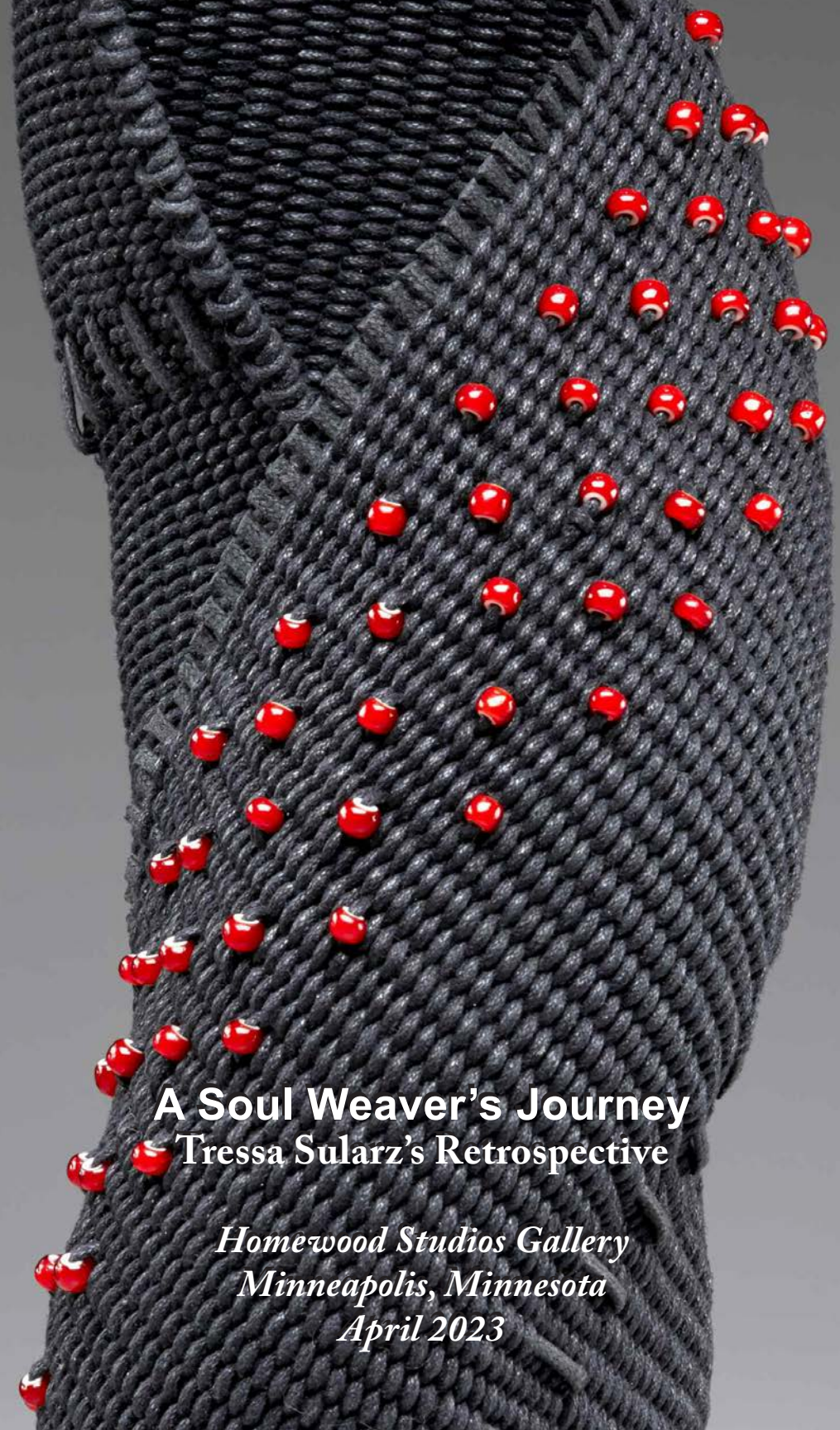


**A
Soul
Weaver's
Journey**

Tressa Sularz



A Soul Weaver's Journey
Tressa Sularz's Retrospective

Homewood Studios Gallery
Minneapolis, Minnesota
April 2023

WEAVE LOVE INTO EVERYTHING

by Tressa Sularz

I am a basketmaker and fiber artist who uses the ancient techniques of wicker, plaiting, coiling, and twining to make things.

I began to sense the magic of making things by watching my namesake Danish grandmother Tressa crochet when I was a child. As an adult, I took a class in basketmaking and fell in love with baskets. In 1990 I quit my corporate job when the boss noticed I had baskets in my eyes.

Watching Joseph Campbell on TV, I was moved to follow my bliss. I have always told my children, John and Andrea, to follow your heart. I have made a good life and earned a living as an artist and a teacher of basketmaking. I built a business on baskets.

