

Material Witness

ARTIST
**JUDY
TUWALETSTIWA**
transforms objects from the natural
world into elegant expressions
of deep truths

BY NANCY ZIMMERMAN | PHOTOS BY PETER OGILVIE

When you meet Judy Tuwaletstiwa for the first time, you immediately want her to be your new best friend. Her gentle presence, her wisdom and compassion—they all weave a spell that wraps you in a shroud of intimacy, as if you're the only two people in the world.

This ability to make instant and meaningful connections with people is both a talent and a curse for the Galisteo-based artist, although she's not likely to see it that way. Tuwaletstiwa, an energetic 78-year-old, is nothing if not accessible, and she brings everything she's learned over the course of her life to every encounter and project, reveling in the possibilities of the present while opening herself up to the upheavals of the past as well as the stirrings of a future yet unknown. That essential integration of living, creating, and knowing is a powerfully seductive force, and it attracts people who enjoy just being around her, often without knowing exactly why. And even without ever seeing her work or understanding what drives her, they know instinctively that they're in the presence of a consummate artist.

Working in a variety of media—textiles, glass, acrylics, found objects, and more—Tuwaletstiwa brings an open heart and an outsized talent to her many projects, including several books that combine her images and words to create a stunning visual poetry. She distills her materials down to their essence with such a subtle hand that viewers are inclined to linger with the work to fully absorb the messages. Even her most far-reaching artistic statements are rendered so simply that the viewer is led gently to the understanding of the complex thoughts and feelings revealed via her deceptively minimalist approach.

Oddly enough, Tuwaletstiwa didn't even realize she was an artist until she was almost 30 years old. Growing up in East Los Angeles during the 1940s and '50s in a multicultural environment, she enjoyed a childhood rich with intellectual stimulation amid genteel poverty. She went on to attend University of California–Berkeley, where she received her bachelor's degree in comparative literature, then Harvard, where she got her master's degree in teaching literature. "I came out of a household that was extremely articulate, a Jewish intellectual family where you had to be well spoken," she says. It seemed she was destined for a career in letters, but it turned out that life had other plans for her.

Tuwaletstiwa had always enjoyed handicrafts, but she still hadn't recognized herself as an artist, concentrating instead on raising her three young boys (a daughter came later). Then one day, while living in the Bay Area with her first husband, she hired a babysitter and took the afternoon off to visit a Van Gogh exhibition at the old de Young Museum in San Francisco. "The show was chronological," she recalls, "so I started at the beginning, then walked through and went deeper and deeper into Van Gogh's mind. When I reached *Wheatfield With Crows*, I simply started crying and couldn't stop. Even as I drove home, I just cried and cried."

As soon as she reached her house, she put the kids to bed, tore off a piece of mat board, and made a pencil drawing of a tree that was a little bit reminiscent of Van Gogh. "I hadn't drawn since I was 11, when a teacher told me I was no good," she says with a laugh. "I started doing my art because Van Gogh's painting broke my heart open and gave me a glimpse of what was possible. A door had been opened, an amazing door, and I had to work with that moment. There was no way not to do art then. And the art has been an expression that has allowed me to go deeper and deeper into my own woundedness, through my hands, through my heart, through color, through form, through the power of the image to heal. It's not that I

Das Buch der Fragen, or The Book of Questions (2007–2013), linen, camel fibers, rolled and burned paper, bamboo sticks, and graphite on canvas, 2007–2013. This piece was inspired by a photo of a child in the Warsaw ghetto during World War II who wore an identifying patch on his coat. "The question it raised was: How do you speak to God after the Holocaust?" says the artist.



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expect my brokenness to go away—it’s about being able to live with it in a way that is healing.”

Tuwaletstiwa began schooling herself in earnest, studying the works of great painters, but she was less concerned with technique than with the materials and emotional depths that gave the works life. “I study all the works of artists I feel strongly about,” she explains, “but it’s usually their final works, those last 15 to 20 years, where there’s a transformation. What I find in their work is not a truth that I want to put into words, but it touches a part of my heart that transforms how I see, that transforms me as an artist.”

She progressed from pencil drawings to using ink on rough watercolor paper, darkening it in so that the spaces in between became the drawings. “I also took a silk-screening class at the community college, but I didn’t start painting yet. I needed to be more present to do that.”

Tuwaletstiwa then moved with her family to Edinburgh, Scotland, and her trajectory as an artist took on another dimension. “I had this fantasy that I was going to learn how to weave from some little old lady in a cottage,” she recalls with a smile. “Instead, I found Archie Brennan, a master tapestry weaver at the Dovecot Studios who was teaching a night class, and I signed up for it. Archie taught me about what he called the integrity of weaving, explaining, ‘When you lay in a line, never take it out. It’s just like yesterday—you can’t undo what happened yesterday, so you change it by what you put in



Songs of Innocence 20 (2018), glass and adhesive on canvas. Top: *Songs of Innocence 2* (2017), glass, fabric, and adhesive on canvas, with a baby’s christening gown. The title is a reference to a collection of poems by William Blake. Opposite, from top: Rolled and burned Japanese paper soaked in beeswax, reindeer hair, and other fibers in an unnamed tapestry begun 15 years ago; Tuwaletstiwa at work at her loom.



above it.' When I started weaving tapestry, that changed the world for me—the texture, the language, going line by line, just like writing.”

