

## Convergence

In late June I attended Convergence, a biennial international gathering of handweavers, sponsored by the Handweavers Guild of America. This year it was held in Grand Rapids, Mich. As usual, I was blown away by the keynote speakers, exhibits all over town, seminars, hundreds of vendors, and most of all, the high-spirited, generous-hearted weavers I met who came from all over the world. (Marilyn Moore and Kathy Halter said “hi!” to all GBB members.)

Besides the profusion of mouthwatering exhibits, you would have loved listening to Kevin Wallace (author of “International Basketmaking”) and Mary Fisher, and participating in the Red Thread Project. Not to mention shopping for beads and ethnic stuff, fabulous clothing, fibers of all kinds, textures, and colors, and books you will never find anywhere else.

### Mary Fisher

Mary Fisher gave the farewell address to the group of about 4,000 people. Her introduction caused the crowd to gasp and then become completely silent. Because not only is she a cutting edge weaver, weaving images of children onto her cloth, and a fascinating sculptor, and nationally known...but she has AIDS. 15 or so years ago, her husband left her and as he walked out the door, he suggested she get checked for AIDS, and have her children (both toddlers) checked too, because he was HIV positive.

This of course changed her life. She had climbed the professional ladder and was a TV executive and a top aide in the Ford administration. First, she had to get herself physically in control, then emotionally. Finally, she began working to increase AIDS awareness. She traveled the country and the world and centered her efforts in Africa, and her weavings were of African children affected by this disease. She has written several books, and “My Name is Mary” was the recommended one. Others were “Sleep with the Angels” and “I will Not Go Quietly”. She is a lovely appearing woman, somewhat bloated, I assume, from all the medication, and her message was one of hope, and that’s why I included it first.

She said that every life has purpose and value including our own. We live with hope. For her, art is a process of pouring out her own soul. For us, she said, “Let your work be as unique as you are. It will empty your soul and fill ours.”

And “Where do you look for hope to manage your grief? How about here, in this community of artists and weavers and friends.” I know this is true for me. I find hope and affirmation on the first Thursday of every month, and other days too, in the community of basket people, the community of GBB.

She said, “We are inspired to hope by being vulnerable, not perfect.” She asked us to lift our voices to speak for that which we believe in, in any way we choose; and she asked us

to remember the children and all people of the world. She said, "Recognize that they are part of the fabric of your life."

Kevin Wallace.

Kevin co-authored the book "Contemporary Basketry" and has become a top critic, mentor, and educator for baskets and their makers. I attended an all day seminar that he held on professionalism, and a panel discussion which he led, along with Marilyn Moore, JoAnn Kelley Catsos, and Carol Stangler. Oh were those good talks!

The Panel Discussion people tried to define contemporary basketry, and all agreed that it has expanded from the three criteria set in the 80's, which were that a basket needed to have at least one of these three: basketry technique, traditional basketry materials, and/or had to be a traditional container. The Panelists came up with a new definition: "A Three Dimensional Structure that implies containment." I'm not too sure they were satisfied with that!

Contemporary vs Traditional:

JoAnn had a lot to say about that. She has always been a believer in traditional basketry and long ago she began her exquisite plaited baskets by pounding out splints from an ash tree. Over the years, she said, she evolved, and she no longer makes her own splints or follows the patterns and shapes of the old baskets, but continues to discover innovation in her designs, while sticking to her love of traditional materials and of plaiting.

Kevin discussed the two distinct arms that have emerged in basketry, the Contemporary, or Innovative, and the Traditional. He said the traditional people have developed their basketry styles over the years by learning from other makers, styles that pay tribute to the past. The contemporary people have often come from university settings and know not so much about technique as about sculpture and three dimensionality. He said the wonder of this is that both areas are highly accepted and sought after, and not only that but makers from each side have great respect and support for the other.

Other interesting notes I took from that panel discussion:

The idea of using unusual titles is to challenge the viewer, and these are increasingly important. They are a way to create a context for the work to be viewed. (Check books of Poetry for Titles) Marcel Duchamp was quoted. "The artist does half the work, the viewer does the other half."

A statement makes a big difference in a show.

There's a reason why we draw from nature: it keeps feeding us.

A good book is "The Presence of Absence". It is about using negative space in art.

Viewer education is what has held the field of basketry back, because people don't know what goes into it. Galleries need the information about the complexity.

You are selling (sharing) a human experience.

Integration is important. Think holistically.

Kevin Wallace thinks we need a basket collectors' society, just as there is a glass collectors' society.

