



Rug Hooking REIMAGINED

BY TRUDI VAN DYKE

Artists who choose fiber as their primary medium continue to combat blasé reactions from collectors and gallery directors. Choose to use a traditional technique with fiber and it gets even more difficult to be taken seriously in the world of contemporary art. But rug-hooking artists are making strides on the trek toward gaining respect. They are expanding their range by fine-tuning techniques, taking risks with fibers, experimenting with color, and combining processes. Open calls for juried and curated exhibitions of fiber are encountering hooked entries that stand out and take awards. Solo shows by artists pushing the envelope of discovery are cropping up more frequently and are beginning to receive well-deserved accolades and press.

Rug hooking has been popular in the United States for at least 200 years, but can be traced back to the early part of 19th century England. It was originally a craft of poverty, when recycled strips of fabric were hooked through burlap. Today's rug hooking artists use a wide variety of fabrics in an equal variety of backings. The structure of the backing may inspire the fabric, or vice versa.

The following seven contemporary artists illustrate the evolution of the art, from taking it off the floor to wowing viewers with sensational mixed media and sculptural works. Like all successful artists their voices are strongly expressed through their work and can be appreciated on multiple levels.

Rac Harrell's art moved toward hooking when her occupation as an antique dealer had her specializing in fiber and so repairing old hooked rugs and quilts. No longer in



BACKGROUND: Diane Ayles, **Sundance Peak**; 2013; hooked linen and wool, 36 x 13 in.
TOP LEFT: Michelle Sirois-Silver, **Recovery Method I**; 2013; sans Soucie recycled waste hosiery, linen; hand dyed, printed, hand hooked; 36 x 48 in.
TOP RIGHT: June Myles, **What Kerfuffle** aka **The Banker**; 2012; hooked on linen with hand dyed wool fabric strips, attached leather shoe tassel and watch face; 40 x 52 in.

the antique business, she now divides her time among various projects. Painting large canvases, lampworking, hooking, and other constructions allow her the freedom to do whatever she wants. The work is meditative and she immerses herself in it.

Her use of extreme juxtapositions of hard and soft is most successfully seen as she counters the hardness of rock with the softness of fiber in *Soft Around the Edges*. Always on the lookout for pieces of stone, sticks, and other detritus to inspire her, she cut interesting boulders into slices, interspersed them with soft hooked dividers and assembled the piece onsite. Equally unusual is her hooking of tubes of various heights interspersed with beads and more detail in *Stairway to Nirvana*. Her strong sense of design and color give both pieces a natural ebb and flow that entices us to reach out and stroke them.

She is pleased when people relate to her work in some way, but revealed that she doesn't worry about the interaction. She relates: "My intentions are to use my work for personal growth."

Sabyna Sterrett also finds the repetition of hooking to be peaceful, thoughtful, and meditative, but hopes she is conveying some of her intent to viewers. Her ongoing series involves hooking recycled plastic bags. Her 2013 installation *State of Emergency* at the Alexandria Virginia Art League Gallery culminated in active conversations about the issues of consumption and the repercussion of the waste generated by our habits. Sterrett shares her concerns through her poignant art. She wants us to reflect as she has "on the magnitude of man's most permanent and ubiquitous invention—plastic."



The signature piece, *Environmental State of Emergency*, was begun around the time of the gulf oil spill. The large-scale work integrates three colors in emotional context. Sterrett explains her palette as white, representing a pristine environment, black, as text speaking to us, and red, as what our environment is trying to tell us. Observers of the work recognize the artist's sadness at the state of the earth we are leaving as our legacy.

Collecting plastic bags wherever she could find them and garnering far more from well meaning friends than she could utilize, she embarked on a project to hook work exploring the value scale of white and black. The work *Dialogue* evolved into using particular shopping bags printed with entertainment-style graphics of fashions and faces. Eyes, hair, and complexions became the gradations. Close examination reveals a three-dimensional hooked wall hanging that invites the viewer to focus on individual parts as well as the whole. Viewing the piece is like watching the interplay of a large family without having an invitation.

