

SUN SMITH-FORÊT

New Work in Amuletic Sculpture



Sun Smith-Forêt, *Planets to Infinity 99*, 2019, waxed linen, semiprecious stones, 16" x 16" x 2", photograph by Ray Marklin.

Sun Smith-Forêt: Transition and Change

by Olivia Lahs-Gonzales

Rooted in ancient cultural practices, rituals and imagery, as well as in mathematics and science, Sun Smith Forêt's most recent sculptural works reference vessels, nests, boats and celestial bodies. A maker of objects—amulets of deep meaning—Smith-Forêt embeds these with the knowledge of spiritual thought from a range of cultures, including Native American spiritual practices, African cosmology, Viking funerary rituals, Buddhist thought and

aspects of Christianity, all with which she connects on a deeply personal level. The artist is a student of world religions and art practices, weaving these ideas and aesthetics both literally and spiritually into her new works. Her background as a psychotherapist and a student of art history and art processes that included painting, drawing, printmaking and architecture, means that the works are layered with both personal and collective meaning.

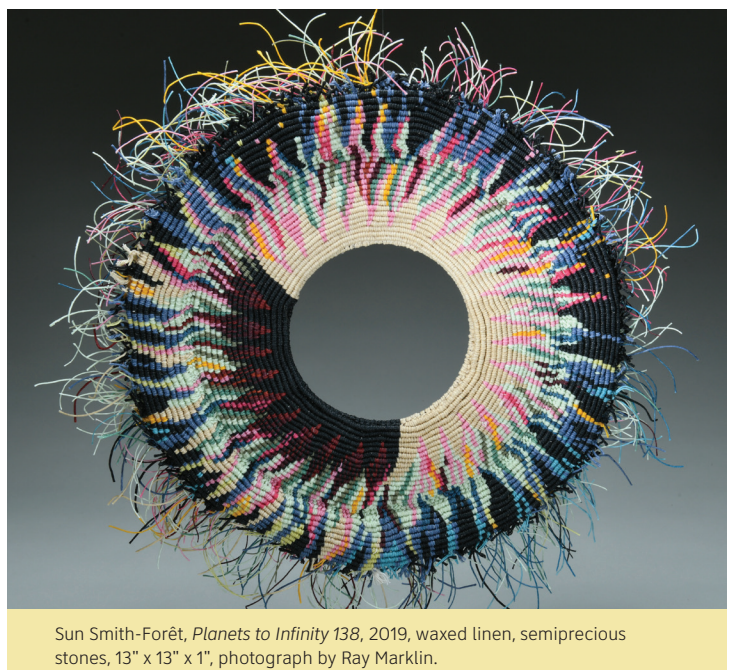
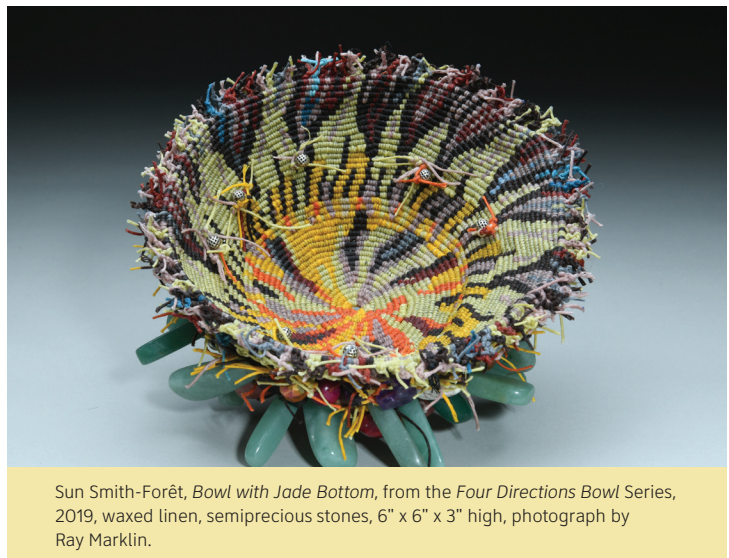
The objects that make up her most recent work evolved in part out of necessity and grew from an invitation to make work for an outdoor installation at the Audubon Center at Riverlands in West Alton, Missouri in 2017. At Riverlands, Smith-Forêt constructed a series of knotted, woven nest-like forms made from waxed linen and flood wood, which were hung in trees and placed on the grounds. These were a departure from the monumental narrative quilts for which she is known. Begun when she became the primary caregiver for her husband, Colin Campbell, this new body of work was much more domestic in scale and could be completed at home and in her lap. Inspired by her extensive study of rituals of spirituality and transition in world cultures, the cultural history of basketry and other vessel-like forms as well as by the working methods of her friend and artist, Jane Sauer, the knotting and weaving of talismanic objects became her new primary form of expression. Also important to the formation of this work were her daily discussions with Colin, a professor of Humanities at Principia College, on subjects as diverse as poetry, world religion and geology. She saw his intellectual contributions as integral to the realization of these works and the results as collaborative.

