



ROOTED  
REVIVED  
REINVENTED

# BASKETRY IN AMERICA

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Fig. 12. Jason Hackenwerth (b. 1970), *Nucleotide*, 2011. Latex balloons: 28' × 23' × 26'. Long Beach Convention Center, Long Beach California. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Larger is the work of Janet Echelman, whose monumental, aerial forms got their start in the late 1990s with fishing nets when she was a Fulbright scholar in Mahaballipuram, India. Nowadays, her sculptures rise several stories in height and can be experienced in locations around the globe (figure 13). Brightly lit and held aloft by cables, her soft, undulating forms sway in the wind and look as much like sea anemones as large openwork bowls. Echelman achieves a subtle balance between structure and space, allowing the forces of nature—whether wind, water, or light—to allow movement within the whole.<sup>14</sup> Echelman employs computer-generated designs and a cadre of fabricators, thereby removing her hand from the process, but with more than a million knots in each project this is truly the work of many hands. In her desire for even greater public participation, the artist has offered viewers control over light projections with mobile devices, and engaged dancers whose movements are digitally connected to the nets. By prioritizing social interaction and community engagement, Echelman holds passersby in a joyful embrace.

When thinking big, it is worth remembering that the first forms of freestanding human shelter were made with naturally available materials and assembled with basket-making techniques. Today's ongoing debates regarding sustainability, climate change, and modern materials, with an assist from Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome, demonstrate that baskets continue to be a major source of inspiration in construction, its global popularity perhaps best proved by the Bird's Nest (National) Stadium designed by Ai Wei Wei for the 2008 Summer Olympics and Paralympics in Beijing (figure 14).<sup>15</sup>

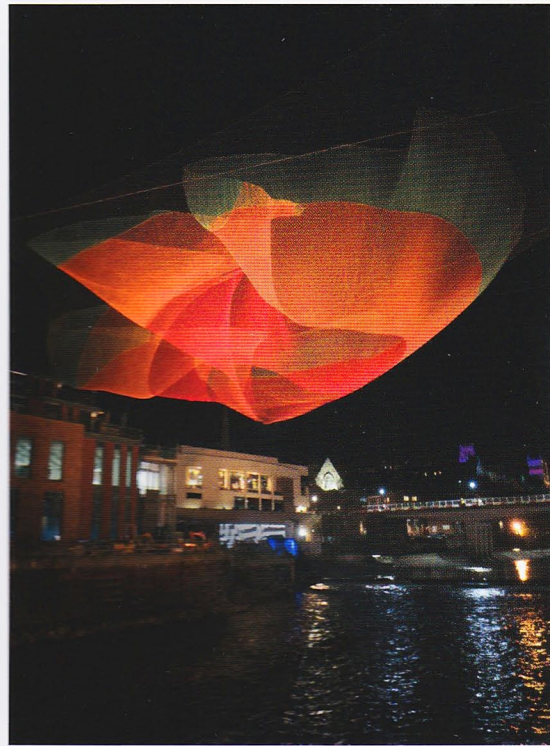


Fig. 13. Janet Echelman (b. 1966), *1.26 Durham*, 2015. Spectra fiber, high-tenacity polyester fiber, and interactive colored lighting: 240' × 90' × 46'. Photograph by Melissa Henry. Courtesy of Studio Echelman.

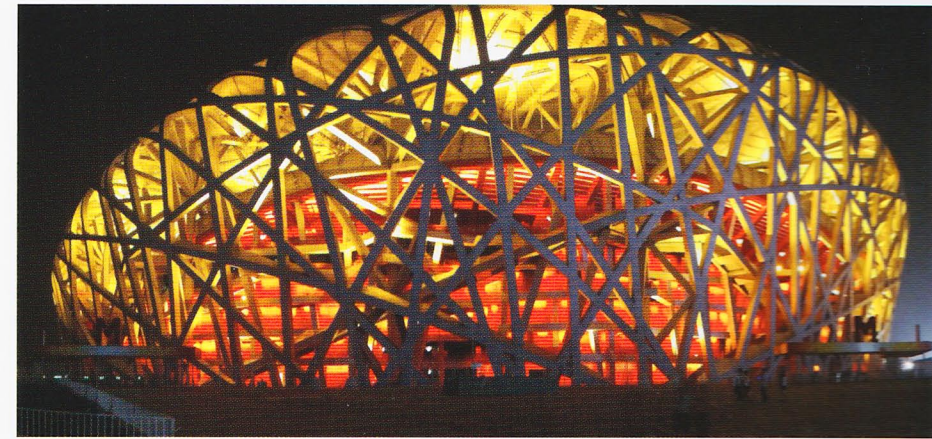


Fig. 14. Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), Pierre de Meuron (b. 1950), Jacques Herzog (b. 1950), and Li Xinggang (b. 1969), Beijing National Stadium, 2003–2008. Photograph by Warren R. M. Stuart, Creative Commons.

Since the introduction of strong, lightweight materials like carbon fiber revolutionized designs for airplanes, cars, boats, and even furniture, contemporary artists and architects have pushed beyond old boundaries, joining the tensile strength of carbon fiber with the binding structure

afforded by basketry techniques. In 2008, the architectural firm Foster + Partners created a bullet-shaped building for Swiss Re headquarters in London (figure 15). Drawing carbon fiber from an oculus-shaped “start” at the top of the building, the strands spiral out and downward, enveloping a structure that is both light and strong. The power of the woven object is even more striking in the designs of Peter Testa, whose proposed *Carbon Tower* is inextricably bound to the notion that a basket offers the tensile strength to hold a building together (figure 16).<sup>16</sup>

Does Carpenter's *Vessel* qualify as a basket? Or Hackenwerth's and Echelman's airborne sculptures? The Swiss Re building? What about *Big Bambú: You Can't, You Don't and You Won't Stop*, the installation by Doug and Mike Starn on the rooftop of Metropolitan Museum in 2010 that was part sculpture, part architecture, and ongoing performance (figures 17 and 18)?<sup>17</sup> What about the bamboo scaffolding found throughout Asia and a mainstay of construction projects to this day? Is it necessary that these makers, designers, architects, and their works fit into some category, or can they compel us to think more broadly about the field? Basket artists and artists inspired by baskets are re-interpreting construction as well as the interstitial play of light and air that appears between woven elements. Investigating line and space, they explore the tension between interior and exterior, space and time, strength and fragility, self and other. In so doing, they unlock the potential of the basket to bind, free and interrogate the space between.

Fig. 15. Foster + Partners, Swiss Re Headquarters in London, 1997–2004. Photograph by Aurelien Guichard, Creative Commons.

