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## **From Nature: Contemporary Artists and Organic Materials at RAM**

February 17 – October 6, 2019

Particular to place and time, organic materials are—and have been—used for baskets, jewelry, architecture, and other functional objects the world over. More and more in the last hundred years, they have also been made into art objects as artists have turned to varied sources to create works that reflect the environment.

**From Nature** features primarily objects—sculptural, functional, and wearable—that incorporate items from the natural world as a means to explore material possibility and a way to investigate a variety of social, personal, environmental, and cultural issues. RAM's collection, with its emphasis on contemporary craft, offers a unique platform for this conversation since so much of the work is built from organically-based media, such as wood, paper, and clay. The works included emphasize the natural as a found object—perhaps manipulated—but not in a way that dramatically disguises the source. Elements such as feathers, stones, shells, twigs, and hair play structural, metaphorical, or decorative roles in these artworks created during the last few decades.

Some artists, such as Dorothy Gill Barnes, “harvest” their materials as homage to the wonder and diversity of nature. Others like Jan Hopkins—who uses unexpected materials such as grapefruit peel and lotus seeds—look for abundant materials that can carry symbolic or metaphorical meanings. Meanwhile, Kyoung Ae Cho gathers, collects, and recycles natural materials in order to investigate how humans interact with nature as well as its cycles and internal processes.

### **Biographies and statements from select featured artists highlight a range of approaches and interests:**

Apprenticeships in sculpture and ceramics as well as restoration work on Navajo weavings set the stage for **Michael Bailot's** later endeavors as an artist. While RAM has multiple baskets by Bailot, he first achieved recognition as a sculptor working with a variety of media, including marble and wood. Self-taught as a basketmaker, Bailot is drawn to a wide assortment of natural materials, but will also use other media, such as copper wire. About his interests, Bailot has stated: “Basketry is a way of life which brings a person into close contact with nature and her cycles. My inspiration is drawn directly from this experience.”

Although **Dorothy Gill Barnes** is usually categorized as a fiber artist, RAM's collection of her work concentrates on sculptures she has created from trees, especially from their bark and limbs. Barnes is known for developing a distinct working process that includes scarring trees that have been marked for eventual removal. She returns years later, after the trees

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have been cut, harvesting the grown bark as a decoratively scarred skin to use in her baskets. About her work, Barnes states: "My intent is to construct a vessel or related object using materials respectfully harvested from nature. The unique properties I find in bark, branches, roots, seaweed and stone suggest a work process to me. I want this problem solving to be evident in the finished piece."

Barnes received her BA in 1949 and her MA in Art Education from the University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa. While she did not major in fiber art in college, she was introduced to the material in the early 1970s, finding her niche in this medium in her mid-forties. Barnes eventually taught fibers as an adjunct faculty member at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, from 1966 until her retirement from university teaching in 1990. Throughout much of her career, Barnes has also been a sought-after teacher who has traveled across the US and around the world conducting classes and residencies. She has received numerous awards and grants, and has work in significant institutions, such as Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina; the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, New York; and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C. Barnes is currently represented at RAM with 18 works.

Interested in the "beauty and the power" that she sees in nature, Wisconsin-based **Kyoung Ae Cho** creates pieces that address the dynamic between nature and culture as well as how human beings respond to the environment. About her fiber-based work, Cho states: "With growing concern in environmental issues, the understanding of nature's rhythm and the recycling of materials have become more important...I respectfully approach this environmental processing by incorporating recycled matter as well as low-valued materials mostly which I have gathered...I believe my works are the outcome of the collaboration between those objects/materials and I."

Cho was born in Onyang, South Korea. She received her BFA from Duksung Women's University, Seoul, South Korea, and her MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Cho has shown her work extensively in national and international venues, and has been featured in numerous publications. Currently the chair of UW-Milwaukee's Art and Design Department, Cho is the recipient of several awards, including a Wisconsin Arts Board Award Fellowship, a UWM Foundation and Graduate School Research Award, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, and an Award of Excellence from Quilt National 1997.

Primarily sewing by hand, fiber artist **Jan Hopkins** creates narrative sculpture and baskets that incorporate unexpected materials, such as grapefruit peel, sturgeon skin, and lotus pods. In addition to experimenting with a range of media, especially those considered "mundane and unusable," Hopkins is interested in exploring women's roles. She has crafted torsos that respond to icons, such as **Marilyn Monroe** and **Helen Keller**, as well as to cultural objects like shoes and teapots. For Hopkins, unusual materials can be used symbolically and add to layers of meaning to the work.

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A student of basket and textile-focused classes and workshops, Hopkins describes herself as self-taught in regards to her particular interest in and manipulations of unexpected media. Her work has been featured in numerous exhibitions and is included in several collections, such as the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, New York and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts. RAM currently has six of her pieces in the collection.

**Michael J. Peterson** crafts wood sculptures and turned bowls that reflect his home environment, the Pacific Northwest. He purposefully traverses the landscape to source his materials, describing the process as “walking around in a sculpture garden.” Peterson responds directly to the materials, stating, “My work evolves out of the process of making...my approach to surface and abstract organic form has always been grounded in the natural world.”

Born in Texas, Peterson has his Associates of Arts and Science from Edmond’s Community College, Seattle, Washington. His work has been exhibited extensively and is featured in several significant collections, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California; Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Mint Museum of Art and Design, Charlotte, North Carolina; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and RAM.

Currently interested in exploring concepts of “home,” **Maria Phillips** has long considered the nature of materials, using variety of media to create adornment, sculpture, and installations. Her necklaces made of non-precious metals and sheep casings reflect her interest in “capturing the beauty and inelegance of objects as they proceed through decay and regeneration.” Phillips has degrees from Loyola University, New Orleans, Louisiana and the University of Washington, Seattle, Washington. In addition to maintaining a studio practice, she teaches workshops across the country. Her work is found in the collections of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, New York; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., and Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, Washington, as well as RAM.

Based in Alaska, **Fran Reed** (1943 – 2008) became known for creating baskets made of materials that she found in her local environment, including fish skins. Before learning about fish skin vessels and containers made by the Yup’ik, Reed was an accomplished weaver. A friendship with another artist in this exhibition, **Pat Hickman**, further encouraged her move from textiles to fish skins and gut. In addition to creating her own innovative designs, Reed made an effort to encourage the tradition of “skin sewing” as practiced by native populations for centuries.

More interested in exploring aesthetics than utility, Reed would draw and paint on the surface of her baskets as well as layer in materials, such as leaves, seaweed, pressed ferns,

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or flowers. She would create an armature of wood or reed, then layer skin over it. In addition to her work being exhibited extensively, Reed received several awards, including a Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Artist Residency/Fellowship and the Anchorage Mayor's Award for Outstanding Individual Artist.