

# TRESSA SULARZ

LETTING GO

BY ANN BROCKETTE

**B**asket maker Tressa Sularz from Minneapolis, Minnesota, creates unique forms that reflect her long journey fraught with illness and the inability to work in traditional materials. In 2013, having been diagnosed with breast cancer, Sularz underwent numerous surgeries, chemotherapy, and radiation treatments that resulted in two significant outcomes: First, she is cancer-free, and second, she has renewed creative energy to work with new materials and new forms. "I found myself dancing towards the top of life again," Sularz states, "... and energized by my new work."

The most significant change in Sularz's work began with "letting go of [my] control of direction." She allowed the creation to take hold and direct her in the transformation of twine into its own shape. This focus on the natural movement and transitions of the fibers created vessels that invoke cocoons of stillness and inward rejuvenation. Encouraged to let the "form go where it wants to go," undulating lines and sinuous forms manifested themselves in her hands. Now, she allows the weaving to show her the way to proceed, and the feel of the vessel to dictate the final form.

## The Journey Begins

When Sularz began making baskets in 1972, she worked with rattan, using a continuous twill weave that created a serpentine pattern. She hand-dyed and soaked the rattan, and built vessels with predetermined designs. She built typical shapes, row by row, based on carefully worked-out calculations that controlled the pattern weave according to a shape she had already planned.

Sularz followed this technique until, in 2004, family concerns restricted her work. She entered a period she calls her "quiet time." She constructed three-dimensional forms, twisting and turning flat, mat-like rattan structures into shapes that are reflective of water and movement, like vessels on a journey. *Passages* is an example from that period.

In 2013, the physical limitations imposed by her illness led to a new body of work. Her materials changed; her weaving technique changed. Sularz now uses waxed cotton for the spokes and the weavers. The cotton

does not require dyeing and soaking, and its flexibility and portability enable her to weave when and where she wants.

She began twining, which lets her play with shapes. *Dowry* is an example of this transition. It is an oval-shaped basket with bands of hand-dyed Japanese cane. Twined with waxed cotton, the Japanese cane is wrapped in the mid-section, using a ti band to stiffen and hold the upright and horizontal elements together. This seminal work suggested incorporating other objects into the baskets, not to be decorative, but to add meaning and spirituality to her work. When you peer into the base of *Dowry*, for example, a Hmong dowry bronze bar surprises you.



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LEFT: **Chamber**  
(In Progress); 2015

ABOVE: **Dancing My Way Home**; 2015; red & gold glass beads, waxed cotton; 7 x 6.25" dia.

RIGHT: **Dowry**; 2014; hand-dyed Japanese cane, waxed cotton; 3.5 x 8.5 x 6"

BELOW: **Passages**; 2004; natural & hand-dyed rattan; 6 x 6 x 25.5"



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## Discovering the Inner Life of the Vessel

Amazed and thrilled with the flexibility of materials and technique, Sularz realized she could let the process follow its own direction and form as it was created. A relatively flat piece may turn up at the corners and twist into an unexpected amorphous shape. Sularz allows this process to unfold. "It feels so wonderful," she says. "I am gifted each day by what is happening with my work."

No longer tied to her initial intention of the work, Sularz weaves several rows, and sets the piece on her worktable where she and her feline studio-mate, Emma, can enjoy it. "Although I had a vision for the direction this piece might go, it is telling me something different. I will listen to what it tells me. It will rest on my worktable until I understand where it wants to go."

Most of her pieces, as illustrated by *Chamber* begin in a fan-like shape. But as the weaving progresses, the form wraps around itself, origami-like; and with the addition of spokes, it flares into a bulbous shape and turns inward. *Chamber* is undefined at this point. Sularz holds it and turns it, waiting for its inner shape to reveal itself. What is she holding? What is the

work communicating? As she weaves, the piece forms into its own shape, creating a shell-like vessel that calls the viewer to look inside. "I did not set out to create a shell-like form," she states. Having relinquished control of the process, Sularz was open to more experimentation with form.

For over thirty years, Sularz had been collecting trade beads and had stowed them in a special box for her own enjoyment. "The white-heart trade beads have always been a favorite. I love the white core... and hearing [their] white heart..." The color wrapped around the heart core is enhanced by the strong contrast to the heart itself. She realized it was time to share the beads with others.

