

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Billie Ruth Sudduth

The following text is a written questionnaire completed by the artist on behalf of the curator.

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

Simply put, the passion I have for basketry. The rhythm of the weaving is akin to playing music. It is never tiring. A gratification I have is knowing that something I have created becomes a part of someone else's environment.



*Billie Ruth Sudduth- Illusions
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?

My work draws from 13th century mathematician Fibonacci's Nature Sequence. The historical form of Shaker baskets inspires my exaggerated cat's head shape, although I do not use molds in any of my work. I do use natural dyes and create the colors I use much as dyes a century or more ago were created.

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

I have purposefully made my baskets to hold your interest, not your objects, so I have moved beyond function.

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

I work alone in my studio. I find I can focus much better if I work independently, free of distractions.

What does “mastery” mean to you?

Mastery means being grounded in the history of the craft, understanding the range of artistic expressions in my craft, and finding a “style” that is uniquely my own.

**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 and raised in the South and am extremely proud of my Southern heritage. I have lived in the mountains of North Carolina for 14 years.

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

Being born and raised in the South, I think I have worked harder to establish myself as a basketmaker. I think Southern artists have not garnered as much respect as artists from other parts of the country.

**Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place. (rural/urban, international, concrete/ imaginary, natural, micro/macro environments, etc.)
Do you have a particular relationship to the land or a landscape? If you do, can you talk about it?**

The beauty of the area where I live has a profound influence on my work. The mountains take me beyond myself and give me a sense that there is much more to my basketry than just me. The serenity of the winter affords quiet time to create. During spring, I probably spend too much time daydreaming, looking at the greening of the mountains and the flowers blooming. Living amidst so much creativity is inspiring and the sense of community comforting.

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?

I think contemporary craft in the South draws deeply from tradition and the work ethic is strong. In my generation, Southern girls were expected to create with their hands, although for half my life, I bucked that tradition. My grandmother often said “if you learn to do something with your hands, you will never go mad.”

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

Yes, because of my use of mathematics. I view my baskets as having an intellectual component. I think I am the only basketmaker in the country approaching basketry from this perspective.

How is your work evolving?

Always, especially after being awarded a North Carolina Artist Fellowship to pursue chaos theory, fractals, and sacred geometry. My work is becoming even more mathematical in nature.

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

Living just over the ridge from Penland, I am fortunate to live in a community of craftspeople. I have the best of both worlds in that I am involved with the craft community but also with the community as a whole. I am very aware of the needs of the community and feel fortunate that I can use my basketry to reach out to the community.

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 would like to be remembered for getting baskets off the floor and onto a pedestal. When I did not want to write a book on basketry, a mentor said that the book would have a more lasting impact than the baskets themselves.

How did you learn your craft?

I am primarily self-taught, learning from tearing apart inexpensive baskets to see how they were constructed. When I began making baskets 25 years ago, there were few books on the subject and little was being taught in the craft schools.

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

Absolutely, by teaching in various craft schools, guilds, and to young people in local schools. I have written books on basketry and have demonstrated my techniques from local craft fairs to television.

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, and John C Campbell Folk School?

I think the craft schools have had a larger impact on contemporary crafts than colleges and universities in that they have reached a broader spectrum of people.