She was entranced by the process, which she found remarkable in its ability to calm the mind and heart. “It’s when I started working with fiber that my world opened to me as an artist. It’s so ancient, so simple,” she points out. “In and out, in and out. That’s the thing about my work—I don’t use fancy techniques because I’m not interested in them.”

Tuwaletstiwa continues to find inspiration in her materials—natural substances ranging from seeds and nests and pebbles to sand and paper and twigs. All materials have their own rhythm, their own language, she says, and she lets the substances lead her with their individual voices. “Our first language is the rhythmic beating of our mother’s heart,” she explains. “We know all kinds of cacophonous sounds that are going on in our mother’s body, but it’s that heartbeat that is the constant.

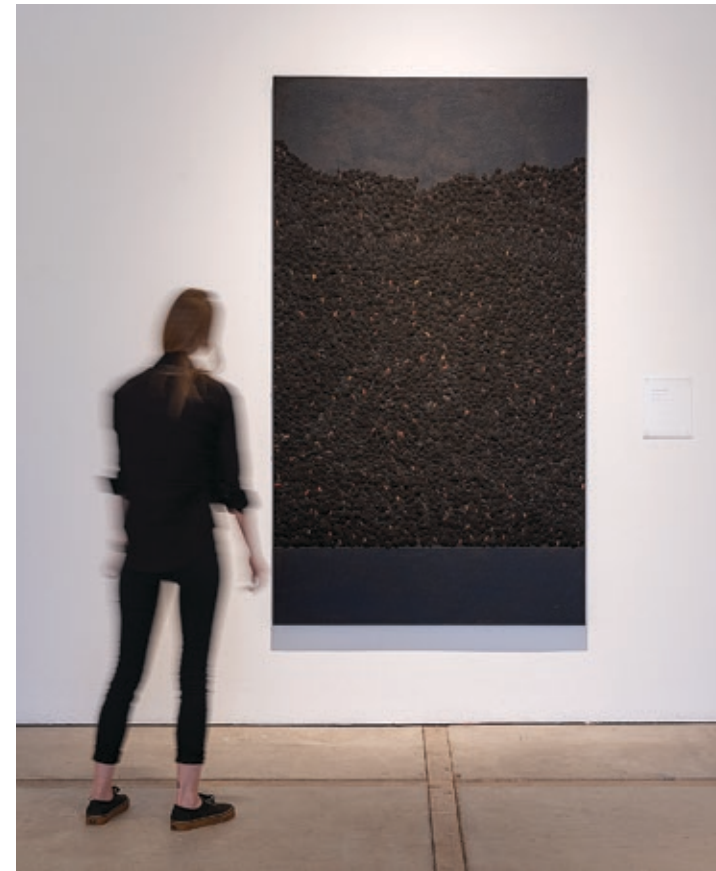
“The second language is our mother’s touch, and that’s equated with love and safety—that’s what holds us,” she continues. “If you look at weavings from cultures that don’t have a written language, it’s all about rhythm and texture. It’s true for every human being; it’s the one thing that unites us all. I think when we get too far away from that, from the texture and that rhythmic beat, we lose ourselves. Perhaps that’s why

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A collection of materials and a glass color chart in her studio. Tuwaletstiwa heats colored glass powders in her kiln at different temperatures to create glass “fabrics” of different colors. Opposite, top: *Text.Shards 5* (2019), glass, adhesive on canvas. Bottom: Tuwaletstiwa holding a cast of her hand created by artist and professor Mary Kavanagh of Toronto. “Hands are our special intelligence,” says Tuwaletstiwa. “My materials have taught me how to see through my hands.”





materials are so important to me—the rhythm of making glass, the rhythm of weaving. I’ve hung on to the fibers I’ve collected over the years, hoping that one day they would speak, that these different materials, whose languages spoke to me at the times I worked with them, would speak again and have a conversation with each other in a way that I could never have imagined.”

Tuwaletstiwa’s next opportunity to expand her vision came in 1993 when she went to live at Hopi with her second husband, Phillip Tuwaletstiwa, a geographer and Hopi native who was working with the US Geological Survey to map the region and help the Hopi people protect their lands. The couple spent 12 years there, and it was during that time that Tuwaletstiwa began working with sand. “It was the most abundant material,” she points out, “and from the sand eventually the concept of glass came to me, as it’s made from sand. At Hopi my work became less narrative and more what would be called abstract, although that’s not the word I use. I say ‘essential.’ I’ve always been reaching toward the essence of things.”