The nests she made for the Riverlands exhibit led Smith-Forêt to further explore the idea of ‘embracing’ vessels, which she articulated as non-functional ceremonial containers and forms of ritual water transport in her Soul-Go Rafts, Cosmic Nests and Infinity Circles series. The substrates and carriers for her nest and raft-forms were structures made from windfall Pin oak branches from around her home and flood wood gathered from the banks of the Mississippi River near her home in Elsah, Illinois.

Smith-Forêt’s materials are also in part informed by the experience of place. Living in a rural flood zone, very close to the Mississippi river, and observing and being affected by its rise and fall and its flora and fauna, flood wood and nest, boat and raft imagery naturally entered her creative expression. “Having lived for 11 years in the Mississippi floodplain at Elsah I became interested as a maker in working with the flood wood that washed up with the swell of the River. Nests became a vehicle of expression mirroring a move to a new home and allowed me to explore a new medium, hand knotting,” Smith-Forêt describes.¹ The use of flotsam wood was also inspired by the

work of Bessie Harvey, a transcendentalist artist who produced sculptures from found wood. Harvey’s work, which drew out the spiritual meaning within the forms of the branches, also became one of the catalysts for the direction that Smith-Forêt’s work would take.

The vessel-forms she made in recent years also speak to qualities of domestic life: protection, nurturing and containment. For Smith-Forêt, who gave up her home in lower Elsah, (and to some degree her independence,) to move in with her husband Colin at his home in upper Elsah, she has had to think about what “nesting” means.



It can mean comfort and security, but also confinement and limitation. Her rafts and boats reference themes of travel, transport, transition and “Home-Going.” Movement via water is the oldest form of migration—of people and of goods—so boat and raft forms are powerful metaphors for movement that can bring forth cultural fusion, transition and change. Boats also have a long history in funerary rituals in cultures as diverse as ancient Egypt and Scandinavia, India, Greece and the South Pacific, among many others. As a woman who is almost 80, and having lost her life partner, she has had to reflect on mortality and what might come after death.

For the artist, both the scientific and the spiritual naturally intertwine. She is interested in patterns—both those found in nature, and those generated through the artistic production of a wide variety of cultures, all of which can be traced back to the structural building blocks of nature. Her recent works all in some way use the spiral—important to Smith-Forêt for its links to the mathematical patterns of beauty found in all facets of nature from plants, galaxies and weather to fractals, mathematically generated by the computer. The process by which her forms evolve is an integral component of the meaning in Smith-Forêt’s works, making them all the richer as talismanic objects. The action of knotting and weaving are for Smith-Forêt a meditative practice such as is found in the whirling movements of Sufi dance, which the artist credits as an inspiration. Within the

action of spiral knotting, the artist cites the beauty of mathematics as an element in the formation of meaning. Counting and the evolution of pattern is like a dance, which she choreographs through the intuitive use of symmetry, asymmetry and color placement. Aesthetic management of irregularity is a formal concern. In the “Cosmic” and “Infinity” series’ the artist wishes to convey the sense of dynamic motion of celestial bodies and the universe’s continuous movement both in spirals and outward through an unimaginably great dimension of space and time.

Color, design and structure are also important to Smith-Forêt. A student of art history and color theory, which she taught at Washington University, she builds her works with a limited selection of colors, which she weaves in patterns that are never previsualized. Her process is intuitive, and she lets the colors guide themselves as she is actively counting, weaving and knotting. The first basket forms that she created used only black and white threads, but they have evolved to include a complexity of colors. She has also begun integrating semi-precious stones—a nod not only to her husband’s interest in geology, but also to her jewelry-making. For years, Smith-Forêt also had a jewelry business, creating beautiful adornments from earth’s geological offerings. The artist admires the sensuality and metaphorical qualities of the materials she uses, and finds joy in the colors, textures and patterns of both the fibers and beads.



Sun Smith-Forêt, *Volcano 03*, 2019, waxed linen, semiprecious stones, pin oak windfall materials, 6" x 19" x 14", photograph by Ray Marklin.

