

Shaker Inspired



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Organized by Eric Wolf

Francis Cape

Matt LaFleur

Matt Crane

Caitlin MacBride

Betsy Friedman

Robin McKay

Kathy Greenwood

Sue Muskat

Brece Honeycutt

Chris Pennock

Bill Jacobson

Richard Saja

Nicholas Sullivan

May 14 – June 18, 2022

Joyce Goldstein Gallery

19 Central Square, Chatham, NY





View of the Mount Lebanon North Family, seen from the Great Stone Barn. James Irving, photographer. Courtesy of the Shaker Museum, New Lebanon, NY.

Shaker Inspired

AN EXHIBITION OF CONTEMPORARY ARTWORKS BY ARTISTS RESPONDING TO THE SHAKERS

The first time I discovered the Shaker Museum, in 1996, it was in its original place, the home and barns of its founder, John S. Williams in Old Chatham, NY. The pieces felt natural in the settings, lightly adapted 200 year old spaces. Eventually, the Museum acquired a group of the North Family buildings and property including the great stone barn, at the Mount Lebanon site, a complex of structures begun in 1787, in mostly original condition. The Museum's extraordinary collection of objects has been beautifully presented online on the Museum's website. The Museum's new building in Chatham, which will be built over the coming few years, will house the collection's objects. The buildings at the Mount Lebanon site are to be preserved over a longer timeline, as resources allow.

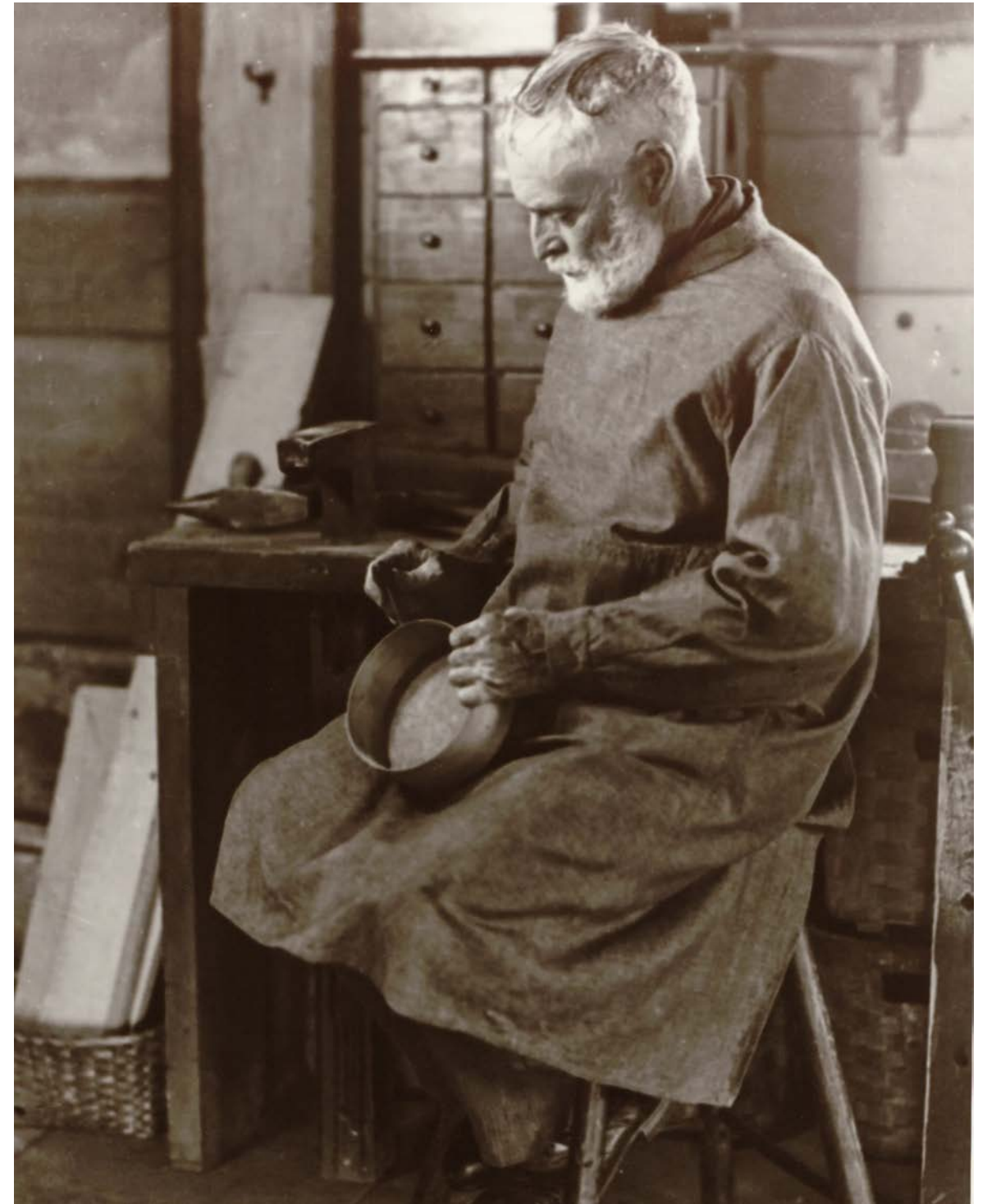
There are so many aspects of Shaker life that are of great interest, beyond the creativity that served the community's needs. The reasons for the Shaker's social pact, celibacy, autonomy, productivity, and success as a communal enterprise are complex, and part of a fascinating history of social, religious, utopian and idealistic movements.