The couple moved to their current home in Galisteo in 2005, having fallen in love with the village when Tuwaletstiwa was showing her work at Linda Durham’s gallery there. She continued to collect colored sands, working at the kiln in her studio to fire them into glass “paper” that



An interactive part of last summer’s CCA exhibit, *The Dream Life of Objects*, was *Title Pages*, which featured 20 photos of objects, each with an accompanying story. Viewers were asked to write a story of their own based on the photos, with archival paper provided for the task. Above and opposite, bottom: The exhibit also included this installation of continuing paintings begun in 1987, which sought to answer the question raised in *Das Buch der Fragen*. Opposite, top: *Text.Shards 2* (2019), glass, adhesive, and acrylic on canvas.

Previous pages: *Text Shards 1* (2018), glass and adhesive on canvas. The artist used 32 color mixes of glass powder and fired them at five different heat levels to achieve subtle changes in hue.





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Internationally renowned violinist Arnold Steinhardt plays his 200-year-old instrument in an improvisational performance based on Tuwaletstiwa's triptych, *Das Buch der Fragen*, in connection with the CCA exhibit *The Dream Life of Objects*. Top: This series highlights meaningful objects whose individual stories continue to resonate through the years. From left to right: Sands collected from Iwo Jima; a Nazi armband; a child's tallit katan from Tuwaletstiwa's grandfather's prayer bag; a remnant of the artist's childhood quilt; her grandfather's tailor's chalk; shards of fired glass.

she uses to bring color, dimension, and an organic sensibility to her work. A wall of shelves containing glass jars filled with the sandy powders gives her studio the appearance of an alchemist's lab, and indeed, her work has an element of alchemy to it as she transforms her materials into quiet expressions of deep emotion. “Working with the glass powder is like the synthesis of the materials for me,” she says. “The sand itself took millions of years to make, so there's a long geological evolutionary history there—destruction and creation at the same moment. You have sandstone, a rock, and over millions of years it becomes particles, grains, and it's such a simple, amazing process.”

Tuwaletstiwa finds inspiration for her work everywhere: in nature, in history, in her own inner explorations. One particularly moving piece was inspired by a 2004 news report about the massacre of 49 men in Iraq who had trained to be part of the Iraqi army. They were aboard a bus traveling back to their village when they were ambushed at a roadblock by fake policemen. The men were removed from the bus, laid out in rows out in the desert, and killed. “I was horrified that this massacre was a result of our actions, because we couldn't see the consequences of our war,” she says. “So I took a burning tool to cut hatch marks from a sheet of cotton rag paper, 49 of them to represent the souls lost that day, and then I arranged them in rows by sewing them to the paper. I was doing it from the most sacred part of myself, taking responsibility as an American. When I turned the paper over, I discovered that the stitches I used to fix the burned marks to it had created the shape of a mosque on the reverse side. I had created a mosque to hold these men, and I had no idea I was doing that. To me, that's when art is at its absolute truest.”

For her summer 2019 exhibition at the Center for Contemporary Art in Santa Fe, *The Dream Life of Objects*, Tuwaletstiwa created an installation of a sequence of paintings done over a number of years that represent her process in a unique way. She created a painting, photographed it, then painted over it

to create a dozen or more iterations, new each time. The photographs were displayed in a vertical sequence, with the final painting a synthesis of every version that had gone before, completely different from the first in the series but bearing marks of all of them. Her process was similar to the ancient methods of the Hopi in the kiva, who for centuries have created murals for their ceremonies, then whitewashed them and painted over them multiple times. “In some kivas there were more than a hundred layers of murals,” she says, “which is astounding to me, coming from a people who wandered the Earth. Here were people who could dance in a kiva in the Southwest, knowing that their ancestors' hands were on that wall.” What she learned from doing this series, she says, was how to let go. “I was teaching myself how to paint. All of my work is based on that, on letting go.”

Tuwaletstiwa has a number of projects either in progress or waiting in the wings, including a novel that she's writing with her husband and a children's book. When not making art or writing, she also teaches workshops and classes to help people find their inner artist and hone their skills. Her fascination with materials also led her to create a scholarship fund for her former high school to supply students with materials to create art. “There are other scholarships available for tuition and study,” she says, “but kids need materials to work with, and they're expensive. So I wanted to help low-income kids gain access to the materials they need.”

Tuwaletstiwa's work can be found in private and museum collections throughout the world, and her life's oeuvre continues to expand. She particularly values the art of collaboration and enthusiastically works with other artists, designers, musicians, and filmmakers on a variety of projects. Visual artist, writer, teacher, and collaborator—Judy Tuwaletstiwa is a force of nature, not unlike the materials she collects and cherishes. It seems appropriate, then, that the name Tuwaletstiwa is Hopi for “the wind making ripples in the sand.” “It's perfect for this stage of my life,” she says. ❁