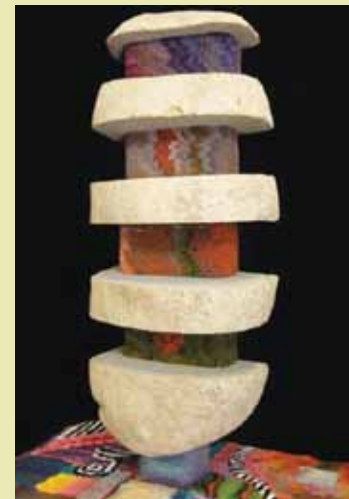
Canadian artist **Diane Ayles** is clearly influenced by her environment. Her appreciation of nature and its colors results in intricate hooking processes blending color and fiber in a variety of textures. The artist works tirelessly to dye and over-dye a variety of fibers to achieve her extensive palette. Her labor-intensive wall hangings speak to her preferences for greens and earth tones. The accomplished skill of blending color within pieces of fabric makes her transitions seamless.

Vibrant shades are magnified in *Sundance Peak* in a meticulous way that gives the observer the feeling of entering the sky as would a bird, not standing on the edge and witnessing, but as an integral part of the environment. Her use of fine warp and weft on linen allows her to achieve the illusion of depth that tempts the viewer to step in for a personal experience.

Michelle Sirois-Silver has also been impacted by her awareness of reclaiming and repurposing. *Recovery Method* is a series of hand hooked works made from waste materials. Sirois-Silver has formed a symbiotic relationship with designer Katherine Soucie, who uses hosiery seconds purchased from manufacturers to create her unique clothing line. Soucie's process creates long, thin waste strips that Sirois-Silver uses in her hand hooking. The already-dyed hosiery inspires the artist to think about designs and materials in new ways. She receives further satisfaction as she passes her scraps on to yet another artist.

The onlooker will relate to her designs as they imply the subject matter rather than stating it directly. The works are process-based and the surfaces are imbued with hand hooking,

FAR LEFT TOP: Tracy Jamar; **Furrows**; 2014; vintage wool challis quilt squares; wool; appliquéd, hand hooked and shirred on monk's cloth; 23 x 34 in. FAR LEFT BOTTOM: Michelle Sirois-Silver; **Decay**; wool, linen, silk and polyester; hand dyed, hand and machine stitched; 47 x 47 in. TOP LEFT: Rae Harrell, **Stairway to Nirvana**; 2008; wood, metal and hooking; 40 x 12 x 12 in. CENTER LEFT: June Myles, **The Chef** aka **Chez JBM**; 2005; hooked on burlap using hand dyed wool strips; 31 x 43 in. LEFT: Michelle Sirois-Silver; **Decay**; detail. ABOVE: Sabyna Sterrett, **Environmental State Of Emergency**; 2009; hand hooked recycled plastic bags; 13 x 50 in.



LEARN MORE

Prepared to Dye by Gene Shepherd
(Rug Hooking Magazine)

Dyeing with Gene Shepherd DVD Set
(Rug Hooking Magazine)

In these new publications, readers will learn many different ways to use commercial acid dye to produce fantastic effects in fiber of all kinds for hooking, prodding, punchneedle, appliqué, knitting, crocheting, and more; as well as bleeding, marbleizing, and marrying found wool to produce gorgeous colors and patterns without any added dyes. Included are instructions for preparing different kinds of fiber for dyeing, information on setting up and furnishing a dye space, and hundreds of useful tips from a master dyer.