For this exhibition, the focus is on how artists have responded to the Shaker's physical legacy. Recent beautiful exhibitions along these lines, seen at the Mount Lebanon site and curated by Amie Cunat, and at the Albany Airport Gallery, curated by Kathy Greenwood, were inspiring. I decided to think about organizing a show of contemporary work, to be shown in Chatham, near the new Museum's building location. The collection, in its current warehouse at the original site, and the museum's buildings in Mount Lebanon, are a tremendous resource for artists. Several visits to the collection and the site occurred as some of the artists here prepared work for this exhibit. With this group of artists, I chose to gather a diverse set of creative approaches, and show work that had a certain amount of specificity, in its use of "Shaker" as subject matter.

There are some compelling correlations between the Shakers' lives, and the lives of artists, generally. At the center of it is the drive and the desire to spend time purposefully endeavoring to create, as a way of life. Shaker communities are quite similar to "artist colonies" (no longer called colonies.) The nearly utopian order and discipline of a harmonious group of likeminded individuals, who agree to rules that allow life to be harmonious, and to be isolated, to some extent, from the chaos of the "regular" world, this description applies equally to Mount Lebanon, as well as to Yaddo, or MacDowell, the estimable artist retreats. I have noticed that all of my artist friends fall under the spell of the Shaker presence, when given the chance.

I would like to express special thanks to Jeff Bailey, of the Shaker Museum Board, who facilitated all of our site visits. Thanks also go to Lisa Seymour and Jerry Grant, who met with, and communicated with artists about works in the collection. Special thanks also to Susie Harding, Emily Silvia, Brece Honeycutt, Linda Johnson and Lindsay Turley. And finally, thanks to Joyce Goldstein, who invited me to curate this show, and is hosting this exhibition, which opens May 14th, and runs through June 18th, 2022.

—Eric Wolf



Shaker Brother Ricardo Belden, making wooden oval boxes in a workshop at the Hancock.
Courtesy Samuel Kravitt - Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.07479>.

Francis Cape

The Shakers believed in an everlasting afterlife that contrasts with the brief moment we spend on this earth. But they gave time, focus and attention to the things they made in this world.

To us they are a paradox. We value the things they made, but they did not. That is not to say they did not give that time, focus and attention to their material work; in the care of the thing made as much as in its making. But it was the time, focus and attention that mattered. The things made were not discarded, as Buddhists erase a sand painting, but were not treasured as we treasure them now. For example, finding that the late eighteenth century dining tables at Sabbathday Lake were valuable, Brother Delmer sold them in the 1920s, and made new ones.

Cabinet 58 is one of the studio pieces I made during a time when my main focus was on installations that I called “built-in”. These were site-specific works that were well crafted, highly finished, room-size architectural interventions that were destroyed at the end of the exhibition. My belief is that the material object is a vehicle for art, it is not itself art. Paradoxically the two are inseparable.



Tailor’s work counter. Pine and cherry painted blue with orange shellac top. Canterbury, NH. Courtesy of the Shaker Museum, New Lebanon, NY.



Cabinet 58, 2005, wood and paint, 48 x 29.5 x 2.5 inches.

Matt Crane

I set out to create a sculpture with hopes that I would learn more about Shaker design through reverse engineering. My limited knowledge of the Shaker's woodshop and foundry process led to an intuitive exploration of the forms and proportions of the Shaker woodstove. From a sketch and an idea, I made the parts first in wood, and then cast them in bronze. Undertaking this material transformation, while tweaking the stove's scale and thinking about specific proportions of individual elements was a very rewarding exploration. I obsessed over and let go of details simultaneously. These cast components, the legs, the fire box, the ash lip, and stove deck were then assembled to complete the piece. With the scale shift and bifurcation, the combined parts become an abstraction of an original. As a whole the stove becomes a haunting liminal object.



Bifurcated stove body (after Guber), 2022, cast and fabricated bronze, 18 x 18 x 12 inches.

