

FLEXING THE TRADITIONAL

Contemporary Basketmakers foster form and fluidity



Not long ago, basketmaking was considered by many makers to be the “poor cousin” of craft – not always taken seriously by those involved in neighboring practices. During the 1970s and the decades that followed, training in basketmaking had a tendency to focus on producing objects that were heavily traditional and purely functional, developing techniques that were already long-established in the basketry world. Now in the 21st century with exhibitions being held often and in all corners of the world, we are seeing a significant increase in experimental forms and techniques. Because of this, basketmaking is now getting the recognition it deserves.

This artistic status (however belated) was made possible by a rise in high-profile basketmaking exhibitions, more and more gifted artists emerging on the scene and well funded training opportunities that continue to spread knowledge of this age-old craft. Across the board, one of the key trends currently at its peak in basketmaking is the move towards a more exploratory, expressive way of creating baskets.

One of the most important exhibitions that played a hand in this recent development was *Contemporary International Basketmaking, 1998-2002*, an exhibition organized by the UK Crafts Council. This show displayed a wide range of baskets made using both traditional and contemporary techniques including stake and strand, frame baskets

and those coiled, twined, plaited, netted, knotted, interlaced, linked, looped and assembled – an unapologetic educational exercise. Similarly, the Crafts Council of Ireland's 2008 exhibition *European Baskets* reflected this growing change in the industry; featuring a broad movement towards experimental, sculptural work among artists who at the same time – as evidenced through their work – respect the legacies of tradition.

One of the most prominent artists pushing the boundaries of basketry is UK based Annemarie O'Sullivan, with her fluid forms and large-scale installations. She writes: "The day I first made a basket I was utterly blown away. I fell asleep that night with a familiar feeling as though I had spent the day swimming." The juxtaposition of wood and willow in her objects is grounded in agricultural baskets, and her "Hothouse" award from the Crafts Council has given her work deserved acclaim. Equally interesting is the work of Janice Brooklyn, who uses dyes with rattan (a jungle creeper plant) to create a tonal subtlety that gives rich life to her sculptural work. Nancy Moore Bess also creates bold, abstract forms by fusing innovative Japanese influence with traditional twining methods.

In preparation for the exhibition *East Weaves West: Basketry from Japan and Britain 2007-2008* held in the UK and Netherlands, the show's curator visited Japan and was swept up in the rise of innovation there, where she witnessed traditional craft systems being reimagined ▶

