



FEATURE

# Kari Lønning

WRITTEN BY LOIS RUSSELL



It is a small house on a small lot in western Connecticut, and it could not belong to anyone but Kari Lønning. A former school built in 1900, it is snuggled amidst a garden full of delicate flowers and textured leaves. Inside, coils and coils and coils of dyed reed are everywhere. Everywhere.

This is Kari's world. She tends it and in return it provides her with inspiration, context and the space to be an artist. Kari is best known for her basketry, with its rich and interesting color combinations, elegant forms and topnotch craftsmanship.

The property is both home and studio. The reed is dyed in the kitchen. The finished baskets are taken to the small greenhouse which both shelters plants and provides a vented area to apply encaustic, a new step which deepens and preserves the colors. Her faithful sidekick, Emma, an Old English Sheepdog, follows her everywhere, while her cat Kitt, beds down in the reed.

For Kari Lønning each day is a trip down three creative pathways: gardening, photography and basketry. Her home is where those paths come together.

All the colors found in the coils of dyed reed are found outside in the leaves of the hostas, the ripe tomato, or the clouds lifting after a storm. Captured on camera, they make their way into the baskets.

Not that Kari never leaves home. An annual summer trip to a family cottage on a Norwegian island adds the colors of algae in a tidal pool; and a road trip in Maine, the angles and colors of a wheelbarrow display at a rural hardware store.

Kari collects images wherever she goes. Her eyes are always on the prowl for interesting color combinations, lines, and patterns. It is this act of observing, of really looking, that is, in her mind, the basis of being an artist.

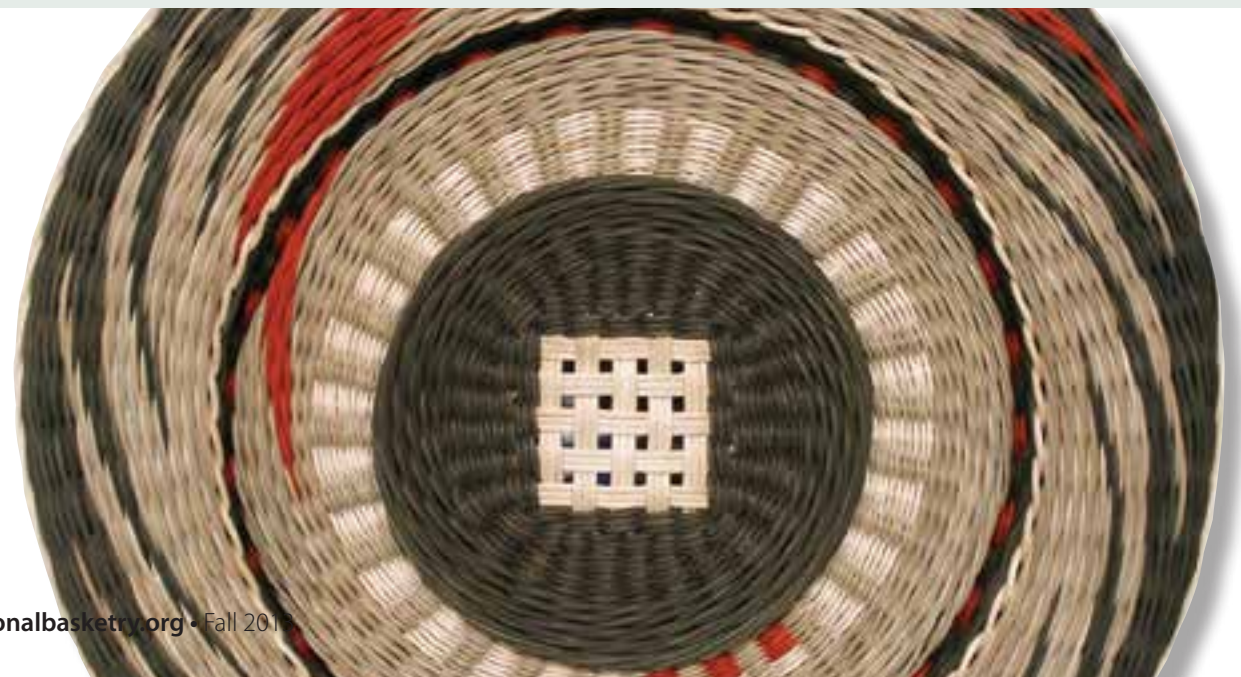
"It is all about paying attention," she said, "about noticing all the little things that get you excited."

