

"Basketry as art is our main focus."

Joanne Segal Brandford

Part 4:

Arlene K. McGonagle

by: Catherine K. Hunter, Museum and Education Consultant



Arlene McGonagle

Photography by George Vaponte

Arlene K. McGonagle is a basket maker and mixed-media artist with an MFA from the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. Her work was published in NBO's "All Things Considered VI" (page 58, 2011). Arlene has exhibited primarily in New England, including the Fuller Craft Museum, MA; The Bristol Art Museum, RI; Providence Art Club, RI; New Bedford Art Museum, MA; New Hampshire Institute of Art, NH; University of Connecticut, CT; League of New Hampshire Craftsmen; and Brookfield Craft Center, CT. She has received awards from the historic Providence Art Club, and taught art in colleges in Rhode Island. Her work is in private collections including Fidelity Investments. Arlene lives in Providence, RI. This artist profile is a chronology of highlights. You will hear Arlene's voice in numerous excerpts from conversations and publications. Her web site is www.basketsculpture.com.

BEGINNINGS

Arlene's passion for baskets finds its roots in her childhood. She began our interview with thoughtful memories of her first awareness of baskets:

I was brought up on a farm in Hadley, a town in western Massachusetts where baskets were very much part of our harvest routine from early April to late October. We used specific baskets for picking asparagus, tomatoes, and a variety of other vegetables. Each basket had a practical shape and form determined by its use. Some were wide and shallow so as not to crush the vegetables, while others were tall and narrow to fit efficiently between the narrow rows in our fields while we harvested.....From this early farming experience I now realize why functional, simplistic baskets have so much appeal to me....

Arlene went to college five miles from her home at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. With a degree in sociology, she left farm life and worked as a community organizer in Providence, Rhode Island, using Sal Alinsky's techniques in working with communities to affect social change. The stress of the work would take its toll after 10 years. In 1980, a chance encounter with a course in Appalachian Mountain basketry in an orange grove in Florida changed her life.

After traveling the country to take basket classes, Arlene gradually specialized in Nantucket lightship baskets as a student of Gladys Ellis in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts. She embraced this New England craft, as well as Shaker traditions, appreciating the aesthetics of exactness, order, restraint and precision.

When Arlene's career as a weaver plateaued, her desire to express herself as an artist emerged. It was no longer enough to be a traditional basket weaver, teacher, member of the Northeast Basketmakers Guild, and President of NBG from 1992 to 1994. Encouraged by a close friend, Barbara Ashton, she applied in 1995 to the MFA Program at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. The Department of Artisanry, in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, comprises a network of studios for Ceramics, Textile Design/Fiber Arts, Wood/Furniture Design, and Jewelry/Metals. The curriculum has its origin in the Program in Artisanry (PIA) founded at Boston University in 1975 and previously was part of the Swain School of Design.

The program appealed to Arlene who wanted to study design and conceptual art work without a requirement to develop skills as a designer for industry. Applying with a portfolio of traditional baskets and lacking traditional art school experiences, she was asked to enroll in a year of art foundation and art history classes. In 1996 Arlene was accepted into the MFA program. She recalls,

"I made this transition with the gift of time....I hope that other basket weavers will consider this bold step after hearing my story...."

Arlene remembers vividly, "I was pushed out of my comfort zone to experiment with materials." She acknowledged her struggles and applauds the high expectations and support of faculty especially Barbara Goldberg in Surface Design and Marjoire Durko Puryear in Weaving. The course work included weaving (4 and 8 harness), surface design (batik, shibori, block printing), woodworking, philosophy of art, art history, seminars and women's studies. With persistence, tenacity and talent, Arlene graduated in 1998.

MFA PROGRAM IN ARTISANRY 1994-1998

Her first baskets investigated the structure and form of the seedpod as a "protective vessel that carries the seed, the life generating nucleus." Comparing herself to a seedpod, Arlene had expectations that graduate school would protect and nurture her personal growth. She experimented with stitches of raffia and waxed linen to coil clothesline, harvested and manipulated vines, and plaited copper foil. By using non-traditional materials there was always a challenge to resolve technical problems. Rules learned from traditional basketry were no longer useful. Arlene described her understanding of creativity:

The process of experimentation made me realize that there is much more to being creative than just combining unusual materials, traditional techniques and historical values of the basket maker. Creativity means understanding all these traditional and historical values and pushing them beyond the established traditional rules.

