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PUCKETT

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The News-Times
FEBRUARY/MARCH
2008

Reed, vine become art in her hands

Winsted business built
on dimensional weaving

By Debra Keiser
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Some people look at bittersweet and see an unwelcome invasive plant, a twisted root that strangles other plants. Tina Puckett looks at it and sees gigantic poppies, dahlias, daisies and landscapes.

Since bittersweet has become the raw material for her craft, she thinks it's beautiful — and it's not the pretty red and yellow berries that attract her, it's the form of the vine itself.

"As soon as I saw it, I knew I wanted to work with it," said the Winsted resident, who discovered it one day as she searched the woods for grapevine, her former love.

Her artist's sensibility drew her to its potential.

"Bittersweet is perfect for my work," said Puckett, who began making baskets in an adult education class 24 years ago, when her daughters were small. (Courtney, now 25, is a student at Rutgers, and Melissa, 27, graduated from Columbia University last year.)

Puckett's work has meandered from traditional reed basketry to a unique art form that uses bittersweet as a frame and hand-dyed reed as the brushwork for wall sculptures and rustic furniture, as well as baskets.

Her signature wall sculptures are gigantic, colorful flowers she makes by bending bittersweet to make the outside edge for each petal. The vibrant flowers immediately become the focal point of a room.

Bill and Debbie Barthelmess of Woodbury have bought seven pieces — six baskets and one wildflower. They met Puckett several years ago in Litchfield, where Puckett had a studio for many years, and were intrigued by her pieces.

"Tina does amazing works," said Bill, a high-end builder. "Her creativity and use of materials, especially the bittersweet, make them special. The bittersweet somewhat dictates what she will do with that piece."

The couple has given her baskets as gifts, even one to Conan O'Brien, the TV show host. But the wildflower is one they are keeping. "Every piece is a unique creation," said Bill.



Chris Ware/Staff photographer
Weaver Tina Puckett's fingers hold the bittersweet frame of a work in progress, showing the thickness of the rustic vine. She formerly worked with grapevine, but found bittersweet more durable.

