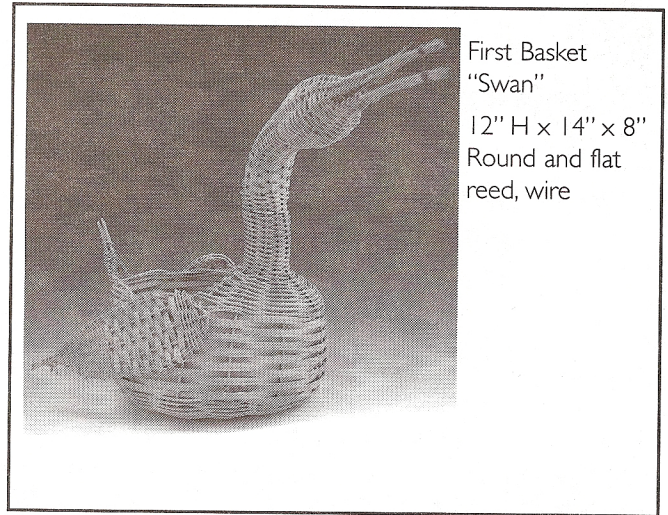


# My Journey with Pine Needles

By: C. Elizabeth Smathers



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First Basket  
"Swan"  
12" H x 14" x 8"  
Round and flat  
reed, wire

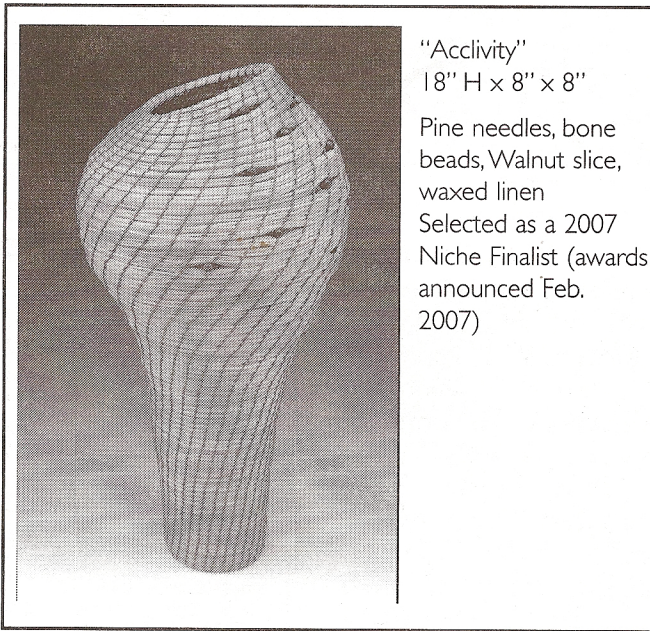
Changing my artistic expression from loom woven tapestries and rugs to pine needles basketry has led me in new creative directions.

As a small child, I was given a rigid heddle loom and made rugs and scarves for my dolls. While in grade school, my mother, who was getting her master's degree in Education and had to take an art class, brought some basket reed home from her class. I used some of the reed to make my first basket, a swan. It was many years later that I made another basket. Having joined the Handweaver's Guild of Nashville, some members were making egg baskets and I began weaving a variety of baskets in my spare time for fun. I found that I really enjoyed working with natural materials like honeysuckle, grape vines, daylily leaves, etc. While on vacation with my husband and kids on a trip to San Diego, we went to Old Town where I found a book on Pine Needle Basketry, thinking I would learn it sometime (I'm always looking for books that I plan on learning something later – I'll never run out of things to try!). I had the book about 8 years when I found some pine needles while camping at the Natchez Trace State Park in Tennessee and began the learning process of coiled basketry. I like to take my work with me when traveling, and the pine needle basketry supplies were more portable than carrying the reed basketry materials with me. The method is slow and more time consuming, and there was little time to work on them, so I did not complete very many.

Several years later, after my husband and I moved to Tulsa, OK, and commission work was limited due to my being new and unknown in the area, I joined my husband (who is a potter) in a two man show with his pottery and my tapestries and rugs, and included about six pine needle baskets. The owners of a local gallery, who were seeking some 3-D work to include along with their paintings, saw the baskets and invited me to display my baskets, asking me if I had some more. "Sure!" I told them, and hurried home to begin working on more. After selling my work there (I was amazed that anyone would pay so much for one of my basket!), things took off! That was six years ago and now I rarely have time to weave or spin, traveling around the country doing fine art and craft shows.

My first baskets were made solely of pine needles sewn with raffia, and then teneriffe's were added as a "start" or inclusion. Later, finding an old gourd we had had for years, I started incorporating gourds in the baskets. While working on a basket as my husband was working on his pottery one day, I started thinking about incorporating clay as a base, and realized this would allow me to make my own shapes rather than being limited to the given shape of the gourds. I liked the variety of blacks and whites the pit fired raku clay offered. Using slabs of clay rolled between canvases, I created an interesting texture (some ask if it's leather). I cut out designs freehand and formed them into shapes with no preconceived notion of what the final product would become. I liked the irregularity of the shapes and was excited to be using another media in my baskets.