This recent work is the outgrowth of a deeply spiritual life. The works she has created in the past two years are reflective of one who is keenly aware of the paucity of time and the transience of earthly life. These objects and the process of making them reflect her yearning to find a connection to the ultimate source of all things. As viewers of these works, we are tasked with using these objects to connect ourselves to the elemental patterns she reveals, which are the building blocks of nature and the roots of artistic production across cultures. What we can see in the forms she now weaves are the interconnectedness of humanity and our fundamental bond with the forces of nature.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Sun Smith-Forêt is a professional studio artist, teacher and independent curator. She completed an MFA in painting, drawing, design and printmaking at Washington University and studied art history, art and architecture as an undergraduate student. Since then, her artistic practice has encompassed textile construction, quilts, sculpture, and knotted and woven functional and amuletic objects. Smith-Forêt has exhibited regionally in one person and group exhibits at the Belger Arts Center, Kansas City, MO;

Cedarhurst Center for the Arts, Mitchell Museum, Mt. Vernon, IL; Duane Reed Gallery, St. Louis, MO; Fontbonne University Gallery of Art, St. Louis; William and Florence Schmidt Art Center, Southwest Illinois College, Belleville, IL; St. Louis University Museum of Art, St. Louis, MO and the Sheldon Art Galleries, St. Louis, MO, among others. Her works can be found in private and public collections including Gash-Voigt Dance Theater Company production, Sacred Ground, Missouri History Museum Theatre, St. Louis, MO; City Hall, City of Jefferson City, MO and Washington University School of Medicine, Physician's Dining Room, St. Louis, MO.

Notes:

1. <https://www.riverbender.com/events/details.cfm?seriesid=36026>

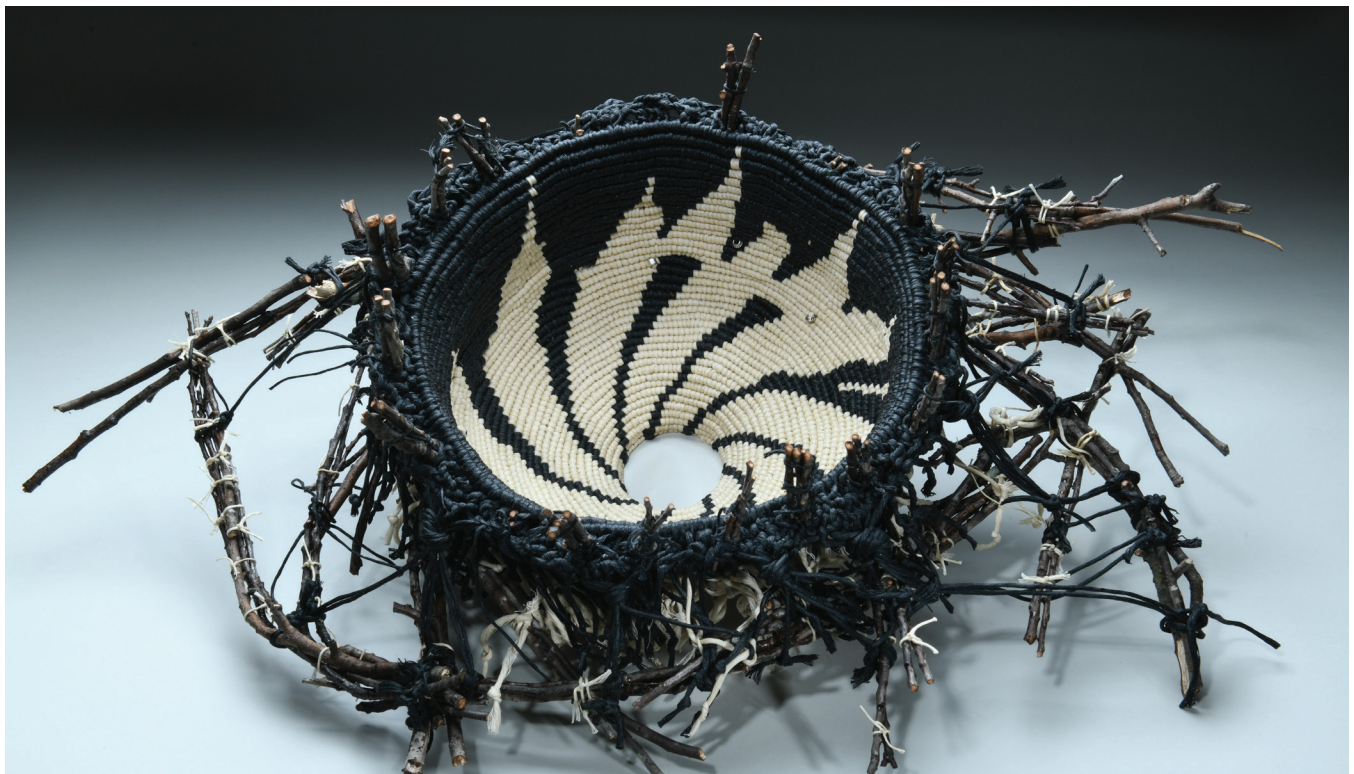
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Sun Smith-Forêt, from the *Audubon Cosmic Nest Series*, 2017, waxed linen, semiprecious stones, pin oak windfall materials, 27" x 18" x 8" high, photograph by Ray Marklin.