Betsy Friedman

Do all your work as though you had a thousand years to live,
and as you would if you knew you must die tomorrow.

— Ann Lee



Mother Ann Lee. © dvhsschepachapush5

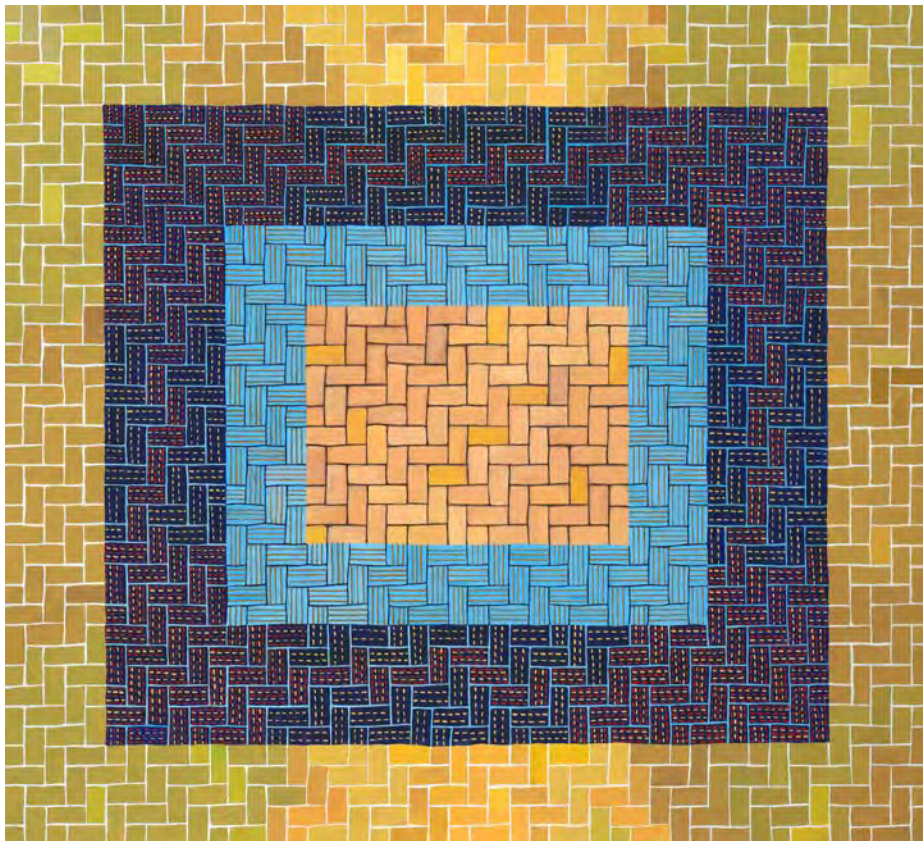


Sunflower #2, 2008, crayon, ink, acrylic and googly eyes on Arches, 14 X 20 inches.

Kathy Greenwood

My work has long been occupied with the juncture between fine art and handicraft, and with objects that are made in and for the home. The history and culture of nearby Shaker communities at Watervliet, Hancock and Mount Lebanon have always felt very present to me, and their traditions of textile production, including chair seat weaving, have recently come to influence my work.

In 2021 I had the opportunity to visit the Shaker Museum Mount Lebanon's collection, and photographed many woven chair seats, along with samples of woven chair tape. This painting is a composite of those observed patterns, aligned in a motif that is both faithful and fictional. On the day that I visited the museum, the collections manager drew my attention to a very large wooden sign painted with the words 'Remember Mother Ann.' In the early twentieth century, Shaker brother William Perkins, a master woodworker and furniture maker, made the sign to draw his dwindling family's focus back to its core purpose of worship through work.