The struggles she faced in her personal journey led Sularz to recognize our human ability to overlook "what is going on inside." In *Dancing My Way Home* she adds beads to the interior of her vessel, irregularly spaced red beads to signify the path

*Ann Harrington Brockett*, Ph.D. is a former professor of humanities and communications, and has been an author and freelance writer for thirty years. She has written and produced a musical adaptation of Oedipus, published as *A Story of Shadow and Gold* (Dramatic Publishing). Recently, she began writing about American textile artists and has contributed articles to *Fiber Art Now*, the *SACA Journal*, *SDA Journal*, and *The Velvet Highway*. She has been active in the field of textiles as advisor for nonprofit organizations, and served as interim Executive Director of the Surface Design Association.



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that could be taken and gold beads to suggest our "inner gold."

*Spire* illustrates the joining of several paths Sularz has been taking in her work. Red white-heart trade beads in the last row of weaving show how line can direct us indirectly, while shape, which folds back upon itself naturally, evokes the need to touch, to hold the work in your



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*Tressa Sularz* has been making baskets for almost 45 years. Her work is in the permanent collections of the Hennepin County Library (Minneapolis) and the Goldstein Gallery (St. Paul). She is also included in several publications, including *500 Baskets* (Lark Books, 2006) and *All Things Considered VIII* (National Basketry Organization, 2015). An exhibiting artist for over twenty-five years, she exhibited her baskets in the *Radical Basketry Invitational* (Textile Center, Minneapolis) and *All Things Considered VIII* juried exhibition (National Basketry Organization) this year. She will have a solo exhibition at the Textile Center in March–April 2016.

hand, to turn it and look inside. This vessel demands a connection from the viewer. "It fits nicely into your hands; it is meant to be held... it has to be held."

In her latest vessel, which is in process, Sularz has added over 250 cobalt blue and white hearts, an appropriate number she believes, although it could grow to many more. No longer sequestered in the studio, in value and context the trade beads unite creator, creation, and the viewer to form a unified and universal gift.

### Emergence

Sularz's latest vessels have added exciting dimension to her work. They are larger, often multi-chambered, and spill over with new found objects. Sularz buys silk cocoons in their natural state and finger-paints them, as a child does, molding them in gold. In *Reclining*, she has added red paint, which she wipes off so that the gold beneath shows through. Placed in the pod, they remind us of life's fragility—and its vibrancy.

*Emergence* reveals the direction Sularz is taking today. She often works on several vessels simultaneously. She refers to them as "starts" because they relate to each other and build upon one another, but are decidedly different. They are what they want to be, filled to the brim with golden cocoons, and remind us that we all harbor silk promises of more to come. "I am enjoying the ride this piece has taken me on," Sularz says. "It tells me I still have a lot to give."

LEFT: **Untitled** (In Progress); 2015; cobalt blue White Heart trade beads; waxed cotton

BELOW LEFT: **Chamber**; 2015; waxed cotton; 15 x 6 x 6"

ABOVE: **Reclining**; 2015; hand-painted silk cocoons, waxed cotton; 2.5 x 14 x 2.5"

BELOW: **Dancing My Way Home** (Detail)



# CONTENTS



ABOVE:  
Tressa Sularz,  
**Emergence**;  
2015; hand-  
painted silk  
cocoons,  
waxed cotton;  
(left) 8 x 4.75 x  
2.25"; (right)  
6 x 5 x 2.5"

## BASKETRY HAPPENINGS

### 4 **When Basket Makers Get Together**

By Lois Russell

A report on *Tradition & Innovation in Basketry VIII*.

## PRESERVING THE CRAFT

### 8 **Collecting and Using Vines**

By Shereen LaPlantz with Doris Messick  
Illustrated by Jane Sullivan

The first in a series re-introducing articles from *The News Basket*, published by Shereen LaPlantz.

## PROFILES

### 14 **Tressa Sularz: Letting Go**

By Ann Brockette

### 18 **Peeta Tinay: A Dance of Texture & Color**

By Leanne Jewett

## TAKING STOCK

### 22 **Pine Needle Designs**

By Dwight Moore  
A basket maker tells his story.

### 27 **CALENDAR OF EVENTS**