

## Fiber Weaving new dimensions in basketry

Mention baskets and one probably envisions a woven container that's functional and durable. However, a look at the baskets of Tina Puckett and one quickly realizes not all baskets are created equally or confined to traditional rules. The Connecticut artist transforms basic basket materials and techniques into complex and colorful contemporary woven sculptures.

Introduced to basketmaking 20 years ago, she soon branched out into freer forms for one-of-a-kind creations. "As I progressed, the less traditional it became. I'm loving it still," said the self-taught artist who works in a gallery-studio on the Litchfield Green in northwest Connecticut. "I especially love color."

"Originally I went to college to be a set designer. A great deal of what I learned there is applied to basketry in terms of structure, color, shape, and form. I had to design sets, build them, and do scene painting," she said during a telephone interview. "Along the way I married and had two kids -- now young adults. When the kids were little, my mother gave me a gift of a basketry workshop on two Saturday mornings. While she watched the kids, I was making and completing a traditional egg basket. I started making baskets as presents and they took off. Friends asked if I would make them one and offered to pay me."

Her materials of choice are dyed round and flat reeds, wood branches and twigs, natural accents, and beads. Using fabric dyes, she controls all of the beautiful color combinations, an advantage in completing custom commissions. She is like a quilt artist who skillfully turns contrasting and complementary blocks of color into a whole new dance of design. The structural frames are wonderful twists and turns in branches she finds on walks. She used raw grape-vine in early work until she discovered bittersweet vines.

"It does everything I want it to," she said. "When I harvest bittersweet, it is pliable and within a couple of weeks, it gets stiff. Within a year, I can't get a nail through it. With bittersweet, I can manipulate it and then it becomes totally durable, while grapevine gets thin as it dries."

There's an abundance of bittersweet. She often finds a nest of it left at her gallery doorway, although there's never a note with these gifts of strangers who obviously know about her creations.

She hasn't totally abandoned grapevines, though she looks for a particular size. "If it's thick," Puckett said, "I peel it to reveal the wood that is light reddish brown color with a distinctive horizontal grain."

For accents, she weaves in hemp rope, sea grass from Hong Kong, paper rope, or Danish cord. "People love the sea grass. I leave it natural since dyeing weakens it," she said.

She works in all scales, from very small to bigger than life, as a photograph on her web site reveals. "That was a commission piece for a customer who had a new room and wanted to walk in and have people go 'wow.' He got what he wanted. It's a corner piece that stands alone."

The Connecticut native and her family lived for a while



in Massachusetts where she sold her baskets at the Gifted Hand in Wellesley, but after divorcing she returned to Litchfield.

"My parents owned a gourmet shop on the Green, so I created a makeshift shop within the store where I sold my baskets," she said. "Then I ran their catering business and placed the baskets throughout the store. After my parents sold the business, I started selling my baskets five or six days a week during the spring to fall season at a farmstand in Morris. At home, I'd prepare for the whole season."

Her baskets were so popular that five years ago she opened the gallery-studio. In the last year or so, the gallery has had fewer customers so for the first time she's selling her work at juried shows.

"The gallery hasn't done it for me," said Puckett. "I have a year left on the lease and decided to do some shows out there rather than waiting for people to come in here. As the community has changed, there's been less support of it."

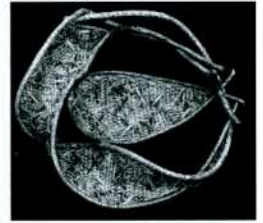
"I want to continue making baskets, so my goal is to do 10 shows a year," she said. "I'm feeling my way through the process (of applications and which shows to do). I'm more folk arty in the eyes of some shows while other shows go for finely detailed work like weaving. I was so pleased when I was accepted for the three spring Paradise City Arts Festivals in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania."

She likes custom orders. "Everyone's taste is different and my work is different and it changes a lot and reflects my mood," she said. "I like putting together ideas when a customer likes different things in different pieces."

She's always fighting the consumer resistance to non-traditional baskets.

"Here in New England, it seems that most people can't seem to get past the idea that everything must be functional," Puckett said. "A lot of my pieces are being sent out to the Midwest."

The Midwesterners know a good thing when they see it.



Among Tina Puckett's basket creations are the life-size "Dancing" (left) and "Fish."

### FYI

#### Tina's Baskets

3 West St.  
(second floor)  
Litchfield, Conn.  
860-567-0385.

tinasbaskets.com

#### Upcoming shows:

Paradise City Arts Festivals, March 17-19, Marlborough, Mass;  
March 31-April 2, King of Prussia, Penn.;  
May 27-29, Northampton, Mass. (See Events pp.4-5).

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