My first body of work was traditional, functional baskets: catheads, egg baskets, quilting baskets. I studied the basketmaking traditions of cultures everywhere. My baskets were made to be used as well as admired.

My work transformed when my first husband, John Sularz, died in 2005. I created a body of work called Solitude. Color left. Working through my grief, I made pieces which look like vessels. I learned my inner life can be reflected in the work I make

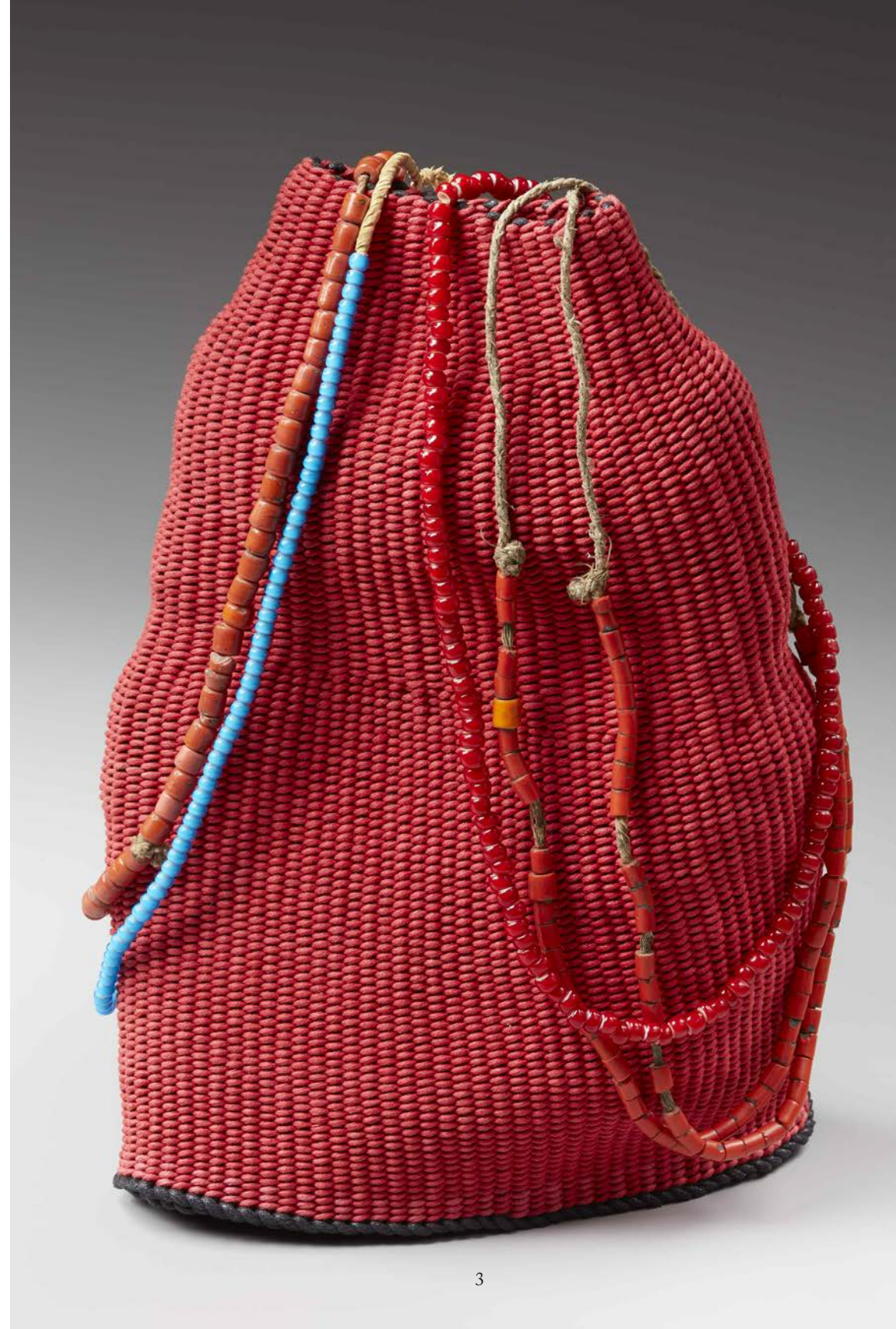
When Mike Hazard and I fell in love in 2010, color returned.

An experience with breast cancer in 2013 forced me to change how I work once again. I experimented with cotton cord, making things that I could hold in my lap. It was liberating to leave the functional work behind and begin to play with more abstract forms.

My work also began to be more influenced by the news of the world. Pieces became not only sculptural in form but embodied a deeper social, emotional, even spiritual content. The work shows what I call my inner gold.

Journey is one of my favorite pieces. It is grace under pressure. The form resembles a human torso; some see a purse or valise. The beads represent one's treasure. The question the piece asks is this: What would you take with you if you had to pick up and leave? For some, it is what you have on your back and no more. A migration is suggested from one place to another, or one state of being to another, even death.

