacific Film Archive, and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. He was invited along with 7 other artists to participate in *Human/Nature* a pioneering artist residency and collaborative exhibition project that used contemporary art to investigate the relationships between fragile natural environments and the human communities that depend upon them. The philosophy of the project was to help Americans understand these communities in order to develop stronger ties between cultures and the environment. The ultimate goal was to affect awareness and ultimately change how we consider at risk environments and indigenous cultures.

This collaborative multi-year exhibition project sent Rigo 23 and each of the other artists to eight UNESCO World Heritage sites around the globe to create new work informed and inspired by their experiences in these diverse cultural and natural regions. The resulting exhibition, *Human/Nature: Artists Respond to a Changing Planet*, featured new commissioned, site-specific work created in response to their travels to these threatened sites.

For his contribution to the project, Rigo 23 chose to return to his native Brazil to work and collaborate with 3 Mata Atlantica communities in the southeast. The craftivist project he envisioned utilized the craft traditions of these communities - particularly basketry and woodcarving. Following his first visit and many discussions with members of the Mata Atlantica communities, Rigo created a working plan to use the techniques and materials of the region to build replicas of contemporary weapons like those manufactured in the Bay area. As Rigo explained, “the idea behind using the traditional crafts of the Mata Atlântica is to create something completely alien to (their) culture, that is, weapons of mass destruction. In this way, I hope to highlight the contradiction between the usual practice of encouraging native populations to preserve their environment (and the fact that) developed countries exploit the world’s natural resources to sustain their own, often destructive, lifestyle.”

During the four return trips Rigo made to the communities, his original idea grew and changed in response to his collaborators’ involvement and input. Each community contributed materials, craft methods, and objects to the final works, and in the end more than a hundred community members were directly involved in the creation of the two sculptures, *Sapukay—Cry for Help*, a representation of a cluster bomb, and *Teko Mbarate—Struggle for Life*, a replica of a nuclear submarine. In the process, instruments of death were transformed into celebrations of life and its diversity. The submarine holds a crew of carved, brightly clothed submariners that include

women and children as well as men, an idea proposed by one of the community members. In place of destructive bomblets, spilling out from the cluster bomb are wooden figurines carved in the likeness of rainforest animals. Just as Rigo and the indigenous communities were able to transform weapons into art, the ambition of *Human/Nature* is to transform attitudes, practices, and ultimately, the state of the planet.

The *Human/Nature* project is an example of the tenets of Suzi Gablik author of The Reenchantment of Art. According to her, artists should be the Shaman of the community and catalyst for change. The collaboration of Rigo 23 with the communities of the Mata Atlantica, also illustrates how traditional basketry can be transformed to reflect and effect serious contemporary issues in our global culture.

### **Jante Echelman**

If we accept Ullrich's definition of a basket, the work of American artist, Janet Echelman can be viewed as a monumental basket structure. Echelman is an internationally recognized sculptor, who is known for reshaping urban space and who draws inspiration from traditional fishing nets and the ancient craft of netting. Notably, this is the same technique used by Joanne Seal Brandford in her work.

Northern Portugal is home for *She Changes* (2005). It is a waterfront netted wind sculpture suspended above a 3-lane highway roundabout. It is 14 stories high and 150 meters in diameter. The netting alone weighs almost a ton and is suspended from a steel ring that weighs 20 tons. Yet it responds to ocean breezes with the same liquid elegance as a jellyfish swaying in the sea nearby.

Echelman, like Rigo 23, works in collaboration with others. However in Echelman's community collaboration, she recruits a crew of experts to realize her designs. For *She Changes*, A New York and Barcelona-based architect rendered 3-D digital models, a Paris-based aeronautical engineer wrote proprietary software to simulate the wind at the site, Portuguese structural engineers calculated cable and steel elements. A commercial fishing net company in Washington State fabricated the netting with Gore Tenara polytetrafluoroethylene architectural fiber, for its debut as an art material. Renowned Portuguese architect Eduardo Souto de Moura collaborated on the design of the elliptical traffic island over which the piece undulates as well as the dramatic lighting that invites contemplation after dark.

In 2009 the artist completed two major art commissions in North America: one for the Phoenix Civic Space in Phoenix, Arizona, titled *Her Secret is Patience*, a 100-foot-tall sculpture. The other was for the *Richmond Olympic Oval*, an official venue for the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Winter Games. She is currently working on a new project for the city of Philadelphia.

## Conclusion

I have discussed a few aspects of what has occurred in basketry over the past 50 years. The artists discussed are representative of some of the current art trends as well as how basketry has evolved and gained a presence beyond traditional craft and become part of the mainstream of the art world. It has become evident that techniques and materials of basketry are used by artists who call themselves basket makers as well as artists who do not align themselves with the basketry movement.

It is clear basketry can be an object but has also moved beyond being “object”.

It has become collaboration, as well as installation art. It can be environmental in concept as well as scale: it can even be monumental. Basketry techniques and materials are used to make serious points about the status of the culture such as human rights, material excess and waste, as well as more subtle human expressions such as fear, wonder and the mysteries of human existence.

Basketry has joined the traditional high art media of paint and bronze to become yet one more material and technique to voice dynamic human expression. It has moved beyond functional craft to be the impetus for aesthetic experience in the mainstream of the contemporary world of art. Basketry is truly a confluence of boundaries, borders, edges and new directions.

In conclusion, contemporary basketry is a vibrant art movement that has had far reaching impact on the art world at large. As a movement, it embraces a variety of techniques, materials and conceptual ideas to visually express personal visions. Contemporary basketry certainly has one common theme – basketmakers are explorers: explorers of ideas within the context of containing space or volume. Basketry has evolved from an isolated craft into the world of fine art and sculpture.

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