Eventually Arlene adopted a basket-within-a-basket structure, designing and then combining separate exterior and interior structures. She adopted the term "nested format" for her thesis exhibition. The historical term "nested" refers to the



Nest # 1 (1997)

5.5" x 11.5"

Wire, waxed linen, honeysuckle vine, black ash and mud

Photography by James Beards



Lines of Verse # 2 (2003)
(detail shown to the left)

10" x 8.5"

Wire, waxed linen, paper and text
Photography by James Beards

19th century, space-saving practice of storing baskets of progressive sizes one inside the next. Baskets were essential tools for measuring dry goods and garden produce. Both Shaker and Nantucket Lightship baskets had a tradition of making nested baskets, and Arlene was accomplished in both. That history is often forgotten; today the stack is valued as aesthetically pleasing and a challenge to a craftsman's skill.

THE "NESTED FORMAT"

The body of work called "nested format" combined a structured exterior grid with an interior unstructured bird's nest. For the exterior, Arlene used hardware cloth, actually metal mesh of galvanized wire that has been soldered together in 1/4" increments, a scale that recalled the tight weave of Shaker and Nantucket basketry. The grid resembled warp and weft alignment, but it also provided a foundation for non-linear design experiments. The grid was also a personal reference for Arlene to measured rows of planted vegetables, an expression of farm work ethic and pride.

The hardware cloth provided a structure but the appearance was industrial. Wrapping the wire with waxed linen added texture and color. Arlene chose linen as a fiber significant



Solitude (2010)
10.5" x 5.5"
Wire, waxed linen, paper and text
Photography by James Beards



Copper Verse #5 (2009)
12" x 8"
Wire, waxed linen, paper, copper foil and text
Photography by James Beards

to domestic life and women. In Colonial America, for example, linen was the fiber used in clothing, bed sheets, and tablecloths. Arlene explains, "The blending of material both hard and soft is a metaphor for women --- soft with a firm resilient structure."

The interior of the nested format was an imaginary bird's nest usually made of Japanese honeysuckle vine. Arlene abandoned traditional patterned weaving entirely and adopted a free flowing, swooping, random weave. She gathered local materials for nests to give "a sense of place in New England." Arlene described a need to interact physically with nature:

I find personal fulfillment from the local landscape and creating a vessel or structure from the natural beauty that surrounds me. The satisfaction and joy of collecting raw materials from nearby fields and woods, then seeing these materials take form, is almost unheard of in our fast-paced, highly merchandised and mass-produced society...

The following excerpt from Arlene's MFA thesis addressed the nest as a symbol of security with links to her childhood on the farm:

The common theme that permeates all of my work is the need for a secure and safe place to grow and develop, often described as a nesting instinct. While my nest-like creations conjure up an image of safety, security and a nurturing environment, they also convey the idea that security and safety only exists in the mind. In fact, there really is no safe and secure place in life except the "mental nest" we make for ourselves...A bird nest is actually quite delicate, fragile and subject to destructive forces. Similar kinds of natural threats also apply to humans. For example, when I was growing up, our

home and farm probably seemed very secure to outsiders because it was well maintained and highly organized. In reality, my parents, like most farmers, were continually gambling the family's savings from one growing season to the next. Our family would invest many months and much money to produce a crop that could be destroyed in a matter of minutes by a freak hailstorm in August right before harvest time. As a result, the whole family knew the supposed security of farm life was always threatened by the uncontrollable forces of nature. And we lived accordingly.

Secondary materials for the baskets included mud, handmade paper and personal memorabilia. Why mud? Just as birds used mud to insulate nests, man has made homes with adobe mud walls since ancient times. Also, mud rekindled pleasant memories for Arlene of life on the farm where "the feeling of mud underneath my bare feet gave me a sense of grounding and an understanding of my relationship to the earth..."

