



# dream WEAVER

TINA PUCKETT -  
INTERWOVEN ARTIST & BASKET MAKER

By *Steven Steele Cawman*  
[arts@mainstreetmag.com](mailto:arts@mainstreetmag.com)

Tina Puckett is a basket maker and master weaver whose art is firmly rooted in the Winsted, Connecticut community. The woods around her home, you see, provide her with the vines that she uses to create her intricate woven works. Puckett says that she is in a place in her life where she is free to move anywhere in the world, but feels connected to this area because of the key role that bittersweet vine plays in the creation of her work.

## Starting at the start

Tina attributes her love of bright and festive colors to spending her formative years in South America. She lived in Peru, Brazil, and Chile while her father worked as the International Art Director for a large advertising agency. When Tina was growing up, she was exposed to local crafts in South America. Her palette recalls the bright fabrics and colorful weavings that she saw while living there.

Puckett moved to the area in the early eighties when her parents came to open the Litchfield Food Company, a gourmet food store on the Green in Litchfield, Connecticut. In 1981, her mother suggested that she attend an egg basket-making seminar at the Forman School in Litchfield. Over the course of two consecutive weekends she learned about the supplies, how to dye them, and basic construction skills. She started making baskets as presents for friends, and things took off from there. Soon, people were offering to pay her for her baskets.

Originally, Tina went to college with the intention of becoming a set designer. Many of the concepts that she learned there about structure, color, shape, and form impact her work today. While in college, she also worked backstage with touring theatrical companies. This taught her how to quickly assemble and disassemble large stage and complicated set pieces. To this experience, she attributes her ability to set up booths quickly and precisely when showing her work at art and craft shows.

## Bittersweet vine

Twice a year, in the spring and fall, Tina sets out to collect bittersweet vine from woods in the area. Along with some friends and a collection of tools like chainsaws, assorted clippers and handsaws, she easily finds what she is looking for. The woody bittersweet vine is overly abundant in our area. When it grows near a tree or shrub, the vines twist themselves around the trunk and eventually strangle the host tree to death. Bittersweet is an invasive plant that has had detrimental effects on many of our local wooded areas. Much like the kudzu vine, bittersweet is very difficult to control and has spread from Maine to Florida, and as far west as the Mississippi River. Tina sees her collection process as helping to restore nature. She cuts back the bittersweet that is choking and killing the indigenous trees. "You have to unweave the tangled mess, only to then reassemble and reweave it into something new and beautiful. It is very transformative," she says.

The character of the vine and its natural gnarly shape informs what sort of piece the vine will be used as. "I see it right away and know what certain pieces will be used for. Maybe it is a basket handle

or an interesting shape for a wall hanging. I look at them as I'm harvesting and I just know," Tina says. When first harvested, the vines are heavy with moisture and still semi-pliable, allowing her to work with them and bend them to match her vision. While they are in this stage, she selects pieces of vines for specific works, arranges and lays them out to dry. Tina has about two weeks from the time the vines are harvested until they reach a state where she can no longer modify their shape.

Tina's weaving studio is in the barn behind her home. The spacious and light-filled barn once served as the livery service stable for the town's horses and buggies. The space gives her ample room to spread out her materials. In addition to bittersweet, she also uses hemp rope, sea grass, reeds, and other natural materials. She purchases all of her other materials in their natural color and dyes them herself. The large space also gives her room for the bittersweet to season and dry until it is ready for use. She enjoys having a large space so that she can create pieces of considerable size, some even larger than herself. These larger pieces serve as both functional and art pieces. Tina creates and sells woven works including baskets, bowls, coffee tables, bed stands, bars, large flowers, and both freestanding and wall hanging sculptures.

## Evolutionary process

While she continues to weave traditional shapes like baskets, Tina's work has evolved and changed from the egg baskets that she started with. Today, her pieces are incredibly colorful, complex and contemporary, while providing a variety of functions - either utilitarian and functional; or purely aesthetic and decorative. Physically, she likes to work on on

piece at a time, but mentally she's always thinking about the next piece. Her work is rich and dimensional. It is like a three-dimensional puzzle made of colorful and interlocking pieces. "Weaving is a lot like painting. You can lay down layers of colors and textures to bring forth subtle or vibrant imagery," she explains.

One of the things that most strikes one when spending time with Tina is her harmonious approach to nature and the way in which her great respect for her materials is exemplified in her work. She recognizes the capability of the bittersweet vines for transformation, and that collecting of the parasitic bittersweet vines helps the forests around Winsted to heal and thrive. Tina not only receives great joy in being able to help endemic nature thrive, but also in seeing that what she cuts and collects can be made into something beautiful.

**The future and potential change**

Over the next year, Tina is looking to reposition the way she presents her art. She has been doing business under the name *Tina's Baskets* for many years, but feels that this name is too limiting for what her work has evolved into. "While I do make and sell a lot of baskets, I want people to know right away that my work is much more than just baskets. I am looking to present myself as an interwoven artist and a designer under a new name that will better convey who I am and what my work is about," she explains.

Over the past thirty-three years of her business, Tina has traveled the country extensively. She has made her way along the arts and crafts show sales circuit. Tina, along with her traveling companion George, her cat, enjoys camping at the various locations travelled to when she shows her work. This has given her a great opportunity to see many wonderful new places and experience nature in different regions. While she enjoys experiencing new places and seeing new things, at the end of the day she is happiest right where she is now, firmly rooted in the Winsted community. Her life and art are interwoven into the community she calls home. •

*Tina will be showcasing her work at two upcoming local shows. The first will be at the Woodstock-New Paltz Art & Crafts Fair held May 24th through 26th at the Ulster County Fairgrounds in New Paltz, NY. She will also be at the Berkshires Arts Festival, which will be held at Butternut Ski Resort in Great Barrington, MA from July 4th through 6th. Prices for baskets range from \$50 to \$500 and her wall hangings, depending on size, are around \$1,500.*

*If you would like to see more of Tina's work check out her website at [www.tinasbaskets.com](http://www.tinasbaskets.com). If you would like to contact her for more information or to discuss commissioning an original piece, she can be reached at [tinasbaskets@yahoo.com](mailto:tinasbaskets@yahoo.com). You are also welcome to see her work in Winsted by calling her at 860.309.6934 to set up an appointment.*

*Are you an artist and interested in being featured in Main Street Magazine? Send a brief bio, artist's statement and a link to your work to [arts@mainstreetmag.com](mailto:arts@mainstreetmag.com).*



Opposite page: Circle and Curves. Bittersweet vine, smoked colored reeds and spokes. 55"hx27"wx6"d. This page, Row 1: 5 Purple Flowers. Bittersweet vines, reeds, and beads. 16"hx16"wx4"d. Row 2, left: Wave. Bittersweet vines and reeds. 60"hx48"wx8"d. Right: Jumping Up. Bittersweet vines and vines. 17"hx43"wx6"d. Row 3, left: Current of Love. Bittersweet vines, voven reeds. 22"hx54"wx8"d. Right: 21B. Rainbow colored reeds. Various sizes. Row 4: The artist, Tina Puckett, in her studio.