Inspired by my grandmother and artists like Olga de Amaral and Louise Bourgeois, my work embodies what it feels like and means to be a human, dancing through life. I weave love into everything I make.



FIVE BOWLS

by Joyce Sutphen

I would have to have all of them
to place them in the window—

all in a neat row
light

at

just

the right angle

to make the colors shine
blue, purple, orange, gold,

green, filling the box of whiteness,
with their solid being, thinking

of directions:

green, gold, orange (or
is it red?) now verging purple

and back to blue again. If they
were mine, I'd fill them with thought

aesthetic, narrative
logical and comic, then

fill them up with clouds and flower
petals

and other such things she loves.



WE FEEL THE ARC OF TRESSA'S LIFE

by Kristin Makholm

I own one basket by Tressa Sularz. I purchased it from her studio in Lowertown in 2011. It was perfect and I just had to have it. It has a classic basket shape—narrow at the top, bulging just past the middle, perched on four delicate feet. Made of natural and dyed reeds, it is a woven twill cathead design, where if you turn it over the dainty feet morph into four little cat ears. The cathead creates a 9 x 9 square where all the black reeds weave together. Tressa says you make a cathead from the bottom, so it's the ears and the square that start it all off, winding towards a perfect circle at its rim.

Since this—my first basket—I have seen and admired many of Tressa's delights. I have seen her objects shape-shift through myriad forms and feelings—from the functional to purely sculptural, traditional to iconoclastic, monochromatic to dyed and beaded bursts of color. My basket sits perky and self-assured on a shelf, whereas later works slump with the force of gravity or exhaustion. We feel the arc of Tressa's life as she probes the stability of a cathead, the rebirth of pods and shells, her own disbelief in seeing a shaky form stand all on its own. We marvel at objects that take shape with the barest of references to what we know, as if weaving, coiling, plaiting, and crocheting have shown her a new way to see and feel.

And yet to the natural world they always return, for Tressa's baskets are nothing if not a profound lesson in the need to look closely at all that surrounds us. Even my one modest basket reveals to me Tressa's limitless vision, her attention to detail, her consummate craftsmanship, and the love with which she creates these redolent forms. I notice its rim, coiled like a snake, fixed with a thread around a twisted cord. I count as one reed in each row skips a beat, spiraling over the surface, ending precisely at Tressa's signature. I feel the basket's rhythmic pulse as I pick it up—full with air and space and so light—still smelling like the soil whence it came.

Slowly experiencing the world, one basket at a time.

CATHEAD

I have studied basketmaking traditions from around the world. Every culture makes baskets. The form of this cathead basket is inspired by a Shaker design. The pattern is a serpentine twill. I have created 36 original designs for baskets. Selling those designs has been one of the several ways I earn a living as an artist.





ECSTASY

When I weave, my mind travels. I go places. It's a journey. This work is slow and labor-intensive. I like meticulous. There is something ancient and rhythmic about weaving with our hands. Weaving a piece like this one, which is called Ecstasy, is a kind of ecstatic experience. I hope you feel it too.



HER WORK CALLS AND RESPONDS

by Kimberly Nightingale

Tressa Sularz's devotion to her medium translates into movement, exploration, change—and ultimately—to an intimate love and connection with the divine.

Many of her baskets shapeshift: they sing, undulate like earth and water, appear as having birthed themselves out of streams and up through forest floors, between tree roots. Some baskets are so bright—like glowing fruit—you want to touch them, rub them against your cheek, bite into them.

Her work calls and responds, a repeat, repeat, repeat and echo, echo, echo of form and life, action and reflection. The scope of her artwork translates into a hero's journey of embraced contradiction: the trial and joy, pleasure and heartache of a life lived big and full, and quiet and light too. Brava, Tressa!



FINDING HER BEST SELF

by Tracy Krumm

I am certain that anyone who has been privileged to visit Tressa's studio arrived at a magical showplace of inspiration, filled with numerous finished works—too many to count—from several series made over the past several decades. Filled with treasures, books, samples, and work in progress, this space is special, sacred, crammed with details and stories and ideas. Her studio is a sanctuary of creativity where the work culminates from a lifetime dedicated to mastery of craft, form, vision, necessity.

From her beginnings as a basketmaker, Tressa has honed an aesthetic that has become symbolic of her abstract artistic work. With a practice both fluid and deep, she embraces organic process and its intimate connection to life. Her work is both dimensional and linear. Planning and connecting the dots moves her from one idea to the next, and the work has become about the work.

Approaching pieces with no particular reason but to explore materials and their transformation through process into object—this has made space for the greatest shifts in the work, inspiring and guiding change as she continues her focus on form through technical mastery.