Why did Arlene add paper and memorabilia? Weaving with strips of handmade paper was a means to introduce colors. Memorabilia – strips of photographs, travel journals, sheet music, and fabric– addressed personal values. The latter theme gained momentum after Arlene volunteered in a shelter where victims of domestic abuse arrived with few, if any, possessions to create a temporary home. Arlene describes this experience and the impact on her work:

I began to reflect on the importance of what is really of personal value to me in my life. What possessions are important that cannot be replaced? What possessions would I instinctively



Growth # 1 (2012)
11" x 8"
Wire, waxed linen, paper, copper foil and text
Photography by Charles Papas

take as I fled my burning home? What memories or representations of memories can I protect, honor and contain in a series of baskets? Thus, I decided that each nested basket should contain a physical memento that I cherish.

NESTED FORMAT: PROCESS AND CONCEPTS

How did Arlene organize her work? The process was to sketch an idea, cut the hardware cloth, wrap the wire with waxed linen, join the panels with waxed linen, mold the form and weave. The process of wrapping the wire allowed for contemplative time to consider the importance of home, safety and the symbolic references to nesting. Thus, the process anticipated and satisfied both ends of the creative spectrum, combining repetitive wrapping and weaving of the structured exterior with random weaving for the interior.

The nested forms presented opportunities for exploring many concepts. Each basket in a series attempted to answer a new question: What is the influence of place or environment? What is the relationship of the nest to outside formal structure? What is the potential for design and patterning? The following excerpt from Arlene's MFA thesis clearly described the foundation for themes that she has continued to explore in current work:

I have always been influenced by the natural order of things. This in fact is really quite a contradiction. When I use the words "natural order," they conjure up an ordinate system of checks and balances. Natural order conveys the idea that everything is

on a linear path of growth. In reality, natural order is a set of contradictions: comfort vs. discomfort, beauty vs. ugliness, security vs insecurity, good vs. evil, permanence vs. impermanence, and life vs. death. We talk about the appearance of order, but in reality order is often an illusion. The outside appearance of order gives way to the inside random weave of fragility and uncertainty. My baskets also represent the coping strategy we create in an attempt to provide a "safety net" or "safety nest" environment. But in nature, our protective physical and emotional nests are also subject to the whim of chance destruction and in a real sense are as fragile as those built by birds.

My work also speaks of the reality of nature, its order and its chaos...its uncertainty in dealing out random acts of destruction, disease and death. We often handle the reality of this possible devastation to our property, our loved ones and ourselves by denial. The baskets I have created speak the answer to this question of false security by denial. They state that despite this reality of existence we can only find security within ourselves, with hope for the future no matter how uncertain it may be. In a sense "mental nests" of hope are portrayed in all my works, combining memories of past joys and wishes for those still to come.

SCRIPTED BASKETS, BASKET BOOKS, PRINTS 2000 - PRESENT

In 2001 Arlene was invited to submit a piece for a show at the Sarah Doyle Gallery at Brown University, Providence, RI. When artists were invited to interpret the theme of line, Arlene's response was poetry with "lines of verse."



One Night (2004)
11.5" x 9.5"
Wire, paper, silk yarn and text
Photography by James Beards





Top Left: In Memory (2010)
9.5" x 5"
Wire, waxed linen, paper and text
Photography by James Beards

Middle: Basket Book #5 (2009)
7" x 9"
Wire, waxed linen, paper and text
Photography by James Beards

Bottom Left: Copper Reflection (2008)
9.5" x 7.5"
Wire, waxed linen, paper, copper foil and text
Photography by James Beards

The challenge inspired a new body of work called "Scripted Baskets," a natural progression beyond her practice of weaving with memorabilia.

Arlene created "Lines of Verse" (see page 15) and incorporated poems by Emily Dickinson from a book *Acts of Light*. Working on a light box and with no other artificial light in the studio, Arlene copied verses in cursive on silk paper. The writing process alone enabled her to absorb and internalize the poetry's message. In this digital era, it is beautiful to honor words with the distinctive art of handwriting. The simplicity of the act of handwriting is deeply satisfying to Arlene as an artist.

