

# DOMUS

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### JEREMY FREY: INTERWEAVING NATURE WITH TRADITION

by Toshiko Mori



Jeremy Frey, *Purity*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Karma.

Toshiko Mori Jeremy, you are an artist who uses a traditional material, the ash tree, and traditional techniques of the Wabanaki people to make contemporary baskets in Maine. What influences your work?

Jeremy Frey I'm not the most spiritual person. I have a lot of pride just coming from the people I come from and I've decided to take the work as far as I can, design-wise, without separating it from where it comes from, which is why I still have three-dimensional vessels. That's why I weave the way I do.

TM What attracted you to do it?

JF I've always done art. For me, it was the idea of doing something very traditional in a contemporary way and succeeding at it. I just thought that was such a cool thing to take such an ancient tradition and use it in a modern way. I really tried to stay as close to the tradition as possible. So it's not like I've bastardised the idea. There's something about the fact that 100 years ago, I could have made these exact same baskets. They're so close to tradition, yet they're so far away at the same time.

TM Did somebody teach you to weave?

JF My mother taught me how to weave, but I grew up drawing and sculpting and painting. Those were my toys when I was a kid. We were fairly poor; my mother could afford art supplies but that was roughly it. So for the first eight or ten years of my life, all I did was art. As soon as I became an adult and just had to make a living, I went right back to what I knew, which was art. So it's just been in me since I was a little kid.

TM Are you from a family of basket weavers?

JF Yes, generations.

TM Your baskets are contemporary and modern, but one can recognise certain patterns or details that relate to traditional ones in Maine. What is that tradition that's important to you? And is it specific to Wabanaki baskets?

JF I think it's universal. It's interesting, you know, there's no glue. The baskets are literally pressure-fit together and there's no way for them to come apart. Each piece supports the next piece. I try not to include materials that I don't harvest myself. That's a major thing. If I'm going to put a new material in my basket, I'll go out, find it, learn how to use it, learn how to process it, learn how to prepare it. And then I put it in a way that was always done. Like if I work with cedar bark, I'll turn it into a braided rope the way that we do with sweetgrass, and then I'll weave in patterns that we would have woven with sweetgrass. It's a contemporary approach but done in a completely traditional way. Even though no one has ever done it, you can instantly identify the patterns and the designs, you just don't know what the material is. And it's local; it's not like I've got it from some other place.

TM What is the impact of the emerald ash borer infestation on ash trees in Maine?

JF We're getting hammered. But we still have a few years of harvest left before it's completely invaded the state. There's nothing you can do. Our trees are just, I don't even know, they're just super edible. I guess that's the best way to put it. When a bug gets in there, there's nothing that can be done. It's not even hard for them to chew. There's nothing to stop them; they just keep eating. Whereas where the beetle is originally from, the tree has its own built-in defences. In fact, before they were here, there was no study on the emerald ash borer at all. They knew it existed, they knew there was a beetle, but that was it. Most of the studies done on it have been done since it came to the US.

TM There's a sense of crisis. Is hybridisation an option?

JF There are a few trees that have some resistance to the bug, even now. Those descendants will come back. But as far as weaving traditions and cultures, I can't say I know what will happen. That's probably 50, 80, 100 years from now – I won't be here. I don't know what the state of humanity will be. Are people going to want to weave? It's hard even now for me to find a student who wants to spend that kind of time and disconnect from what we've become as a society. It's amazing that I even did, I think.

TM Brown ash seems to be remarkably pliable. Is this a special property of this species?

JF It is. If you take white ash, which grows here, or even green ash, and you prepare it the exact same way you prepare brown ash, when you go to bend the material, it'll just snap. Whereas the brown ash, it's like rubber.

TM Are the shapes of functional baskets of interest to you?

JF Originally, baskets were made to carry things, so their shape was dictated by their function. Mine are the opposite. The shape is dictated strictly aesthetically. Sometimes I'll make covers that don't make any sense. They're too small for the vessel but it looks good. Aesthetically, I think fancy baskets in general kind of went that route: taking a design that is thousands of years old and refining it into an art form. It became less of a tool and more of like a handbag.

TM But it still remains a vessel. It doesn't deviate from the original, it may not function for containing stuff, but it remains a vessel that has a void for use.

JF I put as much attention to the inside as the outside. The covers come off; they're fully functional. The whole idea is about just exploring the design, exploring what you can do with design, and again, without going away from what it originally was. For years, I didn't really have a philosophy to it. A lot of the work I do is very subtle. A lot of times I don't expect

anyone to notice it until they've had the piece for a year, or who knows if they'll notice some of the stuff I do at all. It's done to make the piece "more" of what it is. A piece can visually be one thing, and then it can become something completely different just by taking the cover off of it, or by changing your viewing angle. I wanted to show people something different, to give people a different perspective on the work.

TM How do you process ash after harvesting?

JF You take the tree and you cut it up until the first branch usually. I try and get about a three-metre piece. The longer the tree is, the longer the materials you can weave with. I prefer to have longer sections to weave with because it means fewer restarts and makes a stronger basket. You bring the tree home, you take the bark off, lay it down, and you pound the outside of it with an axe. Then you turn it and you pound it again; you turn it, you pound it again. Like you're eating corn on the cob. This is collapsing the fibre between each growth ring. You know the little channels that carry the water up? These collapse and crush and then that releases the growth year. If you hit it enough times, you can get down 10, 12 years and then you pull those years off. It follows the grain of the trees. You're pulling the grain down so there are no crosscuts, no weak spots, no in-between grain. With ash baskets, wherever you're weaving, the grain goes with it. It's really strong this way. Even the tiny little stuff I work with is very strong for how thick it is.

TM Going back to the broader topic of "forest", your work is one of the more authentic and direct relationships between forest resources and artwork, because there's no distance between you and a tree. Typically, there are thousands of people and a lot of distance between where wood is harvested and the point where it becomes an object. I think there's something amazing about the way you work directly with the forest.

JF Well, I've been lucky too. Most ash weavers here don't harvest their own trees. There are very few who do. It's physically demanding to pound a tree apart. Pounding the tree is an art form in itself. Harvesting the right tree and processing it down to usable material is a lot of work. And it takes quite a bit of knowledge and a lot of practice. It's really abusive on the body. So you have to be healthy, strong and knowledgeable and willing to learn. You have to break a lot of axe handles before you actually learn how to swing an axe. Eventually, the emerald ash borer is going to infest all of our trees. What will the baskets become? I've written a really cool story with my work. And the timing is perfect because the trees are going to go, and I still have a chance to really continue to write my story. I still have a chance to create this collection of works that hopefully will last a very long time. It feels like there's that much more responsibility to use this material to tell the story of the ash in a different light.