



Weaving her own story



Kari Lonning's work is inspired by the bright colors and fibers of nature.



basket artist kari lonning uses nature as her inspiration

by abby luby | photos by amy dolego

Finding a bird's nest in her rose trellis excites basket artist Kari Lonning. Seeing the nest's natural weave and dense texture inspired Lonning to create her famous "hairy technique" baskets with their multi-colored, crisp tendrils that emit a certain "buzz."

It's just one of many unusual basket styles that have made Lonning, who uses the basket as her canvas and colored rattan as her palette, an internationally renowned artist. Her work has been featured in the White House Collection of American Crafts and as part of the permanent collection at the Smithsonian Museum of Art. For more than 30 years her work has been collected throughout the world. She authored *The Art of Basketry*, the bible for basket teachers, experts and aficionados.

Her baskets bridge the aesthetic gap between fine art and craft. In the home, these stunning sculptural vessels are versatile as either wall or floor art, to be touched and admired.

"My baskets are more than baskets," Lonning says. "Although most people don't use them as baskets, they are constructed so that they can be used. They can be handled. They're not fragile."

Lonning dyes the rattan with fiber-reactive colorfast dyes because of their longevity and for easy cleaning and caring (she advises washing the baskets once a year). The baskets range in price from \$300 to \$5,000.

Ridgefield based, Lonning lives in a 100-plus-year-old house tucked away in an enclave of lofty flowering hedges. She lives with her cat, Kitt, and her Old English sheepdog, Emma, a floppy canine with a perpetually wiggly rump. Her kitchen doubles as her studio, where she sits on a stool at her counter, a peninsula replete with assorted strands of rattan sprouting from old yogurt cups and containers filled with colorful blooms plucked outside and used for inspiration. The room is



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surrounded on three sides by windows looking out at her garden, effusive with rhododendron, peonies and perennials, the flora and fauna whose colors and shapes inform her work.

"Color is one of the major reasons why I make baskets," Lonning says. "The other main influences are nature and architecture. My baskets are a dichotomous combination of structure and the wild. When I look at the garden, at architecture — the spacing, the design, I see a format."

She refers to herself as an avid problem solver who enjoys figuring out the mechanics of a specific design: how many strands of rattan to use, for instance, and how to create a solid surface in the form she wants. Once done, she infuses her calculations with a strong, instinctive creativity, choosing a palette that usually pairs deep, warm hues with dark, neutral shades. When an idea is formulated, she sets to work, the muted sounds of the rattan bending and intertwining like a quiet wind sifting through a stand of bamboo.

The baskets' weightiness is alive with tension and release. The textural weave is a sequence of mini ebbs and flows that lift to catch the light and recede into the shadows like a seamless, moving current. A newly completed "hairy" basket is intricately woven with shades of golden oranges offset by moody mauves and soft olive greens. Bands of color interweave and overlap, accented by the rattan's bristly edges.

Punctuating many of Lonning's baskets are random points of color, a delightful surprise that interrupts the pattern. "There are rewards for the viewer if they look for them," Lonning says, turning one of her double-walled vessels around, pointing to a singular, subtle pattern that's as delicate



as a brief sigh.

Lonning invites interaction with her work and her playfulness teases traditional expectations of the basket. Her double-walled baskets are a basket within a basket; some house marbles that gently clack around when handled, adding a percussive feel that lets us imagine the unseen marbles rolling around in the inner vessel.

“These double-walled baskets are constructed like a house, where I build an outer structure and an inner structure, tying them together with the linear use of color. When people ask me what they can put inside, I tell them it’s a double-wall construction and there already is something inside.”

Prominently shown in a room in her house is a black and white photograph of a young Bill and Hilary Clinton studying one of Lonning’s hairy baskets. The picture is from the mid-1990s and speaks to a notability Lonning has come to accept. But as well known as she and her works are, she regularly reaches out to the global community of artists via the Internet. She periodically connects with artists from all over the world in Twitter sessions that can last up to an hour. “Social media works for me. It’s a way of networking when I choose to,” she says.

Lonning will be exhibiting her work at the Westchester Crafts Show in October and the Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show in November. Ongoing exposure of her work is imperative to Lonning. “It’s always good to keep showing. It keeps your work fresh.” @

You can see Lonning’s work and link to her blog at www.karilonning.com.



Art supplies. Strands of rattan hang in the Ridgefield home of basket artist Kari Lonning, ready to be woven into a new creation. A few of her finished works sit nearby.

Photo by Amy Dolego.