Tressa said, "At some point, letting go became a mantra, along with the constant reinforcement of the idea that if it's that important, it will happen." To me, this is a guiding principle to being in the studio and dedicating herself to a career as an artist. To speak with her was such a gift for me, as kindred object maker, with the language of constructed textiles conjuring metaphors for dependence and independence in so many ways. There is an air to her practice that is all at once practical and essential, thoughtful and intuitive. Each piece is so clearly about the journey of her experience with the work, in an exchange of leading and following with the materials and forms that emerge.

This love of material and process, and the meditation of the work, all lead to the meaning—they are the meaning. Tressa's work never pretends to be otherwise—it simply embraces these essential elements and then lets go, so that memory and energy flow through the hand, and the work seemingly makes itself, perfect and uncontrived.

That she is finding her best self, here, in this work, is apparent.



QUATREFOIL

All baskets are made by hand. No machine can make a basket. The baskets which I made in the beginning, like this piece titled Quatrefoil, had to be imagined first. They are previsualized. Every detail is worked out either in a drawing or in my head before weaving begins.



OF BASKETS, BUTTONS, AND THE ART OF MOURNING

by Robert Silberman

I know next to nothing about basketmaking, although I have always loved the artistry of traditional basketmakers, from those working in the great African American sweetgrass tradition on the East Coast to the magnificent Native American basketmakers on the West Coast. A long time ago I was fortunate to meet Lillian Elliott at the Split Rock Arts Program and see how a contemporary artist of skill and imagination could take basketmaking in a whole new direction. That encounter helped prepare me to appreciate Tressa Sularz's achievement: the relatively straightforward baskets that emphasize a single color, the more sculptural works with their twisting forms and handsome complement of beads, and the unusual creations that contain a gold or rust-colored bounty, egg-like objects that suggest an archaic hoard or futuristic artifacts retrieved from a galaxy far, far away.

The works that most fascinate me, however, are from the Solitude series, created as a response to the death of Tressa's first husband, John Sularz. Perhaps the reliance on mainly uncolored, natural materials appeals to my Midwestern plainness. The forms have the elegance of

true simplicity, the kind often identified with the Shakers: functionality raised to the highest level. I like that as well. But what makes several works from this series so intriguing to me are two other aspects: the use of red, and the buttons.

The appeal of the red is perhaps more easily explained. A little red can go a long way, figuratively speaking, but in two of the Solitude works the red goes a long way, literally—in strips of fabric that run from one end to the other along the edges of the top opening. Perhaps that indicates an unhealed wound or scar. In any case, the red is an attention getter, yet not overdone; it wards off blandness while adding boldness. I can't say I love red the way Lorca loved green: "Verde, que te quiero verde." But I love Tressa's use of red, as in another work in the same series, where two small rings of red encircle the ends, administering precise little jolts that enliven the whole.

Still, it's the buttons I can't stop thinking about. The buttons provide, in Tressa's words, "a vision of closure." In the Solitude series that means going from the physical to the psychological, with Tressa giving buttons metaphorical, even metaphysical, significance in



relation to the overarching theme of death, grief.

It's usually only when one is lost, or maybe discovered unbuttoned when it shouldn't be, that buttons get my attention. But Tressa's use of buttons got me thinking, and now I've got buttons on the brain: the lost and the found, the unbuttoned and the buttoned . . . buttons, buttons, everywhere. In Tressa's work, the buttons stand out because they are used in such an unusual, suggestive fashion. They are surprising and beautiful because they are so not cute, so not either purely functional or merely decorative. The buttons, in their modest, carefully ordered patterns on the sides of some of the works, hint at the enormous problem of containment. It is easy to imagine grief as a powerful expansive force that radiates out like a shock wave. In Tressa's work all that uncontrollable grief is encapsulated as the implied content of a small hand-held carrier, somewhere between a doctor's bag and a firewood tote, accompanied by those icons of closure in neat array. But the red thread used to attach the buttons means the burden is clear. Even in this undemonstrative, unflashy form, the elegance is always being tested by those buttons, the plainness by that red, the simplicity by the disruptive power of grief. In a world of such order, the smallest variation reverberates like clashing cymbals. An extra bit of red added to the thread on just one button reveals the intensity that is there, under control. Amid all the ranks of buttons the introduction of extra spacing and asymmetry, though with overall geometry preserved, suggests something less static, more dynamic, like a game of Go in progress or at least positions laid out and ready for the opening move. The emphasis on order and control hints at darker forces, disorder, a lack of control. I should note that some works in the Solitude series have on their sides not buttons but small images of street signs in compressed montages, a much more intense if still metaphorical expression of the underlying powerful emotions.

Tressa made me pay extra attention to the buttons. The works as wholes matter more, yet the buttons remain essential. They signal the need for psychological, not just physical, closure. They also express the free play of the creative spirit, as elements whose artistic role goes far beyond simple utility. I am grateful to Tressa and her buttons for the reminder of what art and artists do: make us look, make us think, make us live with a keener awareness of things as great as grief or as small as a button.



