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JILL POWERS' Laboratory for Art

BY LEANNE JEWETT

Jill Powers' conversations about her art, her materials, and her teaching are all peppered with words like experimentation, discoveries, investigations, and exploration. And when asked about her studio, she says, "I think of my studio as a laboratory where I experiment with many different processes and develop my work out of the discoveries I make there."

As she describes the outdoor portion of her Boulder, Colorado studio with tables and buckets and trays and jars of things drying and sun-bleaching, or fermenting, she could be describing a 19th Century naturalist's study; and it is used much the same way. She explains, "That's where I cook down the fiber and beat it. I work with plants, pulps, some papermaking techniques, gut, salt, natural dyes, horsehair, crystallization. I've been working with beeswax encaustics and stitching mica. Everywhere I go . . . I'm gathering materials and I'm taking them into the studio and trying all sorts of experiments."

Powers entered the art world as a painter. In her 20's she took a course on how to work with more unusual surfaces for painting, and was introduced to papermaking. She says, "I was just taken in by the process. Beating the plant material, making pulp, the shrinkage, the drying process, all of it really captured me. And then when I started on my graduate degree (at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia), I ended up focusing on fibers."

Later, she and her husband and their daughter had to make what was meant to be a temporary move from Pennsylvania to Boulder. She was unable to take her entire studio and so decided to choose just one fiber to explore for the ten months that she would be away. She chose to take Kozo, the inner bark of the mulberry that is used in fine papermaking. She explains the significance of that decision, "That year I discovered many new techniques and developed a whole new kind of work." And she adds, "It's often those times when you have limitations that bring about wonderful discoveries."



LEFT: Jill Powers in her studio.

TOP: Jill Powers, **The Small Winged Life** (detail); kozo, gut, dried okra pod; 72 x 60".

LEFT: Jill Powers, **The Universe is Speaking: Meadowlark** (detail); kozo, cellulose fiber; 20 x 20".



OPPOSITE PAGE:
LEFT: Jill Powers, **The Small Winged Life**; mixed media processes; 72 x 60".
TOP RIGHT: Jill Powers, **CoEvolution: Insects and Climate Change**; kozo, window screening, gut, salt, seed pods, encaustics; 52 x 22".
BOTTOM RIGHT: **CoEvolution** (detail)
THIS PAGE:
FAR TOP LEFT: Jill Powers in her outdoor studio.
FAR BOTTOM LEFT: Jill Powers, **Planting by the Moon** (detail); 6 x 17 x 7".
NEAR LEFT: Jill Powers, **Cicada Song**; kozo; 12 x 20 x 7"; In the collection of Sara and David Lieberman.

Powers continues to explore and work with Kozo and other natural materials creating abstract sculptures, vessels, and installations that evoke the ephemeral beauty of nature and that are as graceful and organic as the materials that form them.

The move to Boulder proved to be permanent and her now complete studio is part of her home located just on the edge of the Rocky Mountains. She frequently hikes into the foothills near her home where she says, "I just kind of root myself in the land ... feel its influence. I meditate. That kind of contemplative time in nature ... fuels a deeper connection with my work."

Powers reads widely and describes herself as curious. She has a keen interest in environmental issues that find their way into her work. She says, "I live my most authentic life in the studio when I'm getting in touch with the core of the work that I'm meant to do in this world. What's drawing my attention right now is work that focuses on the delicate ecosystems of our planet and the interrelatedness of all life forms."

A new and evolving installation piece that was first exhibited at Snyderman Gallery in Philadelphia during the *International Fiber Biennial, 2012* is called *The Small Winged Life* and speaks to those environmental issues. It is formed of hundreds of small, winged insects created with Kozo fiber, seed pods, and other natural materials that are mounted on entomology pins and flow in intersecting patterns across the wall. She describes the work as an exploration of "the mysteries and complexities of insect life, while also raising awareness about how climate change is affecting insect populations."

She is now working on another installation specific to the pine bark beetle, an insect that is currently devastating trees in her area and in mountains across the western states. That work

will be featured in January, along with an evolved and expanded installation of *The Small Winged Life*, at the Firehouse Art Center in Longmont, Colorado. In October of this year she will have work at the *Watermarks Exhibition* at the Morgan Conservatory in Ohio.

When asked what sparks the creation of a piece, Jill replies that she often sees a shape in her mind and that the piece evolves from there. "When I'm ready to work, I often begin by cooking down a large pot of the Kozo bark. I do a lot of test castings. Sometimes I rework sections. It goes back and forth with the whole process of what's coming into the studio through my life and experimentation."

Jill says teaching has always been part of her life. She is on the faculty of the art department at Naropa University, an institution that has contemplative practice at its core, which she says, "Really fits who I am as an artist." She is especially pleased with a new course that she designed and taught for the first time last spring, called *Eco Art*. The class involves working with sustainable practices, natural and recycled materials, and addresses environmental issues.

She also teaches workshops at her studio and in other places when invited, such as a recent lecture and workshop at the Denver Botanical Gardens.

Powers has work in the American Museum of Papermaking and in the Sara and David Lieberman Collection. She shows periodically at the SOFA exhibitions in Chicago.

For more images of and information about Jill Powers' work and upcoming exhibitions visit her website at www.jillpowers.com.

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