The Carrier Bag Theory

Visual Artists Re-envision the Container

In response to Ursula LeGuin's 'Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction'
April 11 - May 11, 2025
The Nave Gallery

Megan Aki
Samantha Fields
Mo Kelman
Veronica Perez
Deborah Santoro

Cori Champagne
Lesley Goldacre
Michelle Lougee
Nirmal Raja
Sam Toabe

Merill Comeau
Audrey Goldstein
Joetta Maue
Susi Ryan
Ann Wessman

Jodi Colella
Kristina Gorannsson
Cecily Miller
Christle Rawlins-Jackson
Nora Valdez

Pocket Full of Stars

A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling
A sack a bottle a pot a box a container.
A holder. A recipient.[1]

It begins with with weaving the world, weaving and knitting and sewing and crocheting to create, decorate, protect, keep warm, keep safe, and envision new futures in times of chaos. **Nora Valdez's** piece, *Tejiendro Mi Destino, or Weaving My Destiny*, features large wood knitting needles creating a fabric from which are suspended small house like objects with place names written on them. This piece speaks to the power of creativity to enact change in the world, and hints at the migratory nature of human existence on earth. In another origin story, **Sam Fields'** humorous *origin in peach no.4* engages rich textures and a hot palette of color to speak to the agency of those who give birth, in direct opposition to those who think our genitalia defines us in some indefatigable way. Sam's slip cast table legs hilariously frame a birth scene spilling out of a sewing hoop, with plaited hair not covering up for a lack of something, but rather displaying the wild nature of creativity in all its full technicolor glory.

Anna Kristina Goransson reminds us that it is the sails of the Viking ships that enable fragile wooden containers of beings to sail across the sea, that sails are born of weaving. Goransson's felted wool hands hold a basket, another form of weaving. The term 'basket weaving' has become a pejorative phrase to imply something has little value, yet the art of weaving the skins of trees and bushes into useful and beautiful vessels has always been important, and it turns out that this easy dismissal of early technology is just another way to assert the dominance of one culture over another. A little bit of gold spills out of Goransson's basket... hinting at the value of things overlooked. **Ann Wessman's** *Gathering #9* is a cascade of horse chestnut husks, meticulously gathered over years that stretch into decades. The piece starts with a relationship with a horse chestnut tree. Strung into garlands with waxed linen cord, every piece feels like a punctuation mark, a letter in a lost language from another time. Strands of husks are gathered together at the bottom, so that the whole becomes a suspended vessel, hovering in the canopy.

What is gathered can also be split apart. **Liz Shepherd** has suspended a basket with trailing roots in *When the Bough Breaks*. She references an 18th century English folk song—sometimes cradles fall. In this dark cradle that holds no child, Shepherd uses the spaces between fiber wrapped wire to allude to the emptiness of loss. **Deborah Santoro's** *I Would Build a Dovecote*, alludes to another kind of loss, the loss of home and the impossibility of return. This metaphorical dovecote speaks to to long ago migrations and displacements, acts that reverberate to this day. **Merill Comeau's** *La Cadie Diaspora* documents the violent rending of a peaceful culture of French speaking Acadian peoples in Canada in what is known as the The Great Upheaval or "Le Grand Dérangement." Botanical illustrations and the black meandering pathways of forced migration surround a scarlet bordered chasm where once there was a living culture. *La Cadie Diaspora* represents a chapter in the all too real history of colonialism.

The process of cyanotype combines photography with the richness and range of an indigo like

blue. **Joetta Maue's** piece *In the Garden* features embroidery and applique on cyanotyped linen. With raw edges and dangling weft threads that mirror the sewn strands of a woman's hair, Maue juxtaposes photographic images from the garden with needlework, leaves, and flowers that seem to float in a sea of purplish blue, centering the role of motherhood. **Cecily Miller's** *Heirlooms* uses the cyanotype process to document doilies, lace, and leaves, encasing them all in blue, each detail telling the story of a hand that coiled and twisted a fiber to make a pattern. There was a time not so long ago in this country when a woman couldn't own property — the one thing that was considered hers was her trousseau. Miller points out that these doilies "whisper to you of humble moments of repetition, love, care, and a brief flash of triumph when the last stitch was secured."As we go through our closets and find our grandmother's doilies, we too might remember a time when these were the only things women were allowed to own.

