

Forty-Five Years Of Making

BRATTLEBORO – Jackie Abrams walked into a shop called the Basket Shop in Chesterfield, Massachusetts over forty years ago, and it changed her life. Abrams fell in love with the beautiful, functional baskets that owner Benjamin Higgins made using hand-pounded white ash splits. She loved everything about it – the look of the baskets, the tools used to create them, even the smell of the shop.

After convincing the 81-year-old Higgins that a girl could make baskets (she was 26 at the time), she apprenticed with him for six months, learning the techniques he had learned from his father, and that his son-in-law still uses to this day.

Abrams spent the next thirteen years creating functional baskets. Then, she began to explore the livelier colors, less traditional materials, and non-functional forms that have become iconic to her work, which has gone on to be included in important collections, including at the National Museum of Scotland and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC.

Jackie Abrams: 45 Years of Making, a retrospective exhibit of her work, runs now through July 4 at Mitchell-Giddings Fine Arts in Brattleboro. There are many pieces of work on display, and more in the gallery's storage. All the work, with pricing, can be viewed on the gal-



The Precarious Shelters series by Jackie Abrams was inspired by the many precarious living arrangements she witnessed while traveling to teach basketry skills around the world and in the US. Ten percent of the proceeds from each Precarious Shelter sale goes to Groundworks Collaborative in Brattleboro.

lery's website.

"These are, for the most part, my favorite pieces that I kept for myself," Abrams said.

The exhibit includes samples from the many series Abrams has worked on over the years, as well as work from three different collaborative projects: "Untitled," with fiber artist Marilyn Moore; "Material Conversation," with glass artist Josh Bernbaum, and several pieces Abrams made with artist Diedre Scherer.

"Collaboration benefits everyone," Abrams said. "Working collaboratively expands my thinking."

As well as learning about other people's processes, thoughts, and materials, she often realizes new possibilities in her own materials and techniques as she sees them through another's eyes.

"Together we develop a piece that would not have existed with either of us working alone," Abrams said. "One plus one equals three."

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Teaching and Learning

From the very beginning, Abrams had an interest in teaching as well as pursuing her own work. She taught her first workshop in 1975 at Leverett Crafts and Arts while she was living in Montague (she lives now in Brattleboro). She's since taught basketry techniques all over the US, as well as in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the UK, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Uganda, and Ghana.

In February 2020, just before COVID hit the US, Abrams was in the poverty-stricken neighborhood of La Carpio, in San José, Costa Rica, teaching coiling techniques for basket-making as well as crocheting. She brings small tools she can leave behind, such as crochet hooks, she said, but works only with local materials, as she wants the women she works with to be able to source materials after she leaves.

She only works with women, she said be-

cause, "Women will take care of their kids, feed their kids, use the money to send them to school. The men might use the money to go to a bar."

The women in La Carpio have really run with the techniques she showed them, Abrams said, and are making baskets and bags using recycled fabrics, plastic bags, and local *abacá* fiber, often assembling the materials in inventive ways. One woman created a bag with a coiled bottom, like a basket, but with fabric sides. In instances like this, Abrams learns as much from the women she works with as they learn from her.

"As much as they get from me, I get just as much," she said. "Getting to know these women has been amazing to me. Women and their resilience and the way they stand together – I've been really strongly influenced by them."

The Women Forms

One of Abrams' series of vessels, *Women Forms*, grew out of her experience of working with women all over the world.

Abrams and I browsed through the *Women Forms* on the Mitchell-Giddings website together, each in our separate homes, on our separate screens. I admired the vessels, which exuded personality through their varied postures, and commented on how lovely I found their asymmetrical forms.

"I can make a symmetrical basket," Abrams said with what I heard as a smile. "My training was in making very symmetrical baskets."

She paused, then said, "Our bodies are not symmetrical. The way I think about it is, our bodies are shaped by our experiences. You have a little lump here and a little bump there, and that's because of what's happened in your life."

As she talked about one of the forms, "Souda," which translates from Arabic to "black feminine" in English, Abrams said matter-of-factly, "She's woven, and then her sur-

SUBMITTED PHOTO



Jackie Abrams, sixth from left, with women in her basketry and crochet workshop in La Carpio, San José, Costa Rica in February, 2020.

face is covered with black mica sand."

I heard both fondness and respect in Abrams' completely unselfconscious use of that feminine pronoun.

Precarious Shelters

Another series, *Precarious Shelters*, arose from seeing neighborhoods around the world, and in the US as well, in which families were living in improvised housing, often made from discarded sheet metal and wood. Abrams made her first Precarious Shelter in 2016, and she had intended to concentrate more on working on the series than her teaching finally allowed.

"But when COVID hit, all of a sudden I had this residency in my own studio," Abrams said, and she began to work on the *Precarious Shelters* in earnest.

Because she has long wanted her work to address social justice, Abrams will be donating ten percent of the proceeds from the Precarious Shelter series to Groundworks Collaborative, an organization that provides support to families and individuals facing housing or food insecurities in the greater Brattleboro area.

Made using various combinations of wire frames, netting, crocheted fibers, lacquered sewing pattern paper, paint or thread, each of the *Precarious Shelters*, like the *Women Forms*, conveys a unique sense of character.

On her website, Abrams writes that the series "explores the vessel as a symbol of home, and honors women's roles in their homes and societies. It also exposes the precarious nature of some homes and serves as a reminder that universal emotions like hope, anxiety, joy and despair reside in those homes."

Jackie Abrams: 45 Years of Making *may be seen at Mitchell-Giddings Fine Arts, 183 Main Street, Brattleboro. Temporary hours are Fridays and Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sundays 12 to 5 p.m. Check the website for expanded hours beginning in June at mitchell-giddingsfinearts.com or call (802) 251-8290. You may make an appointment to come in. Masks and physical distancing are required. See Abrams' work and read about her craft development work with women around the world at jackieabrams.com.*



AL KAREVY PHOTO

Souda, one of Abrams' Women Forms vessels, is made using cotton paper, acrylic paint and mediums, wire, beads, waxed linen and sand. It is 19" tall.