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From Baskets to COILED ART

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There was a time that you could say “basket” and people would know what you were talking about. Baskets might look very different, be used in very different ways, but a basket was a basket. It had something to do with holding things. It had a function, whether for storage or, in some cases, as part of a ceremony.

No more.

These days it is possible to identify two groups of basket makers. One is working within traditions, not necessarily sticking slavishly to making reproductions of historical work, but working well within the comfortable definition of “basket.” You look at their work and you think, “Yup, that is a basket.”

The other group is stretching the definition of “basket,” and some would say, throwing it out the window. These makers are using the same basketry techniques as the makers in the first group, often the same materials. But

the work they are producing just doesn't fit that concept of a basket as something functional. You look at their work and think, “What is this?”

Nowhere is this truer than among those who use the technique of

coiling. Coiling is an ancient technique that shows up in archaeological sites all over the world. At its most basic, a coiled basket is made of two elements. One

TOP FAR LEFT: Elizabeth Whyte Schulze, **B Girl**; 2013; coiling, pine needles, raffia, round reed, sumi paper, acrylic paint; 15 x 12.5 in.; Courtesy: Mobilia Gallery
CENTER FAR LEFT: Debora Muhl, **Sage Spiral**; 2012; sea grass, nylon/polyester ribbon, waxed Irish linen; 11 x 15 x 10 in.
BOTTOM FAR LEFT: Lissa Hunter, **Round Rim Fragment**; 1991; raffia, glass beads, paper; thread, paint; coiling collage, beading; 20 x 19 x 4 in.
LEFT: Feme Jacobs, **Medusa's Collar**; 2009-10; coiled waxed linen thread; 18 x 14 x 19 in.
TOP: Emily Dvorin, **Green Piece**; 2010; weed-whacker wire, florist's wire, twist-ties, irrigation tubing, and cable ties; coiled basketry; 30 x 30 x 8 in.
ABOVE: Peggy Wyman, **Duet**; 2013, long-leaf pine needles, Irish waxed linen, pearl cotton, wire; 16 x 18 x 14 in.



LEFT: Emily Dvorin, **News Nest**; 2009; plastic newspaper bags and security ties; coiled baketry; 16 x 18 x 18 in.
BELOW: Amanda Salm, **Billabong**; natural dyed horsehair coiled over nylon core; 3 x 6.5 x 6 in.

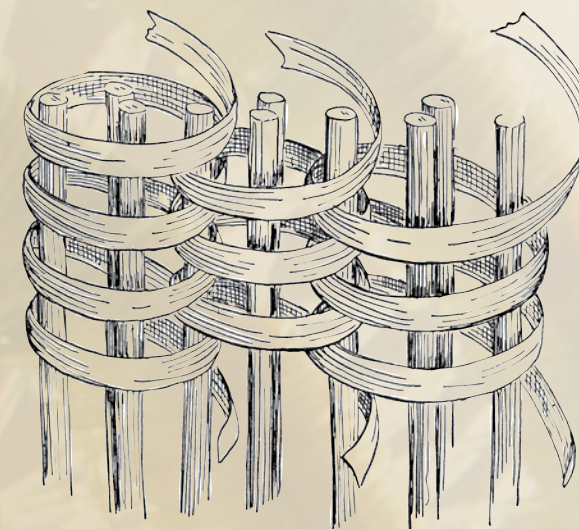
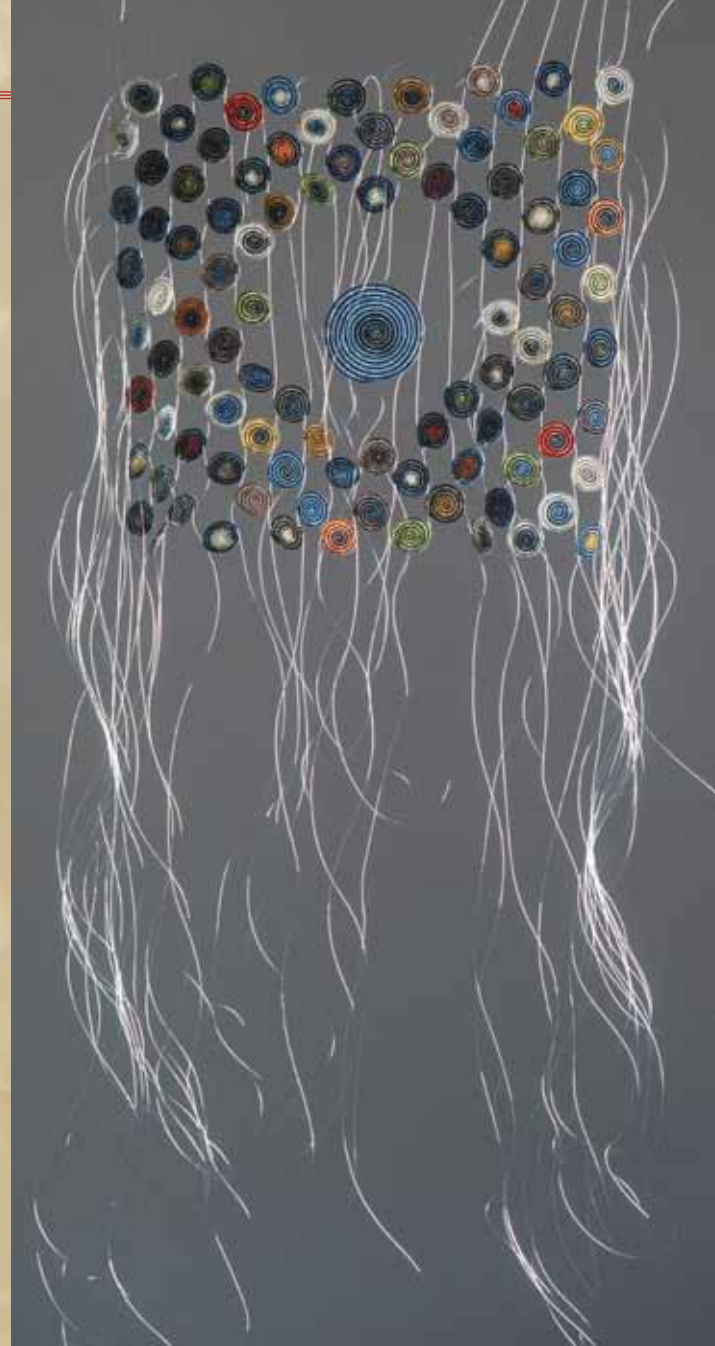
element consists of something that forms a tube-like core: wire, a bunch of pine needles, grass, paper. This is the "coil" in "coiling." Layers of that coil are held together with the second element, something that is used for stitching, perhaps rush or bark strips, raffia, yucca, or waxed linen.