A new series of baskets incorporated excerpts from Arlene's journals with personal reflections on the lessons of life, joys, sorrows,

prayers, and meditations inspired by many authors. She wrote on rice paper, silk paper and copper foil. A unique departure was seen in "One Night," a basket inspired by a tragic fire. Instead of poems and journals, Arlene copied published obituaries of the deceased. She explained that the basket mourns the deceased and honors victims struggling to rehabilitate:

'One Night' is a reference to The Station Nightclub Fire in West Warwick, RI, on February 20, 2003. Many of the people who lost their lives that night had profiles in The Providence Journal. I read and then wrote their personal profiles on brick red stationery. While copying by hand each profile, a little knowledge of each individual entered my world, and I began to know them as a sister, brother, father, mother... They were not just a number or a name on a

page but actual family members with interests and many talents. As I wove the strips of handwritten paper into the wire form, the container became a metaphor for their full lives that ended short that one night...In one way it is a memorial to the friends, family and loved ones; in another way it pays homage to my friends who have survived burns and have gone on in life to be my heroes and heroines.

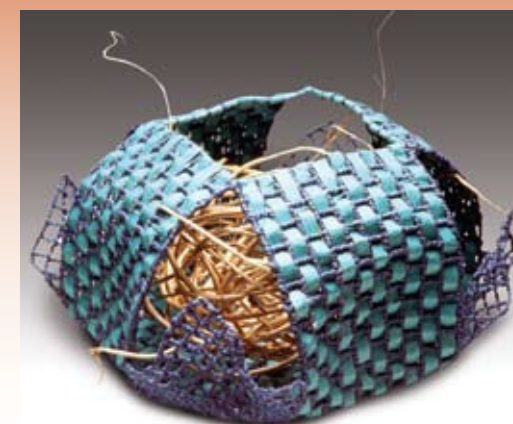
In 2009 exposure to bookmaking inspired a new series of "Basket Books." Arlene copied texts by Emily Dickinson, Shelley, Yeats, Ghandi and other "masters." She folded and wove the paper into books, then placed the book inside the basket interior. Sometimes the book was attached to the lid; lift the lid and the book follows. Arlene also overlapped the text by writing in two directions on one page, essentially weaving with the script.

Handwriting is a beautiful feature in Arlene's work. She purposefully presents text in enticing grids and layers. It is my impression that accessibility of message is not the message; rather, its presence has meaning beyond the appearance of text on a page. Words are synonymous with message; text is a design element used to amplify the words of Arlene and the authors whom she admires. Finally, I must add that Arlene has also explored printmaking techniques for the past

six years. The medium is exciting, the process is fast and the change gives her body relief from the physical labor of time-intensive basket making. Arlene explains:

Working in another medium is like physical therapy. I forget time so easily; I set an alarm to remind me to stop, stretch and take a walk. UMass brought in a physical therapist to teach us healthy movements, especially for surface design. UMass taught me how to stay healthy.

A display of framed prints lines the entry of Arlene's studio, with looms, hardware cloth and a printing press just around the corner. She clearly enjoys the freedom of experimenting with monotype, relief prints, and solar plates (a Green technique). As you would expect, the prints incorporate textiles.



gauze and panels woven with strips of her signature handwritten text on rice paper.

Arlene McGonagle's baskets and prints are dynamic objects that ask and answer questions. Her work provides metaphors for life lessons, reminding us that life is protected and fragile, controlled and chaotic. The work is humble and elegant, quiet and powerful. ✨



Top Right: Culebra (2000)
3" x 6"
Wire, waxed linen, honeysuckle vine and paper
Photography by James Beards

Center Left: Three in A Row (2010)
10" x 6"
Wire, waxed linen, pewter, paper and text
Photography by James Beards

Bottom Left: Peruvian Pick-Up (2009)
7.5" x 8"
Wire, waxed linen, paper and cotton yarn
Photography by James Beards

Above: Basket Book #3 (2010)
6" x 7"
Wire, waxed linen, paper and text
Photography by James Beards