MIGRATING TOGETHER

by Mike Hazard

A piece composed of many pieces, Tressa's Migration is a breakthrough.

"The many elements of this piece represent the multitude of reasons people migrate. The loose ends hang to the earth, leading all in different directions," writes the artist. "I'm here because my Danish grandmother sought refuge in America when she was a child. There is solidarity, safety, and community in migrating together."

"Sularz's Migration challenges the viewer to bring their own stories and narratives to the work," writes Witt Siasoco, a juror for the

Wintertide 2019 Biennial where Migration was awarded Third Prize in the three-dimensional category. "The abstract piece paired with the title Migration evokes many questions about the meaning and can lead to many conversations about the state of the world today. Aside from the social context, this piece is a departure from her previous weavings—moving from the pedestal to the wall."

"Olé! It's a call to the guts," says the artist Raoul Benavides.

I see a huddled mass, yearning to breathe free.



FABRICATIONS

by Mary E. Hazard

Chambered nautilus
A wondrous whelk Triton's conch
Aladdin's slipper
Curls a perfect pirouette
Magic shapes of things to come



HER BASKETS SPEAK

by Margaret Hasse

Before we came into being, young Tressa learned
the heavenly pull of handicraft through crochet.

Grownup Tressa could twine, plait, coil and weave.
The tedium of slow making hummed in her hands.

Our maker listened to what fiber—rattan, waxed linen,
pine needles, wood, cotton cord—wanted to become.

Sometimes when she was in a dark place, after John died,
she found a way out through making us.

Some of us are pale as ships in morning light, fastened yet airy,
containing invisible weight inside, yet free to float.

When she grew better from illness,
one of us stood on our own, like her courage.

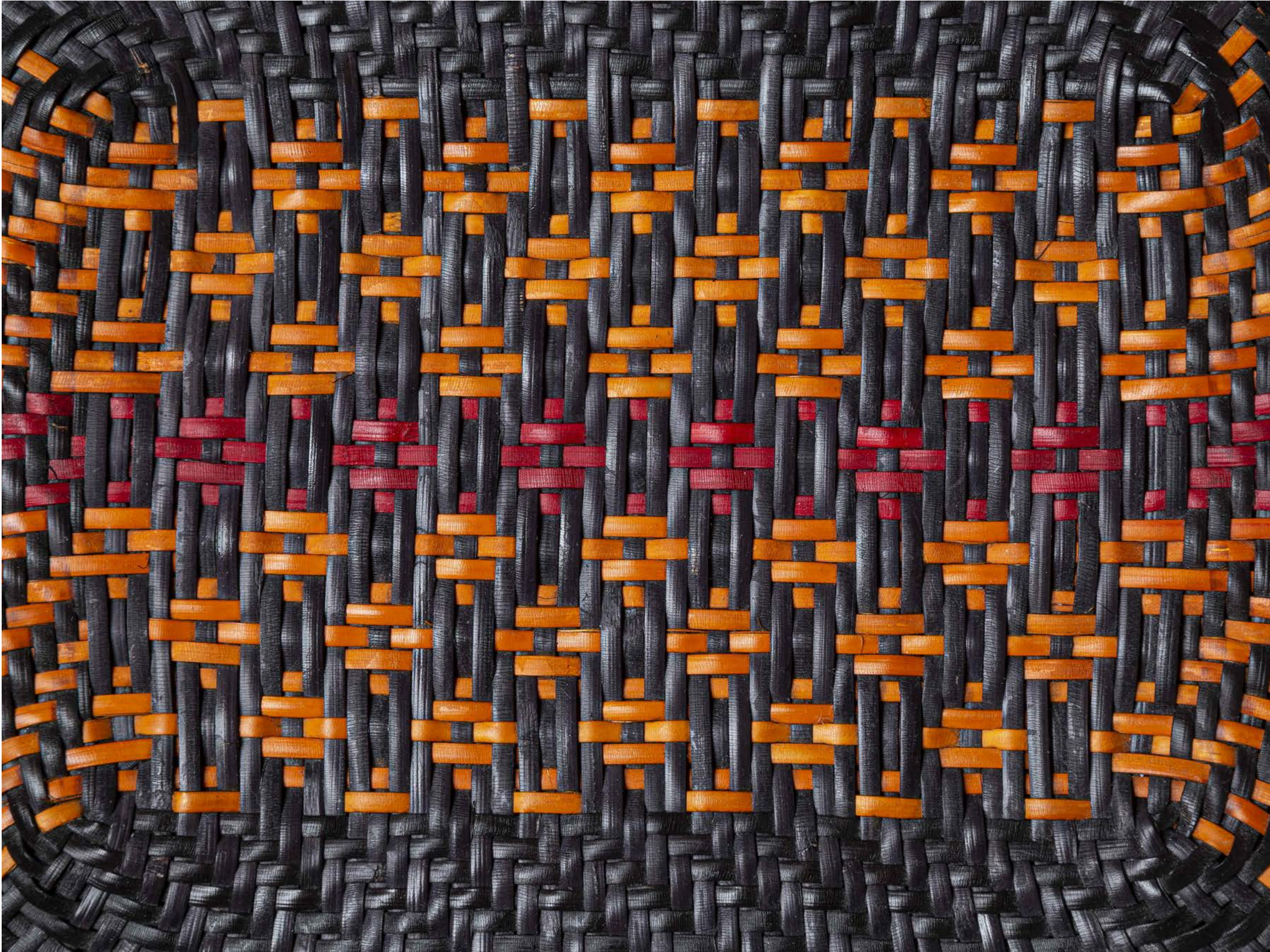
She made black baskets holding golden eggs
as if a storied goose laid them.