I have always loved the quality and texture of wood, and began cutting \_" slices of various woods that could then be

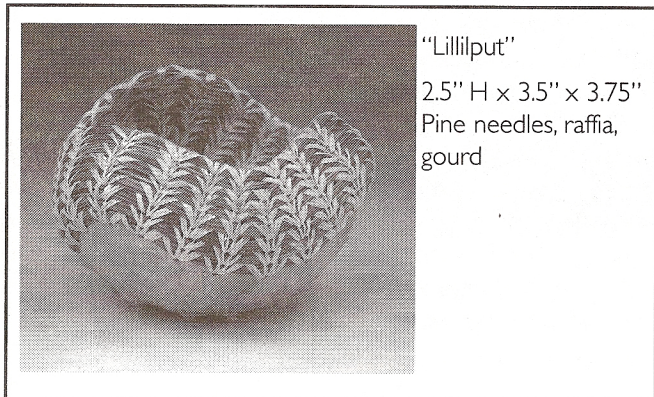


"Acclivity"  
18" H x 8" x 8"

Pine needles, bone beads, Walnut slice, waxed linen  
Selected as a 2007 Niche Finalist (awards announced Feb. 2007)

cut into circles or ovals for bases; but I missed the 3-D effect I was able to get with the clay. I had always wanted to take woodturning as a child, but girls then weren't allowed to take shop and instead had to take Home Economics. Now grown, I had a good excuse (as well as a business expense!) to get a lathe and learn "how to". I passed my woodturning class (having failed at woodcarving the year before!) and really came to enjoy working with the different woods, green or spalted (fresh or decayed), but more so with figure wood (the wood grain does not continue with straight lines due to branching or stress, adding special character to the turned pieces). I don't buy wood, but rescue it from trees downed in storms, or by cutting other people's trees for them (they keep the smaller branches and leaves!).

I have dyed pine needles and made a few baskets with color, but have not enjoy working with color other than natural colors like blacks and grays. I have several pounds of dyed pine needles I intend to use, plan baskets with them, only to put them away again. After years of weaving two dimensional tapestries and rugs that were designed largely with color, I now find myself too excited about creating and using shapes as my primary design element. Last year, while exhibiting at the American Craft Council show in Atlanta, I finally met the first other pine needle basket maker besides from my students,



"Lillilput"  
2.5" H x 3.5" x 3.75"  
Pine needles, raffia, gourd

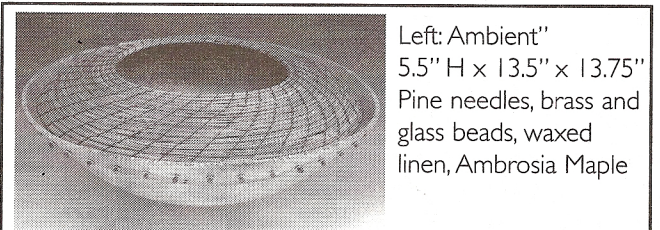
Clay Burnett. His work is done primarily with dyed needles and I was fascinated not only with his work, but with his use of color. I still am not ready to work with color (but I'm thinking about it!).

When I first started making pine needle baskets, I kept having ideas for shapes, but the pine needles would not allow me to do what I had planned. The needles would tell me what they wanted me to do, and that created more ideas and taught me more lessons. I have found I am able to design baskets that I can make more accurately from beginning to end now, but they are still teaching me; sometimes they whisper; other times they just talk, but last year one yelled at me and I almost panicked.

I have always loved nature and nature crafts, and have enjoyed collecting nature's treasures since I was small. We recently returned from a visit to Arizona to visit our son, and with us are palm fronds and sheaths (looked at the palm wood, but it dried too soft to turn), pine needles and rocks collected for use in ideas for future projects. I like to look at them and wait until they tell me what they can be used for. We are heading to South Korea this month (to visit another son) and wonder what customs will let us bring back!!

My journey with pine needles has been exciting as the process continually evolves keeping it fresh as more ideas take "shape"!

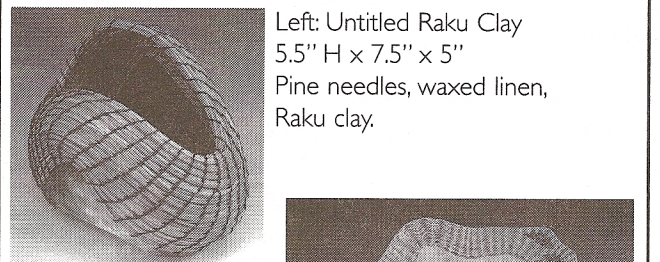
You can view Elizabeth's website, [www.fiberexpressions.net](http://www.fiberexpressions.net), to see more baskets and for information on show schedules.



Left: "Ambient"  
5.5" H x 13.5" x 13.75"  
Pine needles, brass and glass beads, waxed linen, Ambrosia Maple



Right: "Eye of the Storm"  
5.5" H x 17.5" x 17"  
Pine needles, Walnut slices, waxed linen, Red Fir



Left: "Untitled Raku Clay"  
5.5" H x 7.5" x 5"  
Pine needles, waxed linen, Raku clay.



Right: "Delta"  
6" H x 20.5" x 17"  
Pine needles, Walnut slices, raffia, Pear