Most often, the layers spiral up and up creating a vessel, but they can make just about any shape depending on where the basket maker places the

layers. If a piece is to go up, each coil is placed squarely on the one below it. If it is to flare into a tray shape, it's placed a bit to the outside. The stitching that holds the coils together can be left

open to show off the beauty of the material being used as a core. Or the core can be wrapped, to cover it, and then stitched.

It is the myriad possibilities created by these two elements that has contemporary basket makers using coiling to make innovative work. Coiling makes a great basket, but it also lends itself to sculptural forms. Among the first to break out of the purely vessel tradition was Ferne Jacobs, whose work in the 1970s still held to a vessel shape, but whose later work took on great swirling, three-dimensional forms.



Some makers are still working within a vessel concept, but their work begins to push the conventional sense of a basket. Mary Jackson's work is easily identified as within the Gullah tradition of the Carolinas and Georgia, but the shaping of her work nudges it into being more sculptural than functional.

Debora Muhl has taken the same material and technique and marched steadily in the sculptural direction during her career. Her work is an example of what can happen when an artist starts to fiddle with both elements. Her undulating shapes are stitched and embellished with the creative use of traditional open coiling stitches. The same is true of the work of a number of makers including Peggy Wiedemann, Peggy Wyman, and Nadine Spier, who are transforming the use of a traditional basketry material, pine needles, into forms that are anything but traditional.

Amanda Salm's pieces are constructed with coiled horse hair, but there is no confusing them with the horse hair work done by Native workers in the Southwest. After dyeing the horse hair with natural dyes made from plants like indigo, madder, and grapevine, she uses coiling to make imaginative forms inspired by the ocean near her home Monterey, California.

Not all artists have confined their work to traditional materials in new shapes. Emily Dvorin, from San Francisco, coils with all sorts of decidedly

TOP LEFT: Amanda Salm, **100 Experiences of the Ocean**, detail.

LEFT: Amanda Salm, **100 Experiences of the Ocean**; natural dyed and white horse hair coiled over nylon core, monofilament suspension; 66 x 22 x 3 in.
BACKGROUND OF BOTH SPREADS: Amanda Salm, **100 Experiences of the Ocean**, detail.

non-traditional materials, such as plastic tubing and cable ties. Other artists have found that the coiled basket is the perfect canvas. In the 1980s Lissa Hunter started covering her coiled work with paper

and embellishing it with beads and feathers. Underneath Elizabeth Whyte Schulze's imagery, guess what you will find. You guessed it—a coiled basket.

Perhaps it is its very simplicity that attracts basket makers. Vary either of the elements, or both, and the possibilities are endless. Whatever the attraction, these artists are drawing from a rich tradition. And they are expanding it.

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