A blue sculpture opened up like a morning glory
that trumpeted joy.

We manifest her inner life, how she attends to beauty—
seeing it, creating it with love.

We are her body of work.





use

by Tish Jones

a gatherer's purse, the basket,
artifact of my ancestors. archetype
of their strength. evidence of their savvy.

i see these symbols and see Black women—
no matter the weaver,
and no longer wonder *how* she survived. instead,

i consider the stitch a map for my arrival and ponder
whether a wanderer could read their way back home,
by design—how much rice was cultivated,

collected, and carried, inside of something quite like this,
before we were forced to sew the grains into our scalps
if we wanted to eat? i wonder:

when does a tool become art
and art a symbol of once being free
and self-sufficient?

i consider color.

i always consider

color and trade.

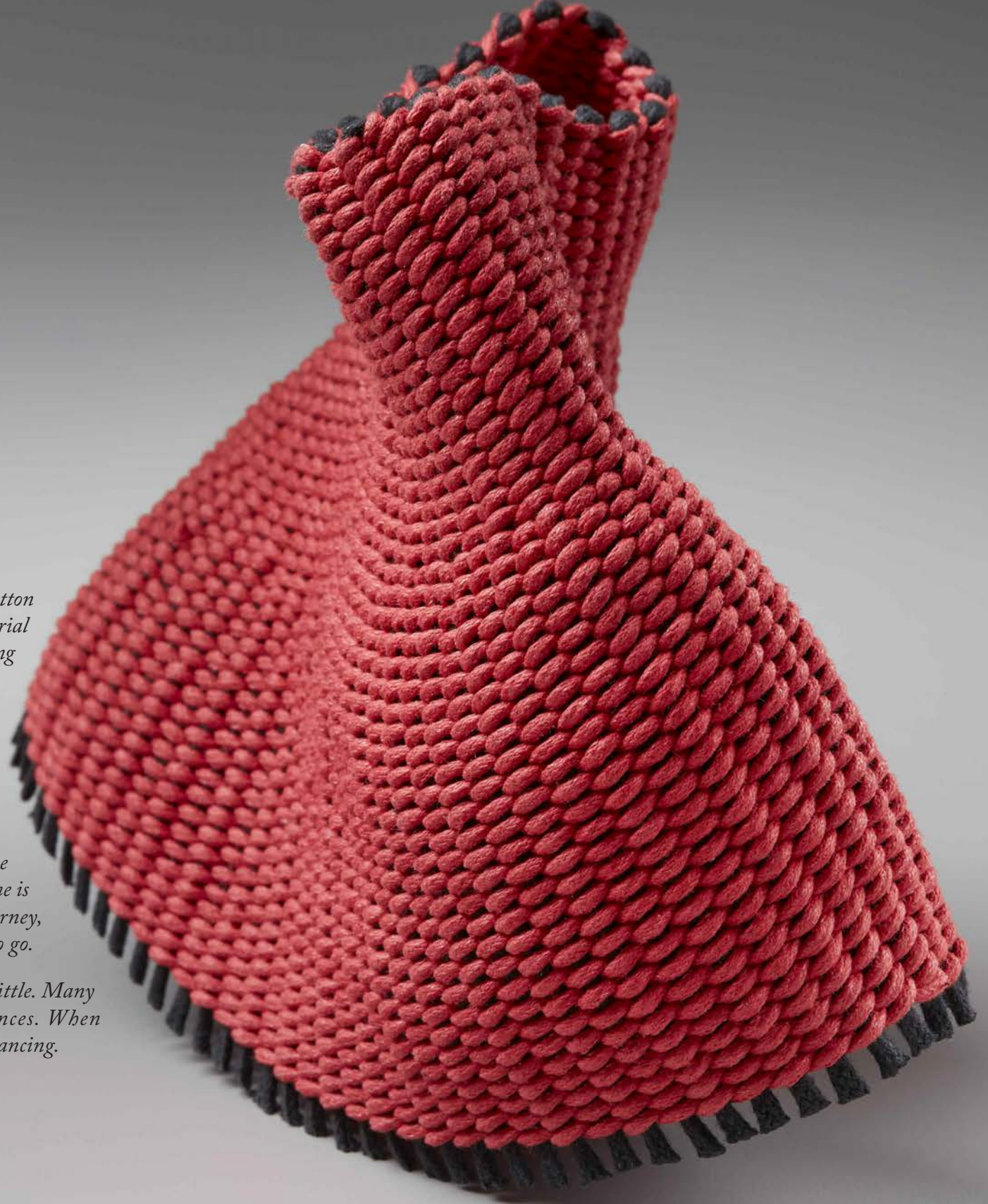


DANCER

With the later work that is twined with cotton cord, I begin without a plan. I let the material and my inner being take me places. Changing the tension in the weaving changes the shapes that grow. They are happy surprises.

Pieces like this one, Dancer, literally grow out of my hands and heart and the material. I love it when a piece starts to speak to me. The two of us are working together. One of us is letting the other one know where the piece should go. A joy for me is allowing the material to take me on a journey, and wherever it goes is where I want it to go.

I dreamed of being a dancer when I was little. Many of my works look like dancers and dances. When I am weaving, I feel like my fingers are dancing.



ALL THINGS FORMED BY LOVE

by Margaret Hasse

Her beloved grandmother lit her interest
