

nbo

National Basketry Organization

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INSIDE

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Promoting the art, skill, heritage, and education of traditional and contemporary basketry.

WWW.NATIONALBASKETRY.ORG

FEATURED ARTIST
JACKIE ABRAMS



Talking Sisters

12" and 15" height

Cotton paper, copper wire,
acrylic paint and mediums,
encaustic wax

Photography by Jeff Baird



Dani (daughter) and I collecting sand in the Kalahari Desert

I knew that I had found something very special when I walked into Ben Higgins' Basket Shop in Chesterfield, Massachusetts in 1975. The smells of the pounded white ash, the woven ceilings, and the weather recordings on the walls all spoke to me. I left my inner-city teaching career behind. Mr. Higgins took me on as an apprentice, four days a week, for six months.

Ben's wife, Gladys Higgins, worked with me every Friday, teaching me to make twined baskets of reed. I found one basket book, "Basketry: Weaving and Design" by Mrs. Edwin Lang, published in 1925. I bought a few tools, and my living room became my studio. It was the start of my basket career. My first national show was in 1976 at an American Craft Council show in Rhinebeck, New York.

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Since then, I have always made baskets, selling them at craft fairs, museums, shops, and galleries. Along the way, there have been grants and awards, recognitions and rejections. All are part of the 'basket business.' One of my proudest accomplishments was being the 'founding mother' of North Country Studio Workshops, an advanced level craft conference held every two years. It continues today.

As I look back on my basket career, spanning over 35 years, I truly realize how fortunate I have been. I have had some fabulous teachers along the way, including Lissa Hunter, John McQueen, John Garrett, Dorothy Gill Barnes, and Shereen LaPlantz. Inspired by the knowledge they so generously shared, I have experimented and adapted to develop my own style of making baskets.

My work has always been intertwined with my life. When my daughters were young, and I was growing much of our own food, garden baskets seemed like the basket to be making. Ten acres of property in central Vermont provided black ash trees, vines, and barks. As my life changed over these years, my baskets have changed as well. Eventually, making functional baskets felt limiting. I created my first architectural series in 1988, inspired by my childhood in New York. Most importantly, I started to explore color and techniques, forms both symmetrical and sculptural, using common basketry materials in unusual ways.

I knew that the way to learn about color was to use color. I explored and experimented, weaving structures with a loom, making paper, combining painted paper with my other techniques. In 1990, I used painted cotton paper as a basket material. What a discovery! It allowed me to return to my basket 'roots' while exploring other aspects of basketry: color, form, texture, and surface design. I continue to use this material today.

When my teenage girls wished I wasn't home quite so much, in the mid-90's, I started traveling to teach basketry. I love to teach, encouraging people to develop their skills and to explore their own creativity. My life has been enriched by the people I have met along the way. I have lifelong friends scattered about the country.

My teaching has taken me all over the world. In 2001, I was offered the first of six teaching expeditions to Australia. The colors and textures of this sunburned country continue to affect my work.

The sands of the Red Centre and the dots and lines of Aboriginal art frequently appear in the pieces that I create. And the people have become my friends.

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Top: Ben Higgins and Jackie Abrams – 1975

Photographer Unknown

Middle: Dani and Rose, my two daughters, in the garden

Photography by Jackie Abrams

Bottom: Seattle Red Urn

7" x 11" x 11"

Cotton paper, acrylic paint and mediums, waxed linen thread

Photography by Jeff Baird



Top Left: Ode to a Grecian Bowl

8" x 12" x 12"
Cotton paper, acrylic paint and mediums, waxed linen thread
Photography by Jeff Baird

Middle left: Tange, a Himba Woman

16" x 10" x 10"
Cotton paper, copper wire, acrylic paint and mediums, traditional metal Himba beads, sand from Namibia
Photography by Jeff Baird

Middle right: A Woman of Consequence

17" x 11" x 11"
Cotton and mulberry papers, copper wire, acrylic paint and mediums
Photography by John Polak

Bottom right: Star Pillow

4" x 8" x 8"
Cotton paper, acrylic paint and mediums
Photography by Jeff Baird

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In 2005, I had my first opportunity to work in sub-Saharan Africa, helping to develop sustainable fair-trade micro-craft industries. These many journeys, to Ghana, Namibia, and Uganda, have had a profound influence on both my life and my work. I've learned that a simple life is just as rewarding as a more complicated life. I've learned that joy, good spirits, and appreciation can be found anywhere, even in a one-room home. I've learned that I am comfortable spending time with these women in their villages, being dusty, letting them laugh at my social gaffes. When it is not totally frustrating, it is very, very good.

I want my pieces to reflect the cultures I have encountered, and the lives that I have been allowed to share, even briefly. I have simplified my techniques. I work directly and intuitively with the materials and techniques in different ways, and let the pieces speak with their own spirit and energy.

The pieces in the "Women Form" series are woven vessels, covered with encaustic wax, textured acrylic mediums and paints, or sands and earth. The forms speak of connections and relationships, shared stories, and ways in which women live and learn. Some of the women stand alone, either in strength or in sorrow. Others rejoice in the company of other women - daughters, sisters, mothers, friends. Each shape is visual collection of her experiences.

My newest series, "Spirit Women," are coiled and stitched, using the time-honored technique of coiling found almost universally in African societies. I use the materials at hand, including recycled fabrics and plastic bags. The core materials are visible, an important part of the piece, reflecting the often unseen inner core of each woman. Each coil captures the experience of the moment. The form develops a shape, coil by coil, experience by experience. These experiences are the threads of our lives that hold us together, give us form, making each of us the person we become.

Last year, glassblower Josh Bernbaum and I were invited to exhibit our collaborative work at the Brattleboro (VT) Museum & Art Center. It was an amazing challenge, combining our two very different materials and techniques. I learned a lot about glass, and Josh learned a lot about baskets. We created seven pieces, each one blending our technical skills with aesthetic considerations. A reviewer called our show "a true gem."

I will, of course, continue to make baskets. Working in my studio brings me a deep satisfaction. I will continue to travel and to teach, and to share time with people with common interests. And I will continue to help develop micro-craft industries. What else could I possibly do?

My work can be seen at two booths at the Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show this year (November 8-11, 2012). At one booth I will be exhibiting my own work. At the other, I will be showing collaborative work with Josh Bernbaum, a glassblower.

Top: Grounded

12" x 10" x 10"
Scraps of fabric (from Ghana, Japan, India, Bali),
waxed linen thread
Photography by John Polak

Bottom: Esi and Her Sister

15" and 16" height
Cotton paper, Ghanaian fabric and beads, copper
wire, acrylic paint and mediums
Photography by Jeff Baird

