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SPRING 2010 \$10.00



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Living Fibers, Living Forms:
The Work of Jappie King Black

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by *Jacquelyn Stonberg*

The loosely woven pieces of grapevine bark extend into our space, inviting us into Jappie King Black's landscape. The natural properties of the organic material dictate the twisting, turning, and undulating forms with gnarled cracked surfaces and enticing tactility. Negative space is shaped between the folded and woven twigs, palimpsest-like. Beyond the woodland subject matter, we feel the pressure and flow of the artist's own human touch in twisting the vines. We sense the gentle weight of her hand in carefully flaying the bark off the branches. This sculpture traces the artist's spontaneous choreography while moving in circles, bending the wood around itself. It is a sensual impression of her dance with the materials, and she invites us to join her in a walk through the woods.

The artist, Jappie King Black, is currently a professor of fine arts at Kean University in New Jersey, teaching graduate and undergraduate courses. Her courses include classes in fiber processes, weaving, textiles, surface design, 2-D and 3-D design as well as advanced graduate seminars. She is beloved by her students for her gentle, caring manner and sincere ability to share her excitement and love of what she does. Educated at The Rhode Island School of Design and Syracuse University, she has earned scores of solo exhibitions, prestigious exhibition awards, and artist grants in New York, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Michigan.

Jappie King Black's work begins with a walk through woods, thick with no paths and lit by the sun through the leaf canopy. The grapevines that she seeks grow up into the trees and down to the ground. With her two-foot-long pruning clippers, she cuts as far up as she can reach, and piles as much as she can drag back, about fifty pounds. Birds—blue jays, hawks, and cardinals—call as she hauls her loot for about thirty minutes back to her van. Large pieces are best (as large as your wrist, even three to four inches in diameter) because the bark can come

off more easily and in larger pieces. Her clippers can handle pieces up to four-inches thick. The vines are very heavy, like two-by-fours, and up to eighty inches long. Skinny vines (finger size) do not yield sufficient bark, but they are useful for twining small figures and detail work. Black is more interested in the thicker ones because they are more self-supporting, and, to her, the thinner ones look too much like holiday wreaths when woven. After clipping vines for about two hours, her arms and whole body are sore. Cutting each large vine requires about six bites of the clippers, and the vines creak as they come loose and fall. A load is lighter if the bark is pulled off in the woods rather than hauled with the whole vine back to the studio. Dragging the vines out from the woods, Black binds them first with rope and pulls them like a sled dog or a peasant dragging her gleanings, making a swishing noise over the three-foot-tall grass, over old crops of soybeans, cabbage, and corn. Now the crops are overrun by wild flowers: Queen Anne's lace, thistle, golden-rod—purple in the autumn from the asters, and gold and yellow in the springtime. For the pleasure of it, Black sows wild flowers herself, flinging handfuls of seeds as she walks. Or, standing often in poison ivy, she wears tall rubber boots and long pants and sleeves for protection. She prefers to gather her materials just after the rain or snow because the vines are more pliable then.

Where Black works, there are few trails except for those that the deer track and that she herself has made over the past twenty-five years she has lived there. Her vines have grapes on them, as she lives in Brockport, New York, north of the Finger Lakes known for their vineyards. The vines are wild and yield "fox grapes," tiny and sour. She sometimes eats them as she works but the wild blackberries, raspberries, and pin cherries that grow there are better snacks—things that birds eat. That is why there are so many birds there; it is an old forest. Her village is small with a college; directly behind her house are the woods.

Every day Black walks out into these woods. When she moved there, she realized that the grapevines were taking over the trees, killing them, so she decided to prune them a bit. The farmer who had lived there before her had let the vines go wild. After the farmer, a developer started

eventual return back into the earth.

After emerging from the woods with her booty, Black separates out vines of different qualities, letting the material suggest the shapes of future artworks. Sometimes she can bend the material to her will but she does not force it—then



ABOVE: JAPPIE KING BLACK *Regeneration* Installation at Byrdcliff Arts Colony, Woodstock, New York, Fall 2000.

BACKGROUND: JAPPIE KING BLACK *Three Figures* Grapevine and bark, 2009. Photo: Richard W. Black.

mowing down trees to build roads, but those plans were abandoned. Black is very interested in how people use land. And she appreciates natural materials because of their inherent voices, because they eventually disintegrate and ultimately belong to the earth. She has demonstrated this in artworks that have naturally evolved, taking on various forms throughout the different seasons toward an

things break. Black prefers the thickest vines for large sculptures, especially when right after the rain they are flexible and the bark comes off easily for crocheting. The vines that are stripped of their bark are stiff and white and good for making skeletons of figures.

Back in her studio, Black begins to bend the larger vines into lyrical forms, then lashes and

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twines them together with bark she has flayed. She dances with her larger forms (often four to seven feet tall) to shape them with both hands, holding and spinning the form and squeezing it against wood. If they are too stiff and brittle, she can use them as one large work in themselves. If they break then, she does not want them or she re-binds them with threads of bark. Other artists have used wood steamers, but she found that she doesn't need to do that, nor does she need to soak the vines in water if rain has already come. She crochets the bark using hook sizes two to ten as well as jumbo ones, or twines it as in basketry.