Nirmal Raja dips cloth in porcelain and fires it, creating an empty vessel that holds the memory of cloth in *Exercises in Letting Go*. For Raja, life is full of border crossings and their inherent dangers. These vessels, empty even of the material that originally defined their boundaries, refer to the transience of material objects and are potent metaphors for the boundaries between breath and body, between self and other, between one nation state and another, boundaries not as fixed as they seem. **Jodi Colella's** family of vessels called *Ova*, each 2 halves stitched

together, are hybrid beings that huddle together on a platform for solace and for succor. *Ova* of course references the egg, and science tells us that the egg has more agency in choosing than we once supposed. These hybrid beings, mouths open to the possibility of song, gather and hold and release, perhaps waiting for a better opportunity to come along.

Mo Kelman's *Once it held water* is a paper clad basket entrapped in a grid of wooden sticks. The title implies that it once held water, but now it is pierced, fragile, wounded, a potent metaphor for the Earth and its fragile ecosystems. The paper itself holds the memory of water, both in its making and in its suminagashi surfaces. **Lesley Goldacre** centers the act of gathering. They gather, wind, and weave their own hair into shallow bowls with animal like tails. A surprise for the curator — the bowls arrived with a small white feather that serves to activate the bowls, implying a nest. The bowls gather energy and focus into themselves and represent a locus of concentration, an ode to the small and seemingly inconsequential.

Christle Rawlins-Jackson's pinecone quilt is a grid of 9 prayer circles, each one holding a talismanic object. She uses hand dyed textiles she made during a sojourn in Ghana, drawing on the rich cultural traditions of the Gee's Bend quilters of Alabama. The gorgeously layered and folded fabrics hint at stories within stories and secrets hiding in plain sight. A container full of stars, it sings to us of multi-layered traditions, and of peoples who have banded together in order to survive. **Susi Ryan's** *Calypso Seabirds* is a story quilt, another kind of container, one that holds textile histories and references to the forced migrations of enslaved peoples. With pleats and

folds that turn and twist, textile speaks to what the physicist Carlo Rovelli refers to as the Order of Time. The rhythm of the folds echoes the syncopated rhythms of music that people brought with them from Africa to the so-called 'New World' and the hand dyed and batiked fabrics hold the histories of fiber, textile, and dye.

White Sleeve, made by **Audrey Goldstein** ,uses wire and cloth to form crystalline shapes. It's a bit of a chameleon, shifting in form and content from different angles. The piece is open, then encloses upon itself, both container and contained, a conglomerate of hollows that exist only in relationship to each other.In **Verónica Perez's** *infinite distance*, braids spill out of a crocheted pot; plaited strands too wild to be contained. Spinning, turning, braiding, looping... textures pile up and intertwine. Perez instills a longing to touch, and simultaneously repells that desire while reflecting a fierce materiality. infinite distance sizzles and bubbles like a cauldron of fury, ready to explode.

Cori Champagne's *Supply* features upcycled clothing and plastic water pouches, enough to hold a woman's recommended water supply for a day. Despite their cleanliness and neatly stitched seams, they give off a post-apocalypic vibe, implying as they do that fresh water is in short supply in many places throughout the globe. They also bring plastics into the conversation, a modern material that ironically pollutes even as it contains. Simultaneously smart, humorous, and devastating, *Supply*, in a women's size 8, warns of dire futures and consequences. Michelle Lougee crochets single use plastic bags into a new sac, applying various gem-like discards to the surface. This eye-popping and humorous Carrierbag is a reminder of the dystopian nature of our consumerist society in which plastics are omnipresent, sold to us in our clothing and in our food. Lougee conveys all this with a light heartedness that masks a deep sadness, using the detritus of our daily lives to weave beacons of hope that all is not yet lost.

