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Collection Focus: Mary Giles

October 21, 2020 – January 23, 2021

In its current makeup, RAM's fiber collection is anchored by artists interested in baskets and basket making techniques. **Mary Giles**, with 22 pieces now at RAM and others promised for later arrival, is one of the most well-represented with works spanning over three decades.

Revered for her willingness to push the boundaries of form and concept, Giles made objects throughout her career that reflected her interest in materials and traditional basket making techniques.

Spanning the scope of her career, RAM's archive of Giles' work includes various iterations of themes and explorations of materials. Her interest in challenging the idea that baskets are merely functional is implicit in many works. There are baskets and vessel shapes created with history but not function in mind.

Inspiration

An affinity for the natural world—also cultivated in her young home life—fueled the artist's investigations of various media including waxed linen, porcupine quills, and various metals such as copper and iron.

Giles seemed to embrace a broad definition of the environment—as both the natural world on a macrocosmic level and the particular spaces she inhabited. She responded to the colors of sunlight and wood as well as the effect of a scuba-diving experience. Stylistically, Giles favored color tones that echo the natural world, and most often, her works incorporate natural elements such as porcupine quills or feathers. She played with texture as pattern as well as using it as a stylistic point of contrast.

One of the artist's most distinctive additions to her works were thin metal strips that she would layer over a surface or core. In addition to creating contrast and adding color, shine, and form, the choice of metal further underscored her interest in the human condition. She stated, "Over time, some of these metals are going to change, and that's fine...That's part of all of our processes—nature's process, the aging process."

In an interview for a Minnesota PBS program, Giles addressed her use of figures, specifically male. She described her use of the form in both aesthetic and metaphoric terms—as an "interesting image" and an "excellent symbol." Tying it to her larger interests, it reflects the human condition in physical terms but also psychological ones and links to natural cycles of growth and decay.

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Process

Favoring the technique of coiling—a process associated with Native American basket traditions—Giles would move between three- and two-dimensions throughout her career, sometimes creating wall pieces in addition to sculpture that suggested aspects of the environment, human figures, and vessels.

The process of coiling most directly identifies Giles' pieces as baskets. Coiling is basically winding strands of yarn or fibers—Giles used waxed dyed linen cord—around a core of wire, rope, or other similarly structured material.

Many contemporary artists, such as Giles, seek out indigenous makers in order to learn techniques and histories and, reverently, incorporate processes into their own work. Describing herself as a “fiber sculptor,” Giles acknowledged baskets as influences but kept her forms distanced from function.

Career

Giles received her BS in art education from Mankato State University, Mankato, Minnesota. Her fiber education was pursued in workshops with some of the most innovative artists working in the field during the last part of the twentieth century—**Lissa Hunter, Diane Itter, Ferne Jacobs, John McQueen, and Jane Sauer.**

Giles' boundary pushing garnered attention nationally and internationally. She represented the US at the International Triennial of Tapestry in Lodz, Poland. Giles was named a Master of Fiber Arts by the James Renwick Alliance, which supports the Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Her work is included in over a dozen museum collections including the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota and the Racine Art Museum.

In addition, Giles signifies the impact women had on expanding conversations in and around art and studio craft during the late twentieth century. While Giles may not have identified herself as a pioneer, per se, she pushed boundaries in her chosen media. And, what is more, she loved the process of making.