

# THREADS OF SOLACE THE CREATIONS OF SHERRI WEST

BY MICHAEL McMILLAN

**M**inneapolis-based basket maker Sherri West is aware of the struggles that come with living in today's world. In response to fast-paced living and changing circumstances, she relishes patience and self-fulfillment in creating her richly woven forms. More importantly, her experiences in and outside of the studio have made her stronger as an artist, mother, wife, and friend.

## BEGINNINGS

She was born in Denver, and her father died while she was still young. Her mother re-married and the family subsequently relocated to Arizona. In elementary school in Flagstaff, Navajo and Hopi students studied side-by-side with the young West, a very distinct change in social and cultural surroundings. This first exposure to Southwestern



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**LEFT: Sitting on Her Shoulders: Ode to Mary Giles (and Sheryl Sandberg);** 2015; waxed linen and cotton, copper wire and beads; 5 x 9 x 9"

**ABOVE: Two Pots of Tea: Sea;** 2014; waxed linen and cotton, stone and shell beads; 7 x 7 x 7"

**RIGHT: Temptation;** 2014; waxed linen and cotton; 4 x 3 x 3"

Native American culture would be the precursor to her anthropological and cultural studies of Native Americans later in her career.

West had an enthusiasm for the benefits of art and art therapy during her adolescence. This passion was particularly evident after a move to Ohio, where, as a teenager, ducking into the high school art classrooms was a regular occurrence. Working with her hands became West's emotional retreat.

These experiences stuck with her as she moved (again) to Arizona's Sierra Vista region, where she finished high school and enrolled at the University of Arizona. Earning a degree in art education was the gateway to creative opportunities, including instructional training for painting, jewelry making, ceramics, and other media. However, West's introduction to off-loom weaving by famed fiber artist and pioneer Gayle Wimmer was profoundly captivating, resulting in a conviction that fiber would eventually become her primary focus.

West's later practice of using foraged materials was born out of necessity. Fresh out of school with limited resources, she was not financially equipped to acquire all the materials to become a full-time artist. She was aware of the bounty of offerings in her natural surroundings and became a materials scavenger. While living in Tucson,





LEFT: *Seasons of Hennepin County*; 2013–2014; waxed linen, paint, beads; 4 x 12 x 3" (four vessels displayed together); Collection of Cindy Johnson

BOTTOM LEFT: *New Zealand Vessel*; 2010; waxed linen and cotton, New Zealand Paua shell and other beads; 3 1/2 x 4 x 4"

BELOW: *Saving Our National Parks: The Seasons of Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado*; 2010; waxed linen and cotton; 4 x 8 x 3"

giving back to those pursuing the craft. She is a contributor (and past board member) at the Minnesota Textile Center ([www.textilecentermn.org](http://www.textilecentermn.org)), an innovative facility that offers a spectrum of educational opportunities in fiber arts, through its on-site guilds, numerous exhibitions, and classes in weaving, felting, knitting, and other techniques.

West works in her 12-foot by 10-foot enclosed porch that overlooks the grandeur of her wooded backyard and nearby Silver Lake. Her four-piece set *The Seasons of Hennepin County*, completed over the course of a year, is a twined, waxed linen tribute to the beautiful, ever-changing maple treetops seen through her studio window. West's appreciation of the natural realm is more profound than that of an individual with a passing interest in a lovely sunset. One can look to her *National Park Series* as evidence of this, in which preservation-based themes infuse the work. This series is a result of various experiences West has witnessed in which parks have become commodities, whether through the purging of their natural resources, or the incorporation of businesses on the land. One example from the series is *Voyageur National Park*, a collection of lake stones encased in waxed linen, highlighting a Minnesota treasure that showcases the beauty of the state's renowned lake system. Also of note is *Seasons of Rocky Mountain National Park*, created years ago as a response to the Bush administration's advocacy of commercial mining within the park system of Colorado.

The theme of West's recent basketry has been the social perceptions and expectations of women in contemporary culture. In *The Girls Hang Together*, waxed linen, gourds, and seedpods are brought together in a thought-provoking commentary on society's instillation of anxiety and superficial value in women's breasts. The accompanying text to this work explains how these areas of the female body can be objects of glorification and enticement, but also the vehicle of a woman's demise, starkly illustrated through the breast cancer victim referenced in the storyline. Overall, much of West's basketry highlights the toils and distinctions of "women's work." *Sitting On Her Shoulders: Ode to Mary Giles (and Sheryl Sandberg)* references these sentiments boldly, in which the repetitive male motifs

she would wander the sides of roads picking up discarded date palm inflorescences for weaving projects. Later in California, her time at the Jim Widess-founded Caning Shop turned her into an urban forager, as she traveled with other Bay Area artists in a mini-van hunting for usable basketry materials.

During years in Arizona and California, West utilized a range of weaving materials, including yucca, palm, philodendron, and eucalyptus. Her stint living in San Francisco was especially transformative both personally and artistically. She gave birth to twins during this period, while also taking advantage of the cultural diversity and artistic resources available in close proximity. West's curiosity and appreciation is no surprise, considering that San Francisco had previously been a hub for the early development of fiber arts in the 1970s.

## CONTINUED TRAVELS & THE NORTH STAR STATE

After several years in the Bay Area, her husband's work brought the family to eastern Michigan. She became a member of the Ann Arbor Fiber Arts Guild and eventually began incorporating red dogwood and willow into her practice. During this period West encountered artists who were pivotal in honing her artistic vision, including Theresa Ohno, famed master Shereen LaPlantz, and willow expert Jo Campbell-Amsler.

West eventually relocated to the Shorewood suburb of Minneapolis, a region she has called home since the mid-1990s. Here again she has taken advantage of her surroundings, while also





PETER LEE

of renowned fiber artist Mary Giles are combined with calls for greater women's leadership (inspired by *Lean In*, the 2013 book of current Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg). Much of West's recent work, such as *Temptation*, acts as a bridge between themes of gender expectations and the modern, industrial effects on food and consumption, a topic of current interest.

Building on decades of experience, Sherri West continues to expand her conceptual and technical horizons. As her friend Jo-Campbell Amsler states, "Sherri's basketwork always makes me smile, and then look further into what the image is portraying and how the materials are being used. Her pieces stimulate the thinking process of the 'how' with the excellent craftsmanship evident in each creation." Later this year, Amsler and West will be with 7-8 other artists in France and Denmark, exchanging weaving ideas while also staying in their homes.

#### CONSTRUCTIVE LESSONS

Crafting handmade objects can be a humbling experience that challenges one's patience and practice. As West states, "Basket making is a tactile experience that, for me, represents the real time commitment of craftsmanship, and its meditative, repetitive motion." Many works of her *One a Day* and *Teapot Series*, have this quiet, contemplative quality that reflects the intimate connections West makes among life and the handmade. Sherri's hard work and deep connection to her art has led to the inclusion of her basketry in both collections and exhibitions, such as her *Two Pots of Tea: Earth and Sea* as part of the 2016 NBO traveling exhibition *All Things Considered VIII*. Just as West continues to delight in the exploration of her craft, those who continue to appreciate her work and her techniques will experience similar joy.

ABOVE: *Two Pots of Tea: Earth*; 2017; waxed linen, cotton, stone, and shell beads; 7 x 7 x 7"

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