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Red basket



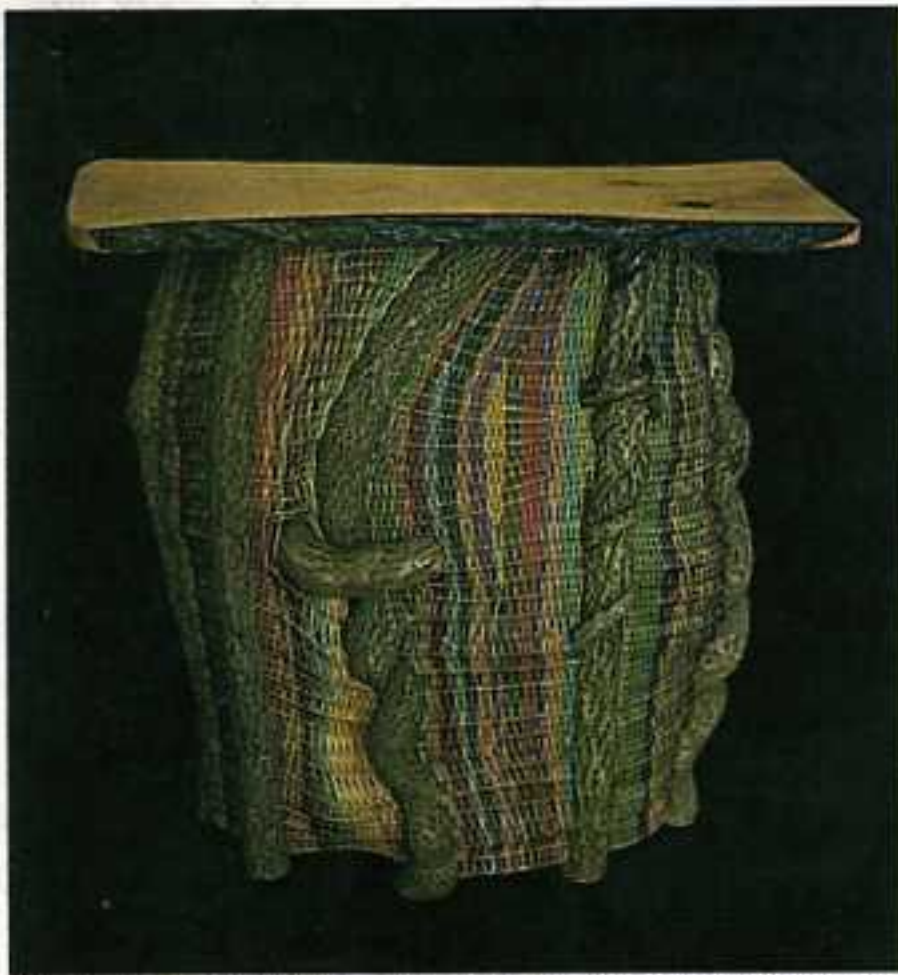
Yellow basket

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"Some pieces of bittersweet just said 'table,'" Tina Puckett explains, while the fat, snakelike pieces of the vine used here must have said "tiki bar." Rivers of colored reed complete the large utilitarian piece, which will be shipped to a buyer in Utah.

▷ Winsted business built on dimensional weaving

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The flowers sell for about \$2,000 each and are 3 to 4 feet wide.

While that may seem pricey, take into account a single flower takes Puckett four to five weeks to make. And she works on only one piece at a time, although she is always thinking about the next.

The process begins with a foraging mission. "I go into the woods with my clipper, even chain saw and ladder sometimes," she said. Her husband, Kleber Renault, a carpenter, often helps harvest the bittersweet.

Because it is pliable when first cut, Puckett is able to bend and twist it into the shapes she needs, but she likes to work with its natural curve.

And unlike grapevine, which doesn't hold up over time, bittersweet is lasting. "It becomes so hard that, in a few months, you can't drive a nail through it," she said.

She starts with the outline of the petal shapes and then weaves a flat "canvas" inside each petal using reed, a plant from the bamboo family that comes in various shapes.

On top of that canvas, the true originality of her work is revealed as she uses round reed in a unique process she calls "dimensional weaving."

The round reed is first brilliantly col-



Chris Ware/Staff photographer

This large flower has an unbeaded woven center.

ored using fabric dye, a step that takes place in a deep old bathtub in the basement of her house.

Much of her work is done on commission, so the buyer can customize the colors and size to complement their decor. "People say, 'I need something for this wall,' and I will go in and we'll talk to come up with the right piece," said Puckett, whose college studies in theatrical set design prepared her for this path.

The reed is then cut into 3- to 4-inch pieces, the elements that give the sculptures their dimension and make them

pop. Each flower has hundreds of these pieces. They are like brushstrokes to a painter.

Puckett places each reed piece "with intent," she said, to create a sculpted dimensional mural that plays with light and dark effects to mimic nature's own paintbrush.

The center of each flower is a contrasting color that may be of dimensional pieces or beaded for another effect. Every piece — whether a black-eyed Susan, a dahlia, bluebird hibiscus or blue daisy — is unique.

Puckett's craft takes other forms, too. She sculpts landscapes for walls that are inspired by the lakes and hills of Connecticut.

Her series of "Islands" is a movable arrangement of multiple pieces that can be grouped in different arrangements.

"Dancing" is one of her freestanding sculptures, approximately 5 feet tall, an abstract vision of movement. Like a lyrical composition, the work seems to sway and undulate. The bittersweet seems to form a spine; the woven flat reed, a colorful costume.

"To me it looks like a woman dancing," the artist said — hence its title.

But Puckett designs utilitarian works, too. She has enjoyed creating tiki bars lately. The one in her showroom, which is located in her house, will soon be on its way to Utah. Puckett, who typically

does a show a month, has buyers all over the country.

Rustic furniture is the latest turn in her road. It's something she always envisioned, but until recently it evaded her. Finally, she took the leap.

"Some pieces of bittersweet just said 'table,'" she explained, seeing the potential for a coffee table in the natural curvilinear form of the vine.

She sculpts and weaves the base of the table, on which clear glass is placed so the artistry can be admired. These sell for about \$1,500.

Of course, there are baskets, too, some traditional, some whimsical. These can be fun or functional and range in cost from less than \$100 to \$300.

This summer, you can catch a show of Puckett's work at Carol Peck's Good News Cafe in Woodbury. Her flowers and wall sculptures will be on display there in June and July.

The restaurant was named one of the nation's best by prestigious 2007 Zagat's Survey of America's Top Restaurants. It was also named Best American Restaurant Statewide by Connecticut magazine's 2007 Readers' Choice Poll, for the fifth consecutive year. Go to <http://www.good-news-cafe.com/>

For more information on Tina Puckett's work, go to www.tinabaskets.com, or call (860) 309-6934.

A glass top lets the sculptural base of a bittersweet and dyed reed table by Tina Puckett be seen.



The artist's "Landscape No. 8" was inspired by Connecticut's hills and lakes.



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