

# Painting in the Round

ELIZABETH WHYTE SCHULZE

“I’d like my work to be as expressive as what I saw in the Lascaux caves.”

Elizabeth Whyte Schulze was recalling an epiphanous moment in the mid-1990s when, during a trip to southwestern France, she was among the five people who were admitted to the caverns on a certain day. Once inside the Paleolithic environment, she immediately took an imaginary leap from the undulating painted walls to the curving surfaces of the coiled forms she had been making. Until then she hadn’t considered them as surfaces to be embellished with graphics and color.

Now, like the Lascaux walls with their layered patina and masses of overlapping images, Schulze’s sculptural forms are replete with overlapping figures, symbols, and patterns. Child-like silhouettes of people, their skirted shapes identifying them as women; archetypal images such as ladders, chairs, and spirals; linear configurations and dots integrated with text—all inhabit the continuum of inner/outer surfaces that Schulze has painted, stenciled, and collaged.

On a July morning in Schulze’s studio in a corner of northern Massachusetts, six or seven colorfully painted baskets awaited shipment to a gallery. They stood together like a family with common characteristics in different proportions. The vertical structures rose from bulging bases—Schulze calls them “bubble bottoms”—bordered with a repeated motif that resembles an element on a Persian carpet. By making the coiled forms flattened, rather than rounded, Schulze created these baskets with two different sides, allowing sequential narrative content. Just completed, the group comprised the *Anna Series*, a collective commentary relevant to women artists.

While Schulze’s works have a bright, lively spirit, they address serious issues persisting for women even in the 21st century. In *Sit Down Now!* the title refers to suppression of female autonomy; it raises a question that is “Anna’s Dilemma”: How to be an artist and a mother? (Anna Schuleit is a contemporary artist who asked that question during an open studio while in residence at the University of Massachusetts.)

On both *Sit Down Now!* and the twice-as-tall *Listen to Me!*, the stenciled names of prominent women artists—e.g., Magdalena Abakanowicz, Joan Mitchell, Ruth Asawa, Agnes Martin, Norma Minkowitz—are like persistent voices in the background. Schulze is honoring these women as important forebears. Her references to domestic objects such as the scissors in *Monkey Business*, are reminiscent of the cartoonish renderings of household objects in the paintings of Elizabeth Murray, another artist Schulze admires. But inspiration has also come from urban graffiti and women she has seen making baskets in small Asian villages. Echoes of traditional basketry patterns appear in Schulze’s occasional use of woven-in patterns, like the checkerboard bands at the tops of some pieces in the *Anna Series*.

Schulze has been making baskets since the 1970s—after completing a master’s degree at Tufts, she remained in the Boston area and became immersed in the emergent fiber movement. She learned a variety of fiber techniques in courses led by prominent artists such as Anne Flaten Pixley, and then took “a little workshop” in basketry. “I was hooked on basketry,” she said. She learned basic twining and coiling from people like Carol Hart, a basketmaker pioneering in the use of natural materials. Early on, Schulze made baskets of yarn and rope, woven on and off the loom, but found she preferred the rhythm of repetitive coiling. “I love the feeling of a basket growing, and the endless possibilities of shape,” she said.

In the early ‘80s, Schulze turned to natural materials—now she uses pine needles and raffia—and started embedding geometric patterns and iconic images into interior as well as exterior surfaces. Then came the point when she wanted to make a mark inside a basket but couldn’t reach deeply enough to embed it into the structure. With an enormous sense of risk, she carefully added a small amount of acrylic paint. Over the years, that tentative gesture with a brush has led to the lushly painted surfaces she creates today.

To construct a fully developed basketry form and then apply paint means shifting from careful control to unrestricted freedom, Schulze pointed out. It also means breaking away from the classical basketry idiom in which surface



LEFT AND RIGHT: ELIZABETH WHYTE SCHULZE *Sit Down Now!* Pine needles and raffia, paint, paper, coiled, 12" x 8.5" x 5".  
Photos: John Polak.

by Patricia Malarcher

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LEFT AND RIGHT: ELIZABETH WHYTE SCHULZE *Monkey Business* Pine needles and raffia, paint, paper, coiled, 9.5" x 8" x 4".  
 TOP RIGHT: ELIZABETH WHYTE SCHULZE *Pins and Needles* Pine needles and raffia, paint, paper, coiled, 9.5" x 10.5" diameter.  
 ELIZABETH WHYTE SCHULZE *Listen to Me* Pine needles and raffia, paint, paper, coiled, 25" x 20" x 12".  
 Photos: John Polak.

decoration and embellishment are integral with structure. An interesting aspect of painting on a three-dimensional surface is the open-endedness of spatial orientation. Varying in scale and tone, Schulze's images seem to move forward and backward on the surfaces, and often are partially lost within patterns of text. The top and bottom borders hold in check an interesting tension between objectness and illusion.

Given the importance of painted imagery in her work, has she considered abandoning the basketry foundation? "I stay with it because I have such respect for it," Schulze said, noting both its universality and its diversity from one place to another.

A recent departure for Schulze, *Pins and Needles* has a straightforward vessel shape but its outer wall is clothed in tissue paper, originally part of a pattern for a garment. Schulze's own linear graphics mingle with the printed instructions. Gently wrinkled, the paper obscures the coiling beneath it and seems to feminize the form. With the painted figures and text on the inside, this inaugurates a new series on women's work.

Schulze's home and studio are in a cluster of buildings on a small farm that served as a commune in the '70s. (Her husband, Steve, was the member of the commune who didn't leave, and is now involved with solar energy equipment.) While her rural setting seems an ideal location for basketry's meditative pace, Schulze's work is largely informed by around-the-world travels. Those began early in her life when her family moved to Japan in connection with her father's business; later, she visited Southeast Asia while her brother was in the Peace Corps in Borneo. Encounters with aboriginal painting in Australia and petroglyphs in the American Southwest have enriched her visual vocabulary.

Having felt the mythic power of the cave murals, Schulze continues to see them as a measure of her own aspirations. At the same time, she keeps connecting with reverberations of other distant cultures. Late last summer she headed for Italy, looking forward not only to Rome but also to "the earliest graffiti" in Pompeii. "Wherever I go, there is something for me," she said. "You just never know what it will be."

Learn more about Elizabeth Whyte Schulze at [www.elizabethwhyteschulze.com](http://www.elizabethwhyteschulze.com).