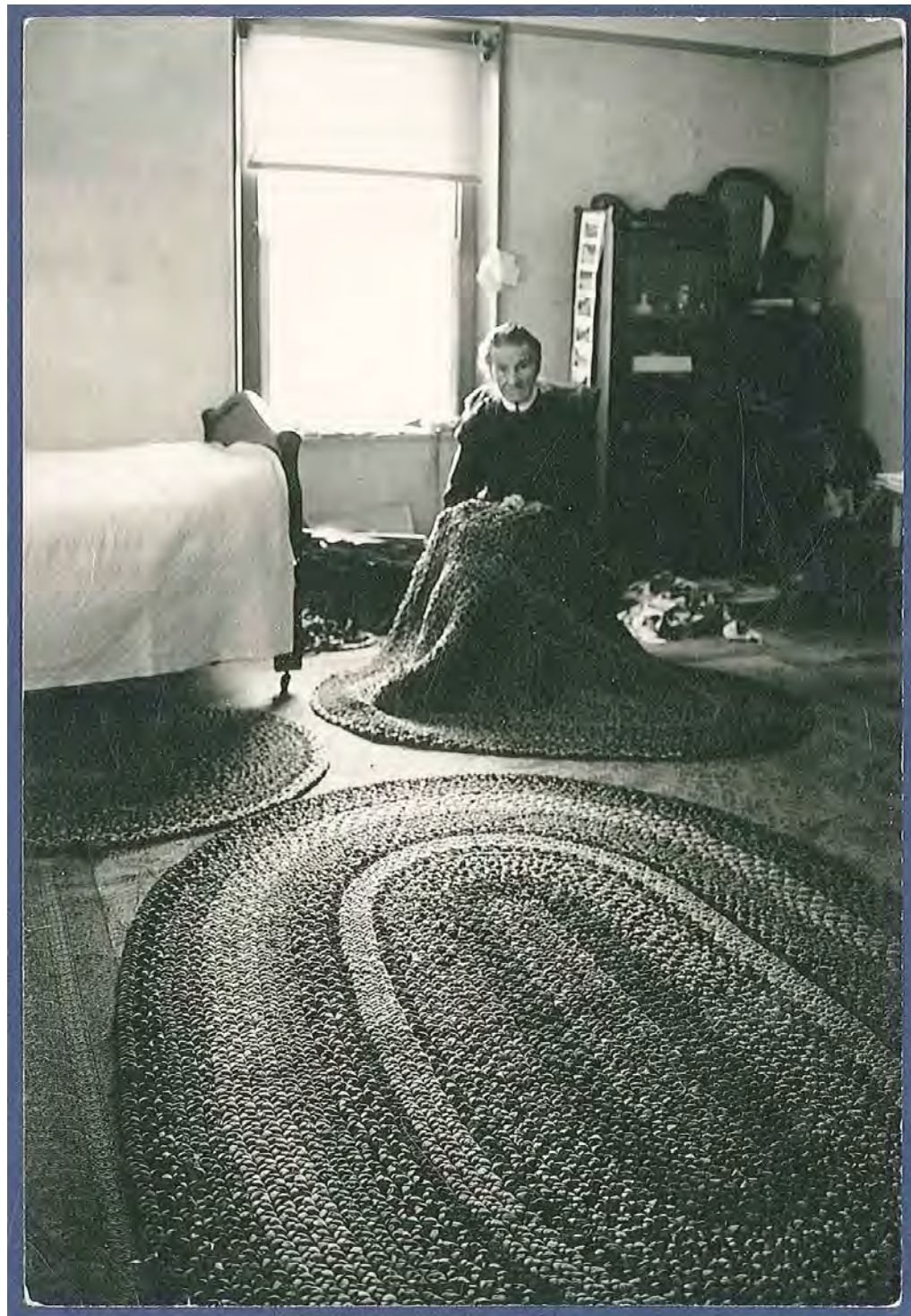
Remember Mother Ann 1, 2021, gouache on arches paper, 21 x 23 inches

The body of work that I've been developing for some years consists of structures made with a braided rug making process, with the raw materials composed of my family's discarded clothing. I was drawn to this exhibition opportunity out of a long-time fascination with Shaker culture and design principles, the history of American utopian communities, and our evolving notions of labor.

In perusing the Shaker Museum Mount Lebanon's online collection, I became interested in Eldress Sarah Collins, who was one of the last Shakers living in the community in the 1930s and early 1940s. She was well known within the community and beyond for her skills in braiding and weaving rugs, and was considered expert in chair taping and finishing. The Museum's collection includes some of her rugs, as well as photographs of her at work on them. I was particularly interested in a photograph of Eldress Sarah in her Second Family Dwelling bedroom (object no. 1957.8555.1). The picture dates to sometime between 1935 and 1940. She sits, illuminated by the big window behind her, and is surrounded by her rugs, with one perhaps in process draped over her lap and pooling around her on the floor.

It is difficult to consider the lives of people who occupied distant eras and cultures without imposing our present day perspectives, priorities and values upon them. And yet, with the little that is known about the internal life of Eldress Sarah Collins, she seems to have devoted herself to achieving an extraordinary level of creative production, and to have been solidly aware of her abilities and their intrinsic value. Though raised from childhood at Mount Lebanon, Sarah as a young twenty-year old got a job in New York City and prepared to leave the Shakers in 1875. She was persuaded to stay in part with the promise that she would be made an Eldress, which she was that same year.

