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Donna Sharrett, "Tailored Herbaria: Pocantico River Watershed (2022 #2)," 2022, donated clothing, textiles, notions and guitar-string ball ends, thread. 10 x 14 inches (25.4 x 35.56 centimeters). Photo courtesy of the artist

DONNA SHARRETT: MEDITATIONS ON NATURE, MEMORY, AND THE TOUCH OF THE ARTIST'S HAND

NEW WORKS — AND RESPECT — FROM AN ART-MAKER WHO OBSERVES THAT "HUMAN EXISTENCE DEPENDS ON TREES"

by Edward M. Gómez

The American artist Donna Sharrett lives and works in Ossining, New York, a small town on the east bank of the Hudson River, about 30 miles (48 kilometers) north of New York City. Along with various historic houses and churches, Ossining is known as the home of the Sing Sing Correctional Facility, a maximum-security state prison that once housed New York State's execution chamber.

Sharrett is one of the most focused, thoughtful artists one might meet today; known for the depth and originality of the research she undertakes in conjunction with her creative projects, she is someone whose art emerges naturally, with a sense of purpose and invention, from her varied but related interests. As Sharrett puts it clearly herself in a statement that appears on her personal website, she works “under the influence” of the roles she plays – with attention and gusto – in her life, including those of artist, environmentalist, gardener, seamstress, and activist.

For many years, her mixed-media artworks, which were based in sewing and the use of fabric, and which unabashedly celebrated the expressive power of fine craftsmanship and the visible touch of the artist’s hand, served as memorials to the deceased. Sharrett was deeply and forever moved by the death of her brother, Scot (1961-2001), at an early age; following her loss, she sought a way to use her art to honor and remember him.

About her “Arrangements” and “Mementos” series of mixed-media works, Sharrett has written: “[They] are meditations on memory [in which] flowers, music, and [personal] belongings serve as its repository and are arranged within a numeric cadence inspired by the sacred geometry of Gothic-cathedral rose windows, religious prayer beads, nature, and six- and twelve-string guitars.” (Scot Sharrett was a guitar player, and Donna has used little metal balls from the ends of his guitar strings in some of the commemorative pieces she has created.)

About those earlier series of thematically related works, which Sharrett produced through 2016, she also noted, “The[ir] circular forms and compositions reflect the seamless continuum of ritual that binds the past to the present, and the present to the future. Mirroring the Buddhist mandala form, the circular shape enveloped by the square background of the ‘Arrangements’ characterizes the infinite within the finite. Nineteenth-century memento mori hair jewelry and contemporary, makeshift memorial shrines are referenced.”

Over the years, viewers who had seen Sharrett’s works in gallery or museum exhibitions would send her old scraps of fabric, beads, sewing notions, pieces of jewelry, or other items of their own – objects loaded with sentimental value for their owners – to use in making her mixed-media artworks.

During the years just before the recent coronavirus pandemic and throughout the period of the health crisis, Sharrett worked tirelessly as a community activist to prevent inevitable damage to the environment that would have come with the invasive construction of a large nursing home in her residential neighborhood.

The nature of the business the proposed new structure would house was not the issue, but its potential harm to a delicate

Donna Sharrett, “Tailored Herbaria: *Liriodendron tulipifera*: Pocantico River Watershed (2023 #1),” 2023, donated clothing, textiles, guitar-string ball ends, thread; 6 x 9 inches (15.24 x 22.86 centimeters). Photo courtesy of the artist



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ecosystem were big concerns for the artist and her neighbors. Although, ultimately, the building was erected, Sharrett and her fellow community activists scored some significant victories that affected its final appearance and impact.

A few weeks ago, I caught up with Sharrett during one of her visits to New York City, at which time she shared with me some big news: today, she serves as a member of Ossining's city planning board.

About that recent episode, Sharrett said, "That building was completed in 2020. Now we are fighting to protect the nearby small wetland, its habitat, and its inhabitants from the negative impacts caused by the lack of compliance with the requirements of that construction project's final approval. This has been extremely difficult and illuminates how the concern for environmental protection is very low-priority, which is especially distressing in a municipality and a state that claim to prioritize environmental protection."

Sharrett also showed me her very latest creations, a still-developing group of fabric- and embroidery-based works she calls her "Tailored Herbaria" series. These new pieces have emerged out of her interest in plants, the land, and nature in general; her work as a garden and landscape designer; and the soul-stirring swirl of thoughts and emotions she experienced during the long pandemic, with its many periods of isolation.

These new works take tree leaves as their central motifs. About them, the artist told **brutjournal**:

"After a three-decade exploration of the objects, techniques, and traditions used to remember human loved ones, I have shifted my focus to memorialize leaves of beloved tree species threatened by climate change, disease and insect introductions, harmful land-scaping trends, commercial interests, and apathy."

"I was raised to love and steward nature. I'm a Master Gardener Volunteer, associated with Cornell Cooperative Extension, and an advocate for responsible policy changes – and their enforcement – to strengthen protections of natural resources. All of these factors have influenced the creation of my new 'Tailored Herbaria' series." I asked Sharrett how she regards her new works. Implicitly or explicitly, what are their functions?

She observed, "I consider the works in this series both portraits and evidence of place within a specific time. Leaves serve to represent trees, the ancestors of ancient inhabitants of the places we now occupy and with whom we co-exist; their presence is often underappreciated or unseen. The 'Tailored Herbaria' series responds to the accelerating loss of the naturally occurring biodiversity that defines the places we inhabit – our parks, park-



Top: "Tailored Herbaria: Quercus alba: Pocantico River Watershed (2023 #3)," 2023, donated clothing, textiles, guitar-string ball-ends, thread; 6 x 9 inches (15.24 x 22.86 centimeters)

Bottom: "Tailored Herbaria: Quercus alba: Pocantico River Watershed (2023 #2)," 2023, donated clothing, textiles, guitar-string ball-ends, thread; 6 x 9 inches (15.24 x 22.86 centimeters)

Photos courtesy of the artist



Donna Sharrett, "Tailored Herbaria: Pocantico River Watershed (2023 #2)," 2023, donated clothing, textiles, notions and guitar-string ball ends, thread; 10 x 14 inches (25.4 x 35.56 centimeters). Photo courtesy of the artist

ways, and home landscapes. Human existence depends on trees for various purposes, including storm-water management, climate control, and biodiversity. Much of our earlier loss of trees could have been prevented. Now, there is much that can be done to prevent further loss. Awareness can lead to action, and action is imperative."

We're intrigued not only by how Sharrett's new works honor the natural phenomena that have inspired their creation but also by how the artist has titled each one, using the botanical nomenclature for each kind of leaf she has represented and the names of the watersheds in which she found the leaves that are the subjects of her new pieces.

Interesting, too, are the resonant ways in which Sharrett's new "Tailored Herbaria" works evoke some of themes and of her earlier series. The artist noted that, in her new pieces, "Materials and processes developed for my 'Memento' and 'Arrangement' series are used in honor of my mother, for whom handmade stitches were love notes held in homemade clothing; for my brother, with the use of guitar strings; and for my father, who fostered my love of trees."



Below: "Tailored Herbaria: Quercus rubra: Pocantico River Watershed (2023 #1)," 2023, donated clothing, textiles, guitar-string ball ends, thread. 6 x 9 inches (15.24 x 22.86 centimeters). Photo courtesy of the artist