On Kevin Wallace's Seminar on Professionalism and on developing your own way of making:

Basketry is a bold new field. It took a long time to take off because Native American baskets were so rich. He feels that basketry and wood are the next new collectibles. Glass is in that category now.

The bridge between art and craft is being knocked down. Traditionally, "art" has been on a pedestal, distant from the viewer, while craft is associated with useful things that make life better. Craft has grown away from its folk roots. People came out of art school and applied those ideas to basketry, and the language of art is being expanded.

The art world is safe, while the "in" thing is now the new craft. But a lot of the world doesn't know it yet. The description "Craft Art" didn't exist 20 years ago. This is where people take a tradition in which everything about it has stayed the same, and said, "Now break all the rules." This new world of craft art includes concept and narrative and it can include symbols.

Art Galleries show people who make art using craft media and it's time to move in that direction. He said you choose the context for your work: Art Gallery or Craft Gallery.

He said that you are the manager of your career. Here are some things to do:

1. Educate people about the making of your basket and the connection to the art world. (He said painting and sculpture are conceptual and there is nothing really new there.)
2. Go see SOFA in Chicago. It is mind-boggling. It is the leading show in 3-D work, and that is where the action is.
3. Basketry is a new and important area. A turn of the century is an important period of time for contemporary art.
4. The context in which your work is shown is very important. For example, when the Quilts of Gee's Bend were exhibited at the Whitney, they were discussed very differently.

You can decide what context you want to be viewed in; for example, "forging new paths", and "important", as opposed to "beautiful", "wonderful", etc. The contemporary art world is very suspicious of beauty.

5. The term "vessel" has been added to the language of sculpture. Can you call yourself a sculptor?

The best art touches something deep inside where you didn't know anything was there, and it keeps coming back (often in the imagery).

The best art shows you a way of seeing that you haven't seen before (think of Impressionism and how that changed people who saw it). The role of art and of the artist is largely to expand the way you see the world...so you have to go to another place in your head. Contemporary artists are the shamans of society. (M.L.: Yeah!)

Art is about sharing the human experience. And art is a means of communication. Your job in a gallery is to sell them (the viewers) themselves.

You have to know who you are in developing yourself as an artist.

Recommended Books: "Guerrilla Marketing" by Guy Kawasaki, and "Four Essays in Beauty" by Dave Hickey.

He also went into the process of selling yourself. GBB has had some workshops on this, and I will just add some of Kevin's suggestions to what we already know:

1. Digital is better. Best is to create a little booklet with photographs; make it special and nifty. Understand what jumps out. This is easy pull out and look at.
2. Show a body of work, not a variety of it. Decide what you are pitching.
3. Newer artists should start off with lower prices.
4. When sending stuff to a gallery, include a very flattering cover letter. Name collectors you have.
5. Resume should include, in this order: Education (including important workshops); Museum and Corporate Collections, Private Collections, Museum Exhibitions, Gallery Exhibitions (solo and group), Publications, Teaching.

Join as many organizations as you can.

Be aware of who your peers are. There is a whole range.

Museums collect from movements. Museums collect history. Galleries are cutting edge. Subtle work is hard to sell because it's so quiet. There has to be a balance between a piece being accessible and being challenging.

Artists should develop their critical skills and a language to communicate what they do.

The field needs more and more one-person exhibitions. And the more that people talk and write about the work, the better it is for all.

The challenges: 1) expand the idea of basketry, and 2) expand the idea of art.

## The Red Thread Project

This originated with fiber artist Lindsay Obermeyer of Chicago. She had recently adopted a little girl and the child panicked whenever Lindsay left the room. So mom knitted two caps, one for each of them, and attached them with a long chain, and that calmed the little girl.

Lindsay thought about the themes of attachment and making connections and her idea has spread to many communities around the U.S. What is her idea? The Red Thread Project: *"An invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet regardless of time, place or circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break."*

## Chinese Proverb

For Convergence, the Red Thread committee got people to make hundreds of red hats, and then they were joined by long chains. On Friday night, we all gathered at Rosa Parks Square in Grand Rapids for the performance. The hat chain was laid out in a huge spiral and everyone stood by a hat and then placed it on their heads. They were all immediately connected!

The performance involved the group following a series of commands—moving forward, backward, out, in, and finally walking in a spiral circle—to the deep beat of a drum. We realized that whatever someone in the group did influenced everyone in the group. The red thread project was about celebrating connections, visible and invisible. After the performance, the hats were donated to local non-profit organizations and to children and adults with cancer.

For more information, go to [www.getconnectedgr.org](http://www.getconnectedgr.org)

## Mary Fisher Farewell Address

Mary Fisher is a weaver and sculptor and had a major exhibition going at the Ford Presidential Library.