For Sarah Collins and her contemporaries, labor was constant, absolutely necessary, and rendered in service to the divine. The Shakers' efforts to economize their labor through innovation and collective efficiency made it possible to incorporate creative energy and design standards into what might otherwise have been just toil. Today, for many of us labor is optional, philosophical, something to take up and then automate if it wearies us. So for my response to this photograph, and to the legacy of Eldress Sarah, I made this piece that I call *In Labor*. Throughout its production I reflected upon the meaning of labor - its urgency in daily life, in childbirth, in physical work and in mental strife. I thought about the strands of ego and necessity and God that are braided, one over the other and stitched together covering the lap of an elderly, sharp-eyed woman whose labor and creative spirit endures.



Eldress Sarah Collins making a braided rug, ca. 1940. Second Family, Mount Lebanon, NY.
Courtesy of the Shaker Museum, Chatham, NY.



In Labor, 2020, discarded clothing, thread, 26 x 28 x 6" installed.

Brece V. Honeycutt

Facts gleaned from my research in primary sources and discussions are materials to me just as much as thread, graphite, and paper that form the results of my work.

Three of my recent projects explore Shaker themes:

billows, 2017 examines music in community and Shaker songs with an interpreted 'score' (that maybe either folded into a book or hung as a five-line clef) and accompanied by a sound track of a selected Shaker songs.

spooled, 2019 ponders the relationship between textile labor and objects, demonstrating through a wall drawing the miles of yarn spun in one year.

Recently, I completed a 155-page transcription of a *Record and Journal of the Sisters of the First Order, Watervliet, NY* (for the period 1839-1841), which links me and others to their everyday lives.

I was also artist-in-residence at Hancock Shaker Village (Pittsfield, MA) for six months in 2020, where I worked closely with then-curator Sarah Margolis-Pineo as I explored the Shakers' relationship with color. Their 'heaven on earth' was intentionally filled with color, with workshop exteriors painted deep ochers; barns of the palest pink; rooms in tones of yellow and Prussian blue; hand-made objects painted in bold reds and greens; and garments not drab but dazzling, with both dyed hues and woven 'changeable' patterns.

My projects at Hancock revolved around the paints, pigments and dyes used by the Shakers. Beverly Gordon, in her book *Shaker Textile Arts* (1980), notes that Shakers were allowed to wear any color they could dye, a magnificent fact. During my residency, I explored the natural dyes used by the Shakers - madder, indigo, butternut, black walnut, logwood, goldenrod, tansy - and then dyed cloth on-site to construct a dye book, made textile constructions, and completed on-site temporary installations for viewing by the public. Shakers' use of circles and red/blue/ochre is examined in my textile series, a perfect circle/perfectly round. *Shaker studies 01-12*. I sought to color match by dyeing textiles and cloth to specific tones, to match architectural elements and objects - indigo circles to match the Prussian blue of the Meeting House, palest pink of madder for the pink barn, and summer's bright goldenrod for the vibrant yellow trim in a retiring room.

Studio time was accompanied by reading primary and secondary sources in the archives. Margolis-Pineo suggested that I start by reading the 1845 *Millennial Laws*. These Laws dictated both spiritual and practical actions, including when and where to worship, what to wear, and what colors items could be painted. *Millennial Laws* did not dictate the absence of paint, but did address abstaining from superfluities (items too showy, too frilly, too worldly). The use of color in their heaven on earth, therefore, was a necessity, not a superfluity. The Shakers were quite deliberate in their creative actions. Though the 1845 *Millennial Laws* dictate the colors for objects, rooms and buildings, they do not indicate the 'whys.'



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In his *Discourses Illustrating the System of the Gospel* (1835-6), Elder Calvin Green briefly addresses color, noting "Every color has a particular meaning," but Green does not give an in-depth interpretation. In the *Explanation of the Holy City*, the book accompanying Eldress Polly Reed's *Spiritual Map: The Holy City* (1843, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA), there are written descriptions of the city that identify colors used but there are no associated explanations of meaning. Scholar John T. Kirk delves deepest into color meaning in his book, *The Shaker World: Art Life Belief* (1997), with essays on painted surfaces for furniture and structures, on dyes for garments, and on texts from Elder Green and of gift drawings; yet, I wonder whether more might be found in other Shaker documents. While at Hancock, my studio was open to the public, and through my discussions with visitors, it became obvious that making art work about the Shakers brought awareness of important social principles to a wider audience.

The meanings of Shaker colors has become for me a subject of great artistic interest. Examining and researching the prismatic world of the Shakers offers a portal into their utopian goal of a society based on gender and racial equality, pacifism, communal property, and elevating manual labor to spiritual work.



This series of work was done at Hancock Shaker Village in 2020 and finished in the studio in 2021. The title is from a quote by two Shaker Brethren, Calvin Green & Seth Y. Wells (1823)—“A circle may be called a perfect circle when it is perfectly round.”

a perfect circle/perfectly round. shaker studies.05, 2021,
coreopsis on muslin, indigo and goldenrod on found textile, dyed cotton thread, 19 x 14.25 inches.

a perfect circle/perfectly round. shaker studies.04, 2021,
madder and coreopsis on muslin, indigo on found textile, dyed cotton thread, 19 x 14 inches.

a perfect circle/perfectly round. shaker studies.06, 2021,
indigo on muslin, coreopsis and indigo on found textile, dyed cotton thread, 19.5 x 12 inches.