**Left: Greenhouse as encaustic studio**  
Photography by Kari Lønning

**Top: Spiral Tulips (2012)**  
2.5" x 15"  
Rattan reed and encaustic medium  
Photography by Kari Lønning

**Bottom: Fractured (2009)**  
1.5" x 15.5"  
Rattan reed and encaustic medium  
Photography by Kari Lønning

**Portrait**  
Photography by Sky Cole





**Top: Sage + Adobe Stripes (2013)**  
10.5" x 12"  
Rattan reed and encaustic medium  
Photography by Kari Lønning

**Bottom: Instagram Basket (2012)**  
14.5" x 12"  
Rattan reed and encaustic medium  
Photography by Kari Lønning



**Emma and hostas**  
Photography by Kari Lønning

Kari's computer is a treasure trove of images, both her own and those of other photographers she has befriended online, mostly through Instagram, like the German photographer who posts seed pod photos in black and white and the person in Seattle who is really good at finding "long shadows."

Photography has become increasingly important in her creative process. It is the way she captures what her eye sees. Technology has made it possible to manipulate those images easily. With a click she can explore an image in more depth, gaining a deeper understanding of what colors are "hidden," or analyze how structural elements contribute to the composition of the photo.

Both design and color attract Kari's eye, but color trumps. "I've been known to stand in front a paint chip display and get lost in the colors... the subtle differences between blue-grays and gray-greens and blue-greens."

What may look like fiddling around on the computer, is what Kari calls "editing." And it is central to her work. She begins by pushing a photograph every which way using the technology. This part of the process is all about possibilities, she explained. It is much easier and faster to "try out" color combinations and design modifications sitting with a computer screen than sitting with a basin of damp reed.

The computer can keep up with her imagination recording possibility after possibility as fast as her imagination churns them out.

"Editing is instantaneous," Kari said. "And I can get carried away. It's not as vague as experimenting... it's more like distilling."

A new color pulled from a photo will send Kari to her dye pot. Kari started dyeing wool as a weaver in the 1970s and still uses the same high quality fiber

reactive dyes that are used for upholstery fabrics, but using a warm, not cool, bath.

If people treat her pieces well, she said, keeping them out of direct sun, for example, the colors will last. The use of encaustic, a combination of beeswax and damar resin, helps. But, she added, "...even the school bus fades in time."

Over the years Kari has come up with a set of "recipes" and she keeps a record of everything she does so she can match a dye lot if she doesn't wait too long. Dyes change with age, one reason the final color is hard to control. With years of experience, Kari can most often get that new color she wants by tinkering with the recipes and sometimes overdyeing to get very dark or saturated colors.

"The excitement happens," she said, "if I like the way it comes out and if it is a color I love." The new color will take her to other colors and then to a design. This is the stage where all the visual exploration begins to take a concrete form and a new basket idea is born.

"I find an excuse to put them (the colors) into a basket," she said with a grin.

Using her hands is fundamental, Kari said. When asked what she wanted to do as a child, she would respond simply, "I want to make things." That hasn't changed.

"I need the balance between working with my hands and working with color and graphics," she said. "Initially it was about making something I could hold... I was a potter. I am still a potter. I was a weaver. I am still a weaver. Now I weave pots."

Raised in Connecticut, she studied art at Syracuse University. After graduation she worked for a photographer, wove, quilted, and worked in wood. Her first two years at the Rhinebeck craft show, she sold quilts, wooden puzzles and what she calls her "woven



**Top: Wavy Top (2011)**  
20" x 15"  
Rattan reed and encaustic medium  
Photography by Kari Lønning

**Bottom: Little Hairy Pots (2013)**  
6.25" x 6.5"  
Rattan reed  
Photography by Kari Lønning



**Top: Wine + Chocolate (2012)**  
7.5" x 7.5"  
Rattan reed  
Photography by Kari Lonning



**Top: Sage and Seagrass for commission**  
Photography by Kari Lonning

**Bottom: Sage and Seagrass Commission (2013)**  
Each basket 15" x 10.5"  
Rattan reed and encaustic medium  
Photography by Kari Lonning

beasts," which were animal forms created using rya rug techniques. When a goat was accepted by the Renwick Gallery, of the Smithsonian Institution, she decided she could take a day off.

That was the day she became a basket maker. There was some left over reed at the house from a friend's chair caning project.

"I picked it up and started playing," Kari said. First she copied a brass tea strainer with a double, crossed bottom, but when the basket didn't turn out well, "I took it apart and started over."

Most of what she learned of technique came from her college weaving classes and experimentation.

"I didn't make up the techniques I use," she says about the little hairy nests she makes, "the birds have been using them forever." Even the way she starts and ends weavers she says, she found in a book published in 1926.


Over the years, she has polished and refined those techniques, publishing a book in 2000 (The Art of Basketry) which covers the designs and techniques that mark her work as unique, the use of multiple rod wales to create subtle texture and sharp graphics, her "hairy" technique, double-walls.

For Kari, good design is everywhere, in manmade architecture and packaging as well as in nature. Color and technique come together in her designs. She goes back to the photographs for ideas and more "distilling."

Combined, these elements make a piece that could only be made by Kari. "As an artist, my work is sharing what I see, with the world. I hope it resonates."

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Fiber	Elin Noble
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