More rug hooking resources:

Hooked on Rugs: Outstanding Contemporary Designs by Jessie Turbayne (Schiffer Publishing)

Modern Hooked Rugs by Linda Rae Coughlin (Schiffer Publishing)

Hooked Rug Landscapes by Anne-Marie Littenberg (Rug Hooking Magazine)

If Wool Could Talk by June Myles (self-published)

Design Basics for Rug Hookers by Susan Feller (self-published)

Visit www.newtownhookedartshows.com to browse a database of contemporary hooked art. The next exhibition, *Hooked Art 2014* takes place October 23 - November 29 at The Gallery, University of Connecticut, Stamford Campus. Read a review of this exhibition in the fall issue of *Fiber Art Now*.

screen printing, and stitching. She shares with us that “each hand hooked loop is a brush stroke...and every stitch attempts to unify the overall image.”

The way the materials and techniques inform one another layer upon layer is key to Sirois-Silver’s body of work. In the series *Decay and Repair*, her use of white space differs from the expected traditional rug-hooked intense tightness between layers and line. Her willingness to let the color and texture dictate inspiration, creativity, and direction serve to make her exceptional art competitive with other media for collectors and awards.

June Myles highlights her work with recycled fibers, often overdyeing with natural dyes. Her color experiments have even been stretched to include rhubarb as a dye. Myles declares that she hooks for fun and was first inspired by hooked mittens at an antique show in New England. She has made her niche in hooking portraits.

Using the medium of hooking to capture personalities in fiber sets her work apart. *The Banker* represents the strongest pieces in her series of men. Preconceived images of stereotypical bankers come to the forefront through carefully placed color and highly proficient technique. She describes the series of weighty portraits as “men I’ve never met.” Her creative outlet of hooking is enhanced by her skill at expressing stories and ideas through her art. The banker holds his Wall Street Journal and Myles adds collage elements with the surprise additions of a real watch face and tasseled loafer.

Liz Alpert Fay believes in reaching beyond traditional materials. She creates spontaneous original works with such unusual things as shoelaces hooked onto a wire frame. Her technique is the only part of this artist’s portfolio that carries on the rug hooking tradition, although she allows that her work is meant to be used and even walked on. Some of her work may be pure explorations in color, but other pieces are creative attempts to tell stories reflecting her views of life and commenting on issues she finds important. Fay successfully imbues her work with a naïve sense of spontaneity, which she attributes to her work with young children.

She collects eclectic items that migrate into pieces or provide a jumping off place for her original designs. She cuts and designs with irregular shapes often anchoring the work with Calder-like movement throughout an installation. Beads, buttons and other materials from her studio collections repeatedly find their way to collectors’ walls, beds, and floors.

Tracy Jamar’s interest in rugs began with restoration of floor coverings, including hooked rugs. Her study of American history through women’s handmade textiles is reflected in the respect she has for the traditional technique of hooking. Jamar’s work communicates her interest in how everyday items reveal personal and intimate views of lives, times, and experiences. She reflects on the sense of fulfillment experienced by making something new of your own from other materials.

Jamar clearly delights in joining her contemporary insight with traditional subjects. *Hedgerows* and *Furrows* speak to an agrarian history, but are presented in non-traditional abstractions generated by her use of color, negative space, and texture. Freeform lines and placement of elements are filled in spontaneously as the pieces progress. The inclusion of antique fibers adds to the richness of her interpretations.

Jamar believes in putting herself into her work and understands that each piece is a reflection of who she is at any given place in her life. She shared advice given to her by a fellow artist to be careful what you think of when you work, because it will show in the finished piece.

All of these artists continue to blaze the trail for fiber artists seeking validation in their choice of medium. Their own particular choice of the tradition of hooking is elevating it to a new level and moving the medium toward increased acceptance and respect in the contemporary art world. These artists demonstrate ways not just to think outside the box but, indeed, to catapult out.

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FAR LEFT TOP: Liz Alpert Fay, *Lost Soul*; 2011; reclaimed shoelaces, nylon stockings and tights, found rubber sole on linen, hand hooked; 32 x 32 in.; collection of Francine Even FAR BOTTOM LEFT: Liz Alpert Fay, *Lost Soul*; detail LEFT: Rae Harrell, *Soft Around the Edges*; 2008; stone, metal, wood and hooking; 48 x 24 x 24 in.