Sam Toabe and **Megan Aki** demonstrate that pockets are bags that are sewn into and onto our clothing. Light hearted yet containing history and referential tidbits about fashion and design, these pockets become modes of sharing, enabling, teaching, and connecting. Take a small flyer from one pocket, and your world potentially expands. Like textile itself, there are stories embedded in pockets, and politics, and the detritus of our daily lives. Pockets hum with the soft logics of cloth, embody the place where textile meets the body and hold something- whether it is a snack, a small book, or a memento of an event.

"...still the story isn't over. Still there are seeds to be gathered, and room in the bag of stars."

Ursula K. LeGuin

Veronica Perez, infinite distance, detail

Likely the pockets we need are the pockets we haven't made yet, the pockets we make together that hold our shared values, stories, and secrets. These pockets full of stars might be a guide in creating new underground railroads in times when tyrannies seem to have the upper hand. Artists like these have the power to imbue cloth with memory, with stories. British textile theorist Pennina Barnett wrote that "cloth is a kind of memory, embodied and material."[2] Yet today a large percentage of textiles are made with the memory of exploitative labor practices in trade free zones. As dystopian futures permeate the present, Donna Haraway reminds us that the carrier bags we weave and sew, write and shape in myriad ways, might might make us "more able to discern and tell what is really happening, and how it can still be different."[3] Keeping a star in your pocket might remind you that you are made of stardust, and that there are futures we can shape and change if we dare to weave new worlds and to tell new/old stories—stories of hope, of change, of freedom.

Deborah Santoro
April, 2025

1. Ursula K. LeGuin, The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction, Ignota, 2019, p.29.
2. Barnett, Pennina, "Reflections on Cloth, Memory, and the Archive," Bummock: The Lace Archive, edited by Andrew Bracey, Danica Maier and Lucy Renton, 2019, p. 59-73. United Kingdom: Flipping the Bummock Press.
3. Haraway, Donna, "Receiving Three Mochilas in Colombia: Carrier Bags for Staying With the Trouble Together (Introduction), Ursula K. LeGuin, The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction, Ignota, 2019, p.11.

Curator's Statement

Ursula Le Guin suggests that the first tool may not have been a sharp and pointy aggressive implement but instead a soft and useful vessel for carrying berries, potatoes or babies. "Perhaps the earliest cultural device was a container, a recipient to hold gathered products, a sling. The tool that brings the energy home."

These invited fiber artists explore the symbolic quality of the container – whether bottle, basket, bag, womb or vessel; telling a visual tale in which the container is of primary importance – the HERO. An Artist might express gathering as story, myth, communication, community and history. As Ursula Le Guin points out in her essay, a novel holds things in a powerful relationship to one another. A leaf, a gourd, a shell, a net, a bag, a sack, a bottle, a box all may hold things like a book holds words. A vessel holds things saved and carried for future consumption, observation, celebration. A vessel is a way to bring a handful or more than a handful home to care for and share with others. Through this exhibition we explore the story of the gatherer.

I'm grateful to each artist for bringing their own language, expertise and history to the compelling work that looks both toward the future and back at the past to this exhibit. I've enjoyed the visual conversations between the works. Special thank you's to Deborah Santoro and Tori Costa for their teamwork on this exhibit and to my ever supportive husband Keith, who helped with installation and had several special projects related to the exhibit.

Michelle Lougee, Curator

This exhibit was funded in part by a generous grant from the Somerville Arts Council. The Somerville Arts Council is the local cultural council (LCC) for the City of Somerville, Massachusetts and serves to celebrate the arts and community.

Since 2004, the Nave Gallery in Teele Square has been the public face of ARTSomerville, a nonprofit, loosely knit volunteer group of artists and arts enthusiasts with the mutual goal to create space to present art in Somerville. The Nave Gallery has been a tenant of the Clarendon Hill Presbyterian Church for over 20 years. Our website is www.navegallery.org and on Facebook we are Nave Somerville.

We present an exhibition of fiber work in response to Ursula Le Guin's Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction essay as part of Gather2025, a month-long celebration of Fiber Arts in and around Boston, Massachusetts.

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