The supple vine bark moves easily through her fingers as she crochets blankets. One of them, *Not Your Average Blanket*, displays a log cabin style on one side with small interlocking squares, while a sleeping figure is painted on the other side. With background in many techniques, Black also weaves under and over, coils, knots, wraps, and plaits. Her combination of those techniques is determined by what shape she wants to make. She works in loose ends carefully because she does not like the cut parts showing—this goes against the idea of continual growth that she admires and fosters.

In addition to grapevine bark, Black's materials include other organic substances such as straw and living plants, bones, and quills. Sometimes she dyes her objects or dips them into colored wax for a three-dimensional encaustic, and even casts them in bronze using the lost wax method. With that method, Black drops her hand-made object into wax, covers it in a mold, melts out the wax, and pours in liquid bronze to replace it. The pieces in *Burnt Offerings Bronze Baskets* exemplify her smaller cast pieces. She is currently working on a plan to cast six-foot-tall figures.

Black allows the materials' natural properties to dictate her shapes, as in *Wishful Thinking*, a bowl woven with bones. Its concave and convex curves pulse out like a bead of water, dropping and reverberating in concentric circles. In other works, Professor Black twists and turns the gnarled cracked surface of a dried grapevine into staccato waves formed into baskets. She weaves shimmering hand-dyed silk plaits with rough matted wool into rugs. On pillows, she raises the weave along a tactile outline of undulating form. Even in her drawings and etchings, the pressure and flow of her own



JAPPIE KING BLACK *Collection 2009* Grapevine, bark, cotton, wax, wood, wire, quills, approx. 12' x 30' x 3'. Installation at Dow Center for Visual Arts, Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, Michigan, 2009.

RIGHT: JAPPIE KING BLACK *Collection* Detail.

BELOW: JAPPIE KING BLACK *Wishful Thinking* Coiled basket, raffia, paper rush, bone, wax, approx. 4" x 6", 2006.

organic touch and hand's weight is the proper subject matter. Her tactile, kinesthetic, and touchable forms create lively organic spaces that invite the viewer to touch them.

In traditional forms of art, the subject matter dictates the formal qualities of scale, composition, texture, and color. A portrait painter might communicate a tortured soul through broken brushstrokes and twisted composition. In contrast, Black critiques this traditional approach and develops it into the mutually dependent relationship between content and form. Instead of content dictating form, Black's natural materials suggest anthropomorphic forms. She indulges nature's self-determining forms in her imagination. For instance, while driving long distances along the highway, she allows herself to find the figures within the road side trees—stooping old men, people pointing, or



collapsed with fatigue. This is like looking at an abstract painting and seeing movement and narrative. Even through her highly mimetic human figures, she never betrays the aesthetic and tactile characteristics of her fibers, using the shine of shiny material, using the matte of matte material, using the loops of crocheted materials, and the layers of layered yarn to express all the emotions and personality of the figures that she represents. At times, the materials suggest unexpected compositions for figures, adding dynamic and exciting motion to warm and fuzzy fabrics. For instance, small birds and sirens made out of yarn spread their wings to display the spiral patterns of the crochet on their backs. In an early work, a life-size sculpture of Lilith (the half-woman, half-serpent first wife of Adam) the woven fabric of her chest presents a strong vertical and horizontal composition interlaced with undulating waves of counter-acting weave. Black's figures bespeak both vulnerability and endurance: vulnerability in the composition and endurance through the materials.

Tied grapevines seem brittle, and yet stand strong and larger than human scale in the sculpture entitled *Regeneration* that stood for a full year, changing and growing and shrinking through each season. Made from knotted twigs, dangerous and endangered life-size figures seem to moan with emotion and personality of their own. They bend under their own weight in bodily gestures of beckoning, need, and desire. Basket-people, tied together in knots and weaves, huddle together in secret commiseration and emotional compliance.

Black engages negative as well as positive space. In *Empty*, she laces a basket with an image of two outstretched hands, emphasizing space rather than form in a perfect conjunction of shape and subject matter. In *Collection 2000*, miniature doll-like forms hang together like punctuation marks on the white surface of the wall. Black shapes negative space that is visible between the folded and woven twigs so that her three-dimensional work appears, palimpsest-like, as two-dimensional. These kinesthetic and touchable botanical forms create a lively organic space that embraces the viewer within the attentive silence of walking through the woods.

Black's sculpture begins with two-dimensional prints and drawings, and then is filled out into three-dimensional fiber or even bronze. Pieces start small (hand-size) and get larger (human scale). So that viewers can identify with their size, she wouldn't make them more than eight feet tall. For



instance, she has recently been invited to exhibit a new installation in Syracuse in XL Gallery. She will create a large cube-like environment into which viewers are surrounded by bark and drawings of trees. Here, many small things together form a narrative about the woods. What is important is not the particular story, just that stories are suggested. Like fetishes, prayers, and memories, Black's work reminds us that nature is important—beautiful, fragile, and powerful.

Black remembers the words of Jack Tworikov taken from his journal: "The best way to work is to empty out your head, to aim at nothing, to become the medium of a process that is almost outside oneself."^{*} She responds: "When I'm working, I just get into the zone of working and it is the process that's important. Like when I start making little birds, I just keep making them and making them and making them."

^{*}Tworikov, 1900-1982, painter and Chair of Art Department at Yale University, quotation from *The New York Times*, September 1, 2009, p. 6.

Find more about Jappie King Black at <http://www.king-black.com/>.

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