

# Sunshine ARTIST™

AUGUST 2013



*Vivification,*  
C. Elizabeth Smathers

Lending  
an Artistic  
Hand

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Setting  
up for  
success

# Weaving her own way

C. Elizabeth Smathers

By Nate Shelton  
SA Editor



*Resurgence* (6.5" x 16.5" x 15.5"; dyed pine needles, raffia and walnut slices on Japanese red maple)

C. Elizabeth Smathers has enjoyed a long, successful career as a fiber artist – which is fitting, considering that her love affair with the medium stretches all the way back to childhood. “I made doll clothes for my dolls,” she explained. “I didn’t *play* with the dolls. I just made clothes and rugs.”

For that matter, artistry itself has been with the Virginia native since her earliest days. “I’ve been doing [art] forever – for as long as I remember,” she said, crediting her parents with fostering her early creative

inclinations. For example, her mother would bring home materials from art-in-the-classroom courses while working on a master’s degree in education after the family had moved to Michigan, and her father worked at a local YMCA.

Per Smathers, “At night, we would go and we would work in the [YMCA’s] woodshop ... and did summer crafts at camp.” In truth, woodworking interested her so much that her artistic career might have gone in a completely different direction if not for the oft-misogynistic





*Delta* (6.5" x 20.5" x 17"; pine needles, waxed linen and walnut slices on pear)

policies of yesteryear's public education systems. "I always wanted to do woodworking when I was little but when I was in high school, girls had to take home [economics]. You couldn't take shop."

The same went for an early interest in pottery. It's OK though; eventually, woodworking, ceramics and other odds and ends all found a place in Smathers' *oeuvre*.

Specifically, her modern output consists of intricately designed pine-needle baskets, which she creates using coiled basketry – a prehistoric technique – and accents with hand-turned wood, hand-thrown pottery, gourds, rocks and even metal.

Clearly, the striking results speak for themselves.

But just as early discouragement regarding allegedly masculine art forms led Smathers to fiber, it was her and her late husband's move to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she still resides, that brought her to basketry. "At that point, I was a weaver of tapestries and rugs," she said. After a Tulsa-area gallery wanted 3-D art and asked her if she had any baskets, though, she assured them that she did – *then* went home and started making some.

Fortunately, the little white lie worked out nicely in the end.

When asked why she started to

blend other types of art and found objects into her work, Smathers revealed it was all about getting the right look from the materials at hand. "I started with the pine needles, and I was doing traditional basketry... but wanted them to get more flow, more up and down, more movement in the basket," she said, adding that she then began using gourds as a base.

The change helped but still didn't give her the effect she wanted. Plus, there was that lifelong adoration of wood to consider. She then "...started cutting wood in quarter-inch-thick pieces – not just in circles but odd, pentagonal, hexagonal or



*Chapeau D'Ete* (6.5" x 18.5" x 18.5"; pine needles, waxed linen and walnut slices on cherry)





*Transformation* (7" x 11.5" x 11.5"; pine needles, waxed linen, shells and glass beads on walnut slice)

triangular shapes. Anything, just to try to get it to undulate more." Yet she still found the result lacking.

From there, Smathers began to experiment with clay, and while that medium proved to be nearly perfect, wood kept calling her back. "So I thought, 'Well, this is my chance to try to do woodturning,'" she recalled fondly. "It was a good excuse, and it was a business expense. So I finally got to do what I always wanted to do."

Despite the fact that it took her so long to try her hand at woodturning, she wouldn't have it any other way. "It's what happens in your life that leads you to where you are now," she offered. "Possibly had I learned

[woodturning] in high school, I would have not enjoyed it as much, and I would not have ever gone back to it."

In addition to priding herself on turning her own wood, throwing her own clay and weaving her baskets by hand, Smathers is also constantly on the hunt for the perfect needles and lumber. For the former, she prefers Southern longleaf pines, though she's used needles that have come from as far away as Korea courtesy of one of her sons.

As to wood, she seeks out new pieces wherever her travels may take her — and she's done a *lot* of traveling. To date, her trips have included childhood moves to Michigan and

Tennessee, teenaged visits to her grandparents in Florida, the aforementioned relocation to Tulsa and, of course, the many roads she's ridden during her career as a working artist.

Speaking of the latter, and considering that Smathers' professional artistic career began in the 1970s, you'd be correct in assuming that she has a long history of participating in art & craft shows. She first started exhibiting during her years at Tennessee's former Memphis Academy of Art, now the Memphis College of Art, where she met her husband, and she still does it to this day.

That being said, she's oddly



*Conjoined* (7" x 11" x 7.25"; pine needles and raffia on mesquite)

reluctant to name any events of which she's particularly enamored. This reticence is partially due to her habit of changing up her show schedule every few years to keep things fresh. But perhaps more importantly, as she put it, "I think the favorite show is the one you're at."

This doesn't mean that she doesn't have preferences when it comes to festivals, though. Smathers confided that she likes short shows more than longer ones, and she'd just as soon not deal with the small percentage of customers who are belligerent or have the temerity to question her prices. And she's always loved the camaraderie.

"I think they're all fun when

you get there," she said. "You're with other artists, and you see your friends." It also helps if, like her, you can make friends anywhere. "I did a show in Charlotte, [North Carolina] this May ... and met a lot of new friends. Most of the people there were people I've never known, and we just all had a really good time."

So Smathers keeps on weaving, calling on her arsenal of artistic talents to create one new basket after another. Some only take days to complete, while others might take weeks or even months. Regardless of how much time or effort she expends, though, it's worth it so long as the final piece can find a good home. "[People] say how my work

should be in a museum and how they're really touched by it," she said with a laugh, "and I say how they could put a mortgage on their home and buy a basket."

However, Smathers does have one desire that's even stronger than the urge to unite her work with satisfied customers, and it's every bit as beautiful as her baskets. "I just wish everybody could just get along and be happy with each other and enjoy the differences in each other," she said. "I just don't understand why people have to get so upset about little things."

*More of C. Elizabeth Smathers' work can be found on her website, [www.fiberexpressions.net](http://www.fiberexpressions.net).* 🌟