

Leslie Pontz



Photography by John Carlano

From the time that I could hold a crayon in my hand, I was a maker of drawings, paintings, mosaics, collages, and sculptures. However until recently I was not a basket maker. Even now, I am certainly not a traditional basket maker, but rather a sculptor who makes baskets. The journey that has brought me to becoming a maker of baskets has been filled with twists and turns, and I would like to share it with you.

My background does not fully explain my being a sculptor who makes baskets. I majored in art in high school, college, and graduate school, all the while working in two dimensional media, focusing on painting and etching. Graduating from Syracuse University in 1972 with an MFA, I taught printmaking, made prints and drawings, and exhibited in galleries while raising a family. In fact, I almost flunked out of graduate school when I tried my hand at a three-dimensional clay course. Also from 1984 until 1996, I owned a company where I designed, manufactured, and marketed table linens. During that period, I was not making studio art at all, and was still working in a two-dimensional medium. I distinctly saw my creative world through two-dimensional eyes.

Also relevant to my artistic journey is the fact that one spring, several years after finishing school, I discovered the beauty of both the desert landscape and the flowering cactus plants that lived in the desert. I remember thinking how glorious the desert appeared with its grayed colors, hard shapes, soft sand and prickly textures. There were so many contrasts in this quiet world of sand and lizards. From the first moment that I experienced this desert environment, it seemed so peaceful and full of shapes and textures that did not seem to go together but definitely co-existed with one another. I drew the cactus over and over and over until the rounded forms simply became part of my visual two-dimensional vocabulary. And then, one day out of nowhere, those rounded forms became three-dimensional.

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Two Pods, Four Seeds (2008)
14.5" x 9" x 5"
Wire, thread
Photography by John Carlano



Seed Pod 2 (2010)
39.5" x 33.5" x 18"
Wire, wood, paint, iron
Photography by John Carlano



Copper Sack Definitely! (2010)
24" x 8.75" x 5.75"
Wire, wood, iron, paint
Photography by John Carlano



Silk Sack (2011)
58" x 12.25" x 2.75"
Silk, wood, paint, iron
Photography by John Carlano



Linen Sack (2011)
35" x 7" x 3.75"
Linen, wood, paint, iron
Photography by John Carlano

With this background in mind, I can now move on to explain how I became a maker of baskets.

In 1996, I left the hectic world of manufacturing and returned to the studio as an artist. It was a confusing time for me. I had no clear idea of how to begin this re-entry as a studio artist. I started by drawing because that was familiar to me. I drew the cactus because that was also familiar to me. Nonetheless, my frustration was building. I was pleased with the quality of the drawings, but they were not going anywhere. I was beginning to do them by rote, and without any sense of a meaningful future direction and a critical internal passion was missing. And then, by chance, I met a great group of women who were making art quilts. Given that I already knew how to sew and had been working with fabric for the

past 12 years, I thought... Why not? So, I started making art quilts.

Instead of using the usual opaque yard goods in my new venture, I used transparent materials such as silk organzas to create the quilt layers, and at times I captured bits of cactus drawings in between the layers. Three years into the art quilt-making experience, and always on the prowl for new transparent materials to use, I discovered crocheted wire. Crocheted wire was a little unusual, but it was/is transparent, and I had an incredible visceral reaction to its texture. I had never crocheted, but again I asked myself... Why not? With the help of a 15 minute lesson from a friend, I learned to crochet. After the initial lesson, I learned how to make crocheted wire "fabric" and began to layer the wire "fabric" with

the organza. Periodically, I would stop to examine my work by holding the layers of fabric up to the light. The light impacted in magical ways upon the translucent quality of the work, adding a new dimension to the two-dimensional images.

At this point, it became clear to me that the quilt needed to be presented so that the light could do its' magic. The answer for me was to wrap the two-dimensional quilt around a box-like metal armature. I was so excited by this new presentation that I immediately took finished pieces to the Snyderman Works Gallery (the gallery that represents my work in Philadelphia). Bruce Hoffman, the gallery director at that time, and a personal cheerleader and critic of my work, took one look and said, "It needs to be three-dimensional. Get it off the armature." His criticism

upset me, but within twenty-four hours I had overcome the hurt, disposed of the armature, and began to make three-dimensional forms that quickly became my passion.

The three-dimensional forms that I found myself crocheting with the wire flowed from the visual vocabulary of forms that I had been developing and drawing for years. They came naturally and were very comfortable to me and were rounded and organic forms. Also, when I stepped back to see what I had made, they were basket forms that were sometimes filled, sometimes empty, sometimes right side up, sometimes upside down and sometimes they were suspended from above. But I had come to realize that they were always baskets.

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Brown and White (2011)
27" x 18.5" x 11.25"
Monofilament, thread, iron
Photography by John Carlano



Opened Pod #1 (2008)
12" x 11.5" x 5.75"
Wire, wood, paint
Photography by John Carlano

For about ten years I used only wire to crochet the forms, adding iron elements as the pieces dictated. Presently I am using monofilament, linen, wool, cotton, ramie, silk, iron, thread and wood . . . the list is endless. Usually, two or more of these materials can be found in any given piece because I am still intrigued with exploring the juxtaposition of the co-existing contrasts that I found in the desert. For me, contrasting elements are far more exciting existing together than independently. The work is always challenging those contrasts through the intellectual and visual combinations of male and female, hard and soft, smooth and rough, and strong and gentle. The work is very personal, being intertwined with an exploration of ideas that remind me that life itself presents an array of conflicts that always need balancing.

The creative process is a unique challenge. There is something very intimate about creating with one's hands. No power tools and no quick results. Just slow quiet movements of one stitch after another. It is a process of slowly developing a three-dimensional form from one single line of "thread." At the end of the creative process, the result is a form that can be held in one's hands.

I start with a detailed pattern on paper, planning every increase and decrease of stitches. With so much planning, I am sure that I know exactly how the finished piece will look, until the piece turns out completely different. I found that the stitch by stitch pattern often morphs into something totally different than the original drawings because I am always reacting to the form as it develops. I have heard the process referred to as "letting the piece speak for itself." Often the voice of the piece is loud and clear, shouting out a new direction that needs to be followed. Listening, making changes, adjusting the form, and implementing new ideas are all part of my creating process.

Recently, I have been exploring the media itself as much as the form, often departing from the detailed organic patterns and following a more spontaneous geometric direction. I am choosing simple cylindrical forms and allowing the material to "speak" almost completely for itself, choosing not to control its natural drape and flow, allowing that process to become the message. Sometimes elements with weight are added in order to see how the material will react to that counter-intuitive addition.

And then there is always the question, What if? What if I make it larger? What if I make it taller? What if I make it scrunched? What if I make it on a larger needle? What if . . . ? The possibilities are virtually endless. Ideas, thoughts, and questions race through my head as I am developing each piece and at the same time thinking of the three yet to come as one piece gives birth to the next, and the next, and the one after that.

Do I really consider the intellectual side of this creative process during the creative process? Not at all. It is a visceral experience, and only when it is completed can I stand back and understand the work through the eyes and words of the viewer. Only then can I make the connections to other work from my near or distant past and understand the common thread that runs through them all. Only then can I grasp the full meaning of my evolution into a sculptor who is a maker of baskets.