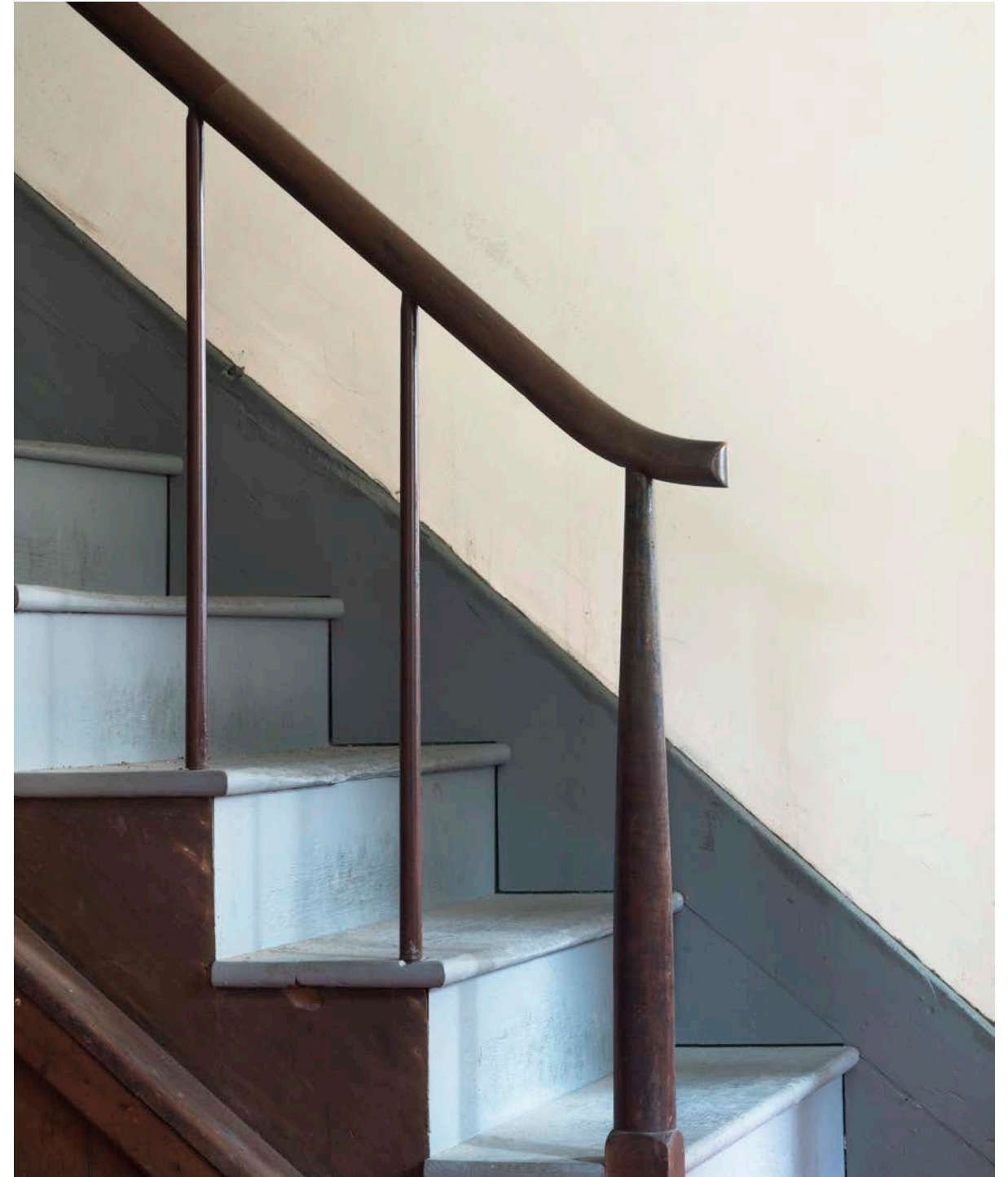
Bill Jacobson

My photograph of the staircase is, hopefully, more than a depiction. It ideally channels the presence, clarity of purpose, and histories not only of the Shaker fabricators, but of those who ascended and descended its steps many thousands of times.

As a photographer I often consider what it means to look intensely at an object, or a space. Quiet observation can summon the spirit of the many hands that have touched it over time. Whether it be a utilitarian object or a work of art, looking for the intentions and energy spent by the maker (or makers) can become transformational in my understandings of myself and the world around me.