in crochet and slow-time handwork.
Tressa learned to weave a life
with strands of kindness, beauty, and love.

She dreamed something
in her hands that must be held
like a baby by its bottom—a basket!
Later, the depth of her knowledge
of basketry—tradition, craft—
refused to let pain and grief
stop her creating.
She invited new materials to guide her
to new shapes, new styles and healing.

Here are baskets pale, calm,
buttoned as if just wanting to breathe.
Also basket sculptures with secretive stones
and hidden gold inside dark cotton weave.
This one swirls as if an invisible dancer
models a very red dress,
and that one rests on its side
like a blue shell sent ashore
by a generous wave of the sea.

Tressa wears simple clothing—
black dress, necklace
with a red stone in a silver heart—
and a calm, welcoming smile.
Now her hands rest in her lap
without their trademark
Midnight-in Moscow nail polish.
In her workshop, some baskets
in process are still connected
to their bobbins of cotton fiber.
Like all things formed by love,
they, too, are beautiful
as unfinished symphonies.



TALISMAN

I love to coil baskets. Coiling is a laborious sewing or stitching technique. Coiling Talisman took about 50 hours. I added beads with various charms. Some of the objects were gifts, others simply items which attracted. Together they make a talisman, an object with magical powers. Weaving makes me happy.



A SOUL WEAVER'S JOURNEY

by Freya Manfred

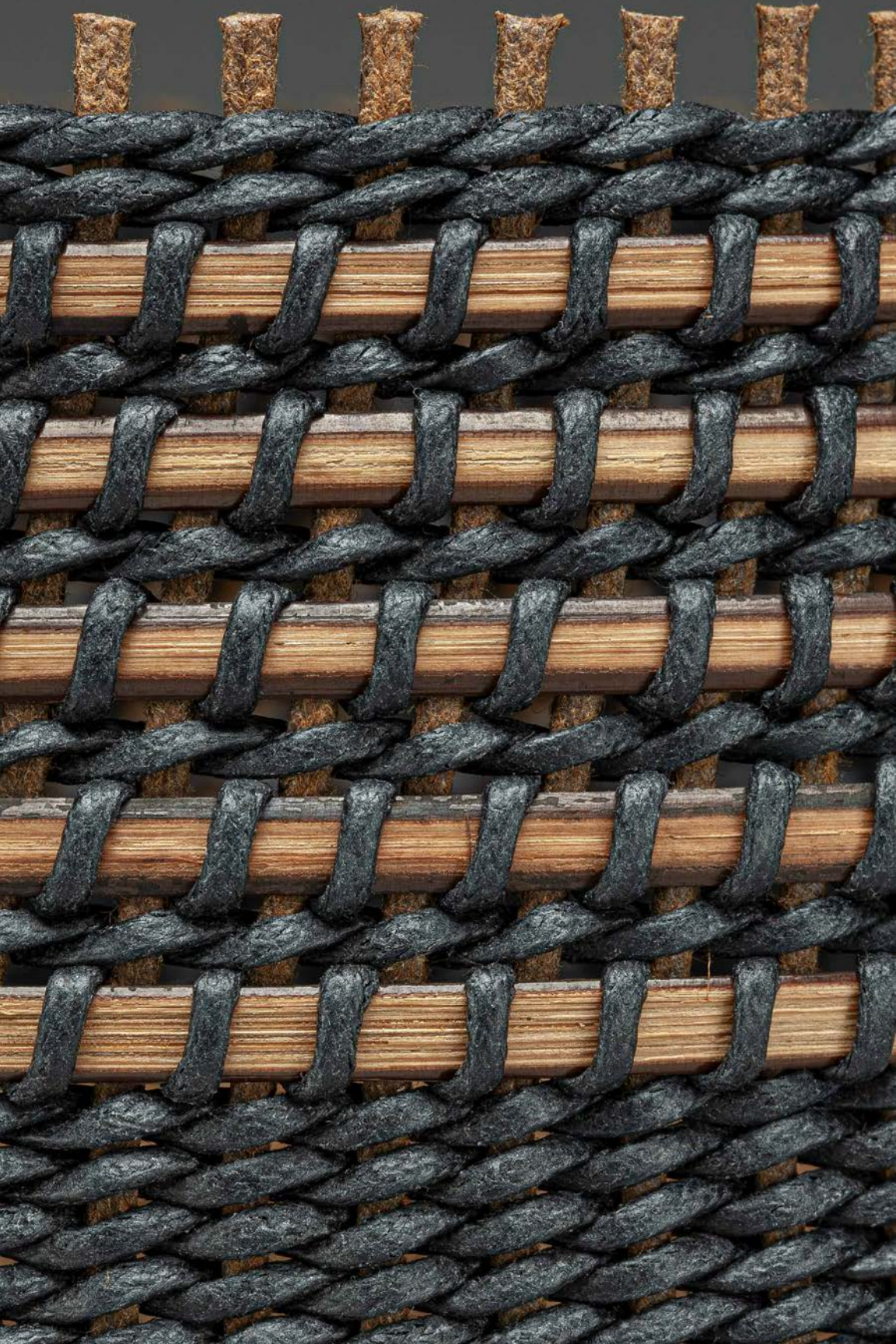
See the shapes of ferns and twigs, shells and stones,
of bright waving grasses and dark rambling roots,
with water all around, and air and fire never far away,
all the wild serenity of nature woven into every piece,
speaking of survival, of love, and of loss.

