

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Clay Burnette

The following is a written questionnaire completed by the artist in May, 2007 on behalf of the curator.

In general, why do you do what you do? What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?

My goal is to create what I have not seen before. The coiling process allows limitless shapes and sizes so I never tire of thinking up new patterns and objects. I work in a fast-paced environment and my craft allows (or forces) me to slow down. It is a rhythmic process that is both soothing and meditative.



Clay Burnette- Hollow Inside

Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007

What influences your work? Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how? Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how?

The history of pine needle basketry plays little part in my actual work, although I researched the origins extensively and continue to read anything I can find about the history. I take a totally contemporary approach by creating objects that have no primary function. I strive to create what I have not seen before.

How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?

Utility and function play little to no role in my work. I always say that I do not do handles or lids. I prefer to create pieces that are fluid and rhythmic in appearance. Organic objects appeal to me and are reflected in my pieces. I do not accept commissions. I create for my personal enjoyment and if that enjoyment is shared by others, I am grateful. I make no preliminary sketches when I work — the

coiling process is slow enough that I have plenty of time to map my progress along the way.

Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?

My studio is very private and is isolated from other houses in the area by a high privacy fence. I consider it to be my retreat space from the busy life I lead outside the studio walls. I work in isolation—there with no phone, television or other diversions. I process all my materials at the studio, as well as work on two handweaving looms. I try to maintain a set schedule for studio time. I work almost every day after leaving my full-time job, and cherish every moment I can dedicate to my craft.

What does “mastery” mean to you?

Mastery is acquired wisdom. Mastery cannot be obtained without first having put years of diligence into your craft. Mastery is what sets you apart from your other contemporaries. Mastery is an inner driven force. I never tire of working on my craft and cannot imagine not being able to spend time doing what I most enjoy doing.

Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there? How long have you lived in the South?

I was born in Dalton, Georgia (carpet capital of the world) in 1951 and moved to Columbia, South Carolina in 1977. I have lived in Columbia for the last 30 years. I have always lived in the South.

If born in the South, how do you think you’ve been influenced by it?

I love the slower pace of the South. I work in a craft field (coiling) that requires that you move slowly and pay attention at all times. There is no such thing as rushing a coiling project. I am influenced by my natural surroundings. I actually get excited when I see honeysuckle draped fences and layers of kudzu covering the trees. Mother Nature never sleeps.

If you moved to your current home from outside the South, what brought you to the South? Is your work influenced by the South in any way?

My work is truly influenced by my environment. I moved to South Carolina from North Georgia, where my native environment consisted of hardwoods and short leaf pine trees. Prior to moving, I taught myself to coil using rope and yarn. After moving to South Carolina, I discovered the longleaf pine that grows in the area and slowly made the transition to the natural native material.

Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place. Do you have a particular relationship to the land or a landscape? If you do, can you talk about it?

I had only seen one pine needle basket before I began making them myself. I wanted to work in a field that allowed flexibility of space and abundance of materials. I took classes in a variety of craft disciplines at the University of South Carolina, but remained true to my own self-taught practice of pine needle basketry. My favorite part of the entire process is going into the woods in search of the longest pine needles I can find. Through the years I have discovered that the longest needles grow on the younger trees. I have actually found long leaf pine needles that measure 24 inches in length – a rarity, but quite an adrenaline rush when they are discovered. I grew up on a farm and live in the city, so any opportunity to escape to the countryside is cherished.

In your opinion, are there features, factors, conditions that distinguish contemporary craft being made in the South from work made in other parts of the country?

Traditionally, basketmakers were identified by the indigenous materials they used from their surrounding environment. In the South, we are blessed with a wide variety of basketmaking materials – grasses, vines, hardwoods, pine needles, etc. As we all know, an artist can live anywhere in these times and order materials they use in their craft. However, I derive great pleasure in collecting my own materials. I choose to live in an area that allows me access to my materials.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

I made a decision early in my basketmaking career that I would try to create what I had not seen. I do not do lids or handles. I best identify with organic shapes that slowly evolve as I work on a basket. I make no preliminary sketches so that my work is still a mystery to me as a shape evolves.

How is your work evolving?

I have been making pine needle baskets for over thirty years now and I still am filled with a desire to complete the object at hand so I can begin another piece. IDEAS ARE ENDLESS...TIME IS PRECIOUS! It is all about the process. I am most contented when I am working on a piece, but am ready to put it aside when finished and focus on beginning another object. I hardly dwell on what has been done...I am filled with “what if’s.”

Describe your relationship to community? Are there communities of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?

I have a degree in marketing and studio art, so I am always assisting other artists with marketing their works. As mentioned earlier, I work in isolation. I think this is partly due to the fact that I interact with people all day and cherish the quiet time I chisel out to work on my baskets. I am also a member of *Cats on a Leash*, a seven-member artist group that has been in existence in Columbia for 22 years. I am a member of the National Basketry Organization, as well as American Craft Council.

Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you? What would you like your legacy to be?

I am not certain I could be considered a keeper of a culture since I do not follow a traditional art form or comply with traditional rules when working on my baskets. I would like to be known as someone who chose a path and stuck to it. I hope I create objects that have never been seen before, but are easily identified as my own creations.

How did you learn your craft?

I basically am self-taught. I taught myself to coil, moved to South Carolina, discovered a pine needle basketmaker and enticed her to show me how to make the basic stitches used in exposed warp coiling. From there, I experimented with stitches, organic forms, and materials. I experimented with dyes and discovered how to best dye the pine needles for color saturation and retention, then moved a step further by individually dipping the dyed pine needles in acrylic paints to add additional texture and color saturation. I am always looking to identify binding materials that are less common. I have used waxed linen thread, copper wire, brass wire, telephone wire, monofilament thread, etc. I also experimented with preservation techniques and created a method where I coat my baskets with beeswax, then heat them in an oven until the wax melts and flows into the piece. This keeps the material from drying with age and creates a rock hard surface. Traditionally, pine needle baskets are painted with a coating of shellac, which dries the material and makes it brittle with age.

Do you share your knowledge with others--the next generation of artists?

I taught a pine needle basketry course for the University of South Carolina's Continuing Education Program for several years. However, I found that all my extra time was spent preparing materials for the class and that I had no time to actually create my own work. The craft I chose is a painstakingly slow process (coiling) and there is no machine that can duplicate it. I plan to teach when I retire from my full-time job, but prefer to work in solitude until then.

What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South? And, alternative places like

Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, John C. Campbell Folk School?

Education is the key to practically everything in life, whether that knowledge is being passed on in a university setting or at a school that is solely dedicated to craft studies. However, I think a person must be self-motivated to experiment personally in addition to taking any courses offered. Pushing the envelope is what sets you apart from others working in your field.