Shakers dancing, near Lebanon, New York; engraving by an unknown artist. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (digital file no. 3a15948).



Brothers, Sisters (#6), 2022, pigment print, 23 x 19 inches.

Matt LaFleur

From 23 to 35 I swept chimneys. I apprenticed at a family run hearth shop in Glenmont, NY and eventually became a master sweep. My studio has always been heated with wood in the winter. Being in the stove trade I came across many stoves and would periodically change out the stove in my studio. Being a Shaker enthusiast, when I found a Shaker wood stove, with glee into the studio it went. I burned it for one winter. It was a good heater, and it was a joy to use. In the morning my studio is a bit cold, so I usually sit in front of the fire a while after I start it. This particular Shaker stove had an air shutter fashioned from a small, hinged door within the stove door, a wonderful solution for controlling air flow into the firebox. Given how much the door is opened allows for the fire to be fed with oxygen or dampened down. Upon starting the stove, I would leave the air shutter in the door open all the way, and the glow from the fire inside would cast a bright light out onto the ash lip. So, I would sit in front of the stove in the morning and watch the light. When the flicker of the light started to die down it was time to tend to it.



Wood stove with super heater. Cast iron. Pleasant Hill, KY.
Courtesy of the Shaker Museum, New Lebanon, NY.



Union #3, 2022, graphite and acrylic on paper, 38 x 50 inches.

Caitlin MacBride

Sewing Saw is based on a Shaker sewing machine that was modified into a table saw and is in the Mt Lebanon museum collection. My interest in The Shakers originated with a few Shaker objects I discovered in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection. I'd been making paintings based on objects in The Met's archive and when I discovered the Shakers I was fascinated by how many objects were in the collections of artists such as Charles Sheeler and Ellsworth Kelley. The more I researched the Shakers, and read about their beliefs for making and living, the more I found connections between my own upbringing in a fairly religious and yet egalitarian household. There was also a quality to the Shaker's writing about their rules for object making that mirrored the writings and beliefs of so many artists and art movements.

I've been working with Shaker objects as my muses for a few years now and my excitement is consistently renewed, such as with this "sewing saw". The repurposing and inventive approach used with this and so many of the other Shaker tools seems to highlight the possibility for objects to transition between traditionally gendered spaces and to open up new lives for what may have once been discarded.



Sisters' Sewing Room, Church Family, Mount Lebanon, NY. James Irving, photographer. Canterbury, NH. Courtesy of the Shaker Museum, New Lebanon, NY.



Sewing Saw, 2022, oil on wood panel, 40 x 30 inches.

Robin McKay

The apron was a ubiquitous element of Shaker clothing; useful in the kitchen, the garden, the laundry, dyeing, in every place of work. My intention was to uplift the utilitarian aspect of the apron and bring it into the spiritual realm, a place of mind the Shakers inhabited during long work days. The depiction of fruit and leaves are inspired by Hannah Calhoon's 1817 drawing, *The Tree of Life*, made during the Era of Manifestations. Its simplicity is a testament to the way of the Shakers.

"Hands to work. Heart to God"
— Ann Lee



The Tree of Life, "Seen and painted by Hannah Cohoon. City of Peace Monday July 3rd 1854", from The Andrews Collection at Hancock Shaker Village. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (<http://www.lswstores.com/zoom.php?id=144>).



Tree of Life Apron, 2022, wool felt, embroidery thread, polyester thread, 52 x 25 inches.

Sue Muskat

The Shaker Gift Drawings

Gift Drawings are unique to the Shakers. Created by women as complex messages of love, they are mysterious, and surprisingly ornate. Since pictures and decorations were not allowed, the drawings were hidden in bedrooms, kept secret from the outside world. The drawings are personal syntheses of imagination, unconventional and fantastical.

Some *Gift Drawings* contain images of heavenly treasures mixed with traditional motifs of everyday objects. Others, inspired by spiritual visitations, are expressions of friendship and reverence delivered in an obscured written code resembling hieroglyphics. Every *Gift Drawing* was tenderly rendered, intricate, precise, and excessively time consuming to create.

“Shaker Inspired”, a new Gift Drawing

After seeing the *Gift Drawings* in person, I thought about the recurring icons: trees, the Bible, birds, bowls, a basket, candles, a clock, feathers, flowers, and fruit. I composed these images in the same way Shaker women put ink and paint to paper, both intuitively and intentionally. The doves situated up high, representing the bounties in heaven, while the tables containing holy feasts remain close to the ground, worldly delights. The trees of life, the clock marking time on earth, and the Bible hover centrally.

Many of the illustrations, including a new iteration of a floral border, came from the extraordinary ink drawing made in 1847 by Sarah Ann Standish. In her drawings every symbol held power: the star infused circles represented unification and reconciliation, and the nearly ripe fruit tree signified the interdependence between earth and heaven. Standishs’ drawings are elaborated with beautifully scripted text containing personal messages.