Discover the sensual, spirit-driven fibers that glow
with the inner gold she says we all have inside us,
or shine black as night with darts of red lightning,
or gleam in quiet footsteps of sky-sweet turquoise,
or bring us peace in fields of tan and bronze.

Get lost in labyrinths of coiling, twining, flat plaiting,
and sturdy wicker, in every dancing, flying form—
beauties which celebrate the artist and her creations
working together in the same direction, to welcome
the freedom of things going where they want to go.

The weaver's body enters each vessel she creates,
and each is a child of her sure heart and hands,
which bestow their gifts and give us faith
to follow the waves from the tips of her fingers
into a world where her art is the love she has to give.



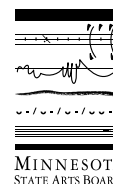


GRATITUDE

The artist gratefully acknowledges the many collaborators who have created this book and her retrospective.

- **Margaret Hasse** began writing poetry as a child and never stopped. Poems from her eight books have been imprinted on Saint Paul sidewalks and are often read on *The Writers' Almanac*.
- Filmmaker, poet, and photographer, **Mike Hazard** is happily married to the artist. He made the photos on pages 13, 20, 22, 36, and 40.
- **Dr. Mary E. Hazard** was a professor of English, scholar of the Renaissance, poet, and beloved mother-in-law.
- **Tish Jones** is a Black woman poet and cultural strategist from Saint Paul, Minnesota, committed to Black life and liberation.
- Fiber artist **Tracy Krumm** has exhibited, taught, and lectured for over 35 years and is currently Director for Artistic Advancement at Textile Center.
- **Jane Leach** and **David Bengtson** are fine writers and teachers of writing who read and proofread the book.
- **Peter Lee** is a meticulous photographer who made the photos for the cover and pages 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14, 16, 19, 25, 26, 29, 30, 33, 34, and 38.
- **Dr. Kristin Makhholm** is an art historian and curator, working at present in philanthropic development at Minnesota Public Radio.
- **Freya Manfred** has written two memoirs, and her ninth book of poetry, *When I Was Young and Old*, has been published by Nodin Press.
- The former creator, executive director, and publisher of the *Saint Paul Almanac*, **Kimberly Nightingale** believes in the power of people to tell their own stories.
- Graphic designer and artist, **Mark Odegard** makes beautiful books.
- **George Roberts, Kraig Rasmussen, Jim Becker, Joe Sularz, Andrea Sularz, John Sularz, Lucinda Anderson, Debbie Johnson, Margarita Mac, Dan Chouinard, and Amanda Rose** collaborated to support the exhibition.
- **Robert Silberman** is a professor of Art History at the University of Minnesota and a widely published art critic.
- **Smart Set** printed the book.
- The Poet Laureate of Minnesota (2011-21), **Joyce Sutphen** is grateful for all the friends (each one a wonder) she's met along the way.

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