In this new *Gift Drawing* I removed the specificity of text to open the viewing experience and potential interpretations. Instead of adhering to the limited palette of a traditional *Gift Drawing*, I intensified the hue to offer something new, cheerful, filled with promise. This painting is a celebration honoring the Shakers remarkable, inspiring, and exacting craftwork. And, the title, *Every Gain Divine*, while steeped in patriotism (a line from *America the Beautiful*), speaks to the Shaker’s indomitable choir of heavenly spirit and belief in our earthly paradise.



Every Gain Divine, 2022, acrylic on paper, 24 x 18 inches.

Christopher Pennock

I spent a lot of time in the backseat of a car driving all over the Northeast as a little architecture nerd with an engineer dad and an aesthetically sophisticated mom.

A primary activity was spotting uncanny, clever, and good-boned buildings, and we'd often take a detour whenever driving in the vicinity of anything Shaker.

Shaker was just Modern Colonial to me- and excellent architecture because of the clean lines and pragmatic, purposeful design, and the graphic facades with big windows that cast beautiful light all over the warm plank floors and surprising paint colors of interiors that had built in multifunctional storage in each room, and handy pegs everywhere, and even they showed a lovely way with wood in all forms and a reverence for the gratifications of skillfully hand made things.

Plus, they not only had practically had the first private automobile in western Massachusetts and were hooked up to electricity before almost everyone else, they also made a successful business of helping people grow their own food more easily by selling packets of seeds, and genuinely believed in the equality of sexes. What's not to love?



Meeting Room in the Dwelling House, Church Family, Mount Lebanon, NY.
James West, photographer. Courtesy of the Shaker Museum, New Lebanon, NY.



Shaker Interior, 2017, gesso, gouache and acrylic on wood panel, 7 7/8 x 11 3/4 inches.

Richard Saja

15 years ago I unexpectedly found myself in northern Vermont at the Shelburne Museum viewing a Shaker exhibition which had recently been very favorably reviewed by the *New York Times*. I was somewhat familiar with the austere and practical brilliance of Shaker design but my attention was immediately drawn to a series of framed paper pieces on the walls of the gallery. I had never before seen Shaker gift drawings and my response was palpable: wonder and enchantment. I found it immediately curious that these drawings relied so heavily upon ornament and decoration: visual expressions usually forbidden by the Shakers. That they were permitted at all and, beyond that, used to convey messages of great spiritual importance from the beyond struck me as a curious contradiction. Some years later, while touring the textile collection at Mount Lebanon, I discovered charming, brightly-colored, knitted dust mitts sold to tourists which similarly encapsulated to me a similar Shaker contradiction. My piece, *A Shaker Farrago* in embroidered toile obliquely addresses a perceived Shaker love of color and ornament based on these 2 experiences.



Group of North Family, Mount Lebanon Shakers. James West, photographer. Courtesy of the Shaker Museum, New Lebanon, NY.



A Shaker Farrago, 2022, embroidered toile, 26 x 32 inches.

Nicholas Sullivan

I was introduced to the Shakers through my friend and mentor Taylor Davis. We both taught an undergrad course called *Form Study* at MassArt in Boston and spent a lot of time discussing how the idea of form was brought into a first year foundations experience. The thesis of this was always bringing specificity to form through the hands of the maker—through repetition of action and the ability for material to create new language through process. These conversations about specificity and function led us to the Shakers.

The Shakers' ability to make and hone form simplified down to its essential function was analogous to how we hoped students would approach what they made. Function, in the most expanded definition for both the Shakers and the students. From there the Shakers stayed in my mind. As I explored new materials in my own studio I ended up making a small Shaker style stove out of paper and charcoal as a test. This experiment opened the next two years of work, often circling back to the form of the Shaker stove—an iconic piece of design, form and engineering. A form that remains important to our object world long beyond its moment of most utilitarian function.



Blue Stove, 2022, newsprint, pigment, steel, 15 x 16 x 24 inches.

Catalog published on the occasion of the exhibition
Shaker Inspired, at Joyce Goldstein Gallery, Chatham, NY

May 14 - June 18, 2022

Organized by Eric Wolf

Cover Photograph by Bill Jacobson

Design by Patrick Neal

Special thanks to the Shaker Museum

Printed by Fort Orange Press, Albany, NY



Church Family Dwelling House and Ministry's Residence, Mount Lebanon, NY. James Irving, photographer.
Courtesy of the Shaker Museum, New Lebanon, NY.



Great Stone Barn, North Family, Mount Lebanon, NY. Courtesy of the Shaker Museum, New Lebanon, NY.