

One of Jacqueline Iskander's most vivid childhood memories involves wandering the Missouri countryside when she was barely a teenager. Awakening one winter morning to a snow-covered landscape, she instinctively donned her boots and coat, walked up a gravel road, and proceeded in the direction of a lake. "I remember being entranced by the quiet, muffled sound of the woods under the snow, everything was so still. I have never forgotten that sense of serenity and beauty." Being alone was in some ways, her mental salvation, and in that time, she sought out a private world that could not be touched by her family's dysfunction.

In her work today, she carries the quest of that young girl to discover and share the beauty that she found in those still woods. Though the road has sometimes been challenging, it has lead full-circle, to a quiet and contemplative place. Her work in mosaics reflects her philosophy through its elegant, meditative designs.

*There is something very elemental for me about creating a whole from many pieces, about coaxing fluidity and expression from rocks and glass, and assembling apparently unrelated pieces to form a single, comprehensible idea. My work is most harmonious to me when I achieve a sense of order and unity from the chaos of all the constructional elements...*

This wholeness grew out of seemingly disparate parts of her life. By the time she was 15, her broken family had moved many times, and there were bouts of poverty and real uncertainty. Pregnant, with no option to stay at home, she married and gave birth to her daughter. But by age 17, she was a single mother. Having dropped out of high school, she worked in factories to support herself and her child. She found satisfaction and even contentment in working with her hands. She relates this very primary work to her eventual connection to mosaics.

She found her way and earned a degree in computer science, became a programmer, then systems analyst. Later, she married her husband of today and developed a more grounded and secure life. She gave birth to two children and threw herself into the role of mothering and home-schooling, providing them with a quality of life that she never had. In gratitude, she notes, "I would often sit in wonder at how my life had changed... some people do not escape what I did." Iskander often cites the fact that each life experience, be it good or bad, has led to more depth for her.

Today, she is a recognized artist living and working in Tulsa, Oklahoma who has a roster of exhibitions to her credit and an impressive output of work, created since 1997. A shift in her work occurred in 2006 when she flew to Italy for a two-week Master Class at Orsoni in

Venice. She had developed technical skill during many dedicated years of making mosaics, but it was this class that brought her to realize that mosaics could be about more than technique and craft.

She grew inquisitive about focusing on mosaic as art, and because she had no specific background, she took classes at a nearby college to increase her understanding. During her first Society of American Mosaic Artists (SAMA) conference in 2007, she was exposed to more contemporary and nonrepresentational forms of mosaic work. She reflects on her change in thinking:

*I did not want to copy things anymore. I did not even want to do interpretive representational work. I had some ideas to explore, and I wanted to see what I could do. Above all, I wanted to understand what it meant to create work that is uniquely 'mosaic,' that can only be expressed through that medium.*

During 2007 and 2008 she created exploratory abstract pieces, rapidly growing in knowledge while pursuing her own style and voice. Materiality, texture, and experimentation are a large part of the contemporary mosaic art movement, and Iskander embraced that outlook.

The masterful *Etude* triptych (2007) is her first nonobjective piece. Intervals of white and vertical stripes of blue, green, and turquoise mosaic gold are subtly modulated in value to create spatial shifts. An intricate, monochromatic horizontal band serves as a countermovement. Narrow white bands framing the color fields provide a dimensional shift and an element of surprise when viewed closely. Subtle modulations in the glass and stone elements add unexpected visual intrigue to a classical format. Iskander reflects on this first ambitious venture into nonobjective work:

“Etude is my visual exploration of a classical music form. Like many short forms, this is in an ‘ABA’ form, with a variance in the final ‘A’ section as the theme moves from blue to turquoise...from minor to major.”

An elongated rectangular piece titled *Old Testament* (2008) illustrates her first serious exploration of natural materials. “Realizing that these fossils are the oldest things my hands will ever touch inspired this mosaic,” she says. The focal point is a large fossil from which a tide of shape and subtle color emerges and widens, counterbalancing the nautilus’ spiral. A band of turquoise sings in contrast to the muted palette. This piece illustrates growth in her vocabulary of form.

In *Pulse* (2008), the artist extends her textural vocabulary, incorporating a broad variety of materials: marble, granite, smalti, glass, hematite, mother of pearl, quartz, ceramic, porcelain, mosaic gold, and crystals. She demonstrates her ability to deftly combine elements that vary in surface quality, subtly juxtaposing matte surfaces with sparkling crystalline elements, ragged edges with smooth, and working with a range of dimensional relief. Adept at carefully marrying the elements, Iskander has a natural eye for unifying diversity. “I tend to not live at the extremes of black and white; my heart beats in those shades of gray,” she reflects. Striving to balance sumptuous materials with clean and tempered designs lends this and others in her oeuvre their quietly seductive qualities.

The *Rhythms Series* (2008) shows further exploration of the vertical format. This twelve-part series involved creating one small mosaic for each month of 2008 inspired by her “external environment as well as personal happenings.” Through journaling, she reflects poetically on her surroundings, noting change and the passage of time. In *October*, for example, she wrote: “The trees surrounding our house, mostly native oaks, are turning a golden brownish color. I am thankful for the sumacs and planted maples that punch up the canopy with those beautiful deep reds...”

In the creation of *Subtleties* (2008), she takes a leap into the use of floating, overlapping planes with a complex structure of ascending and descending intervals, seemingly referring back to *Etude*, while further developing it. In *We* (2008), Iskander explores overlapping planes again, this time in the form of curvilinear, jewel-like shapes that dance on her now-characteristic vertical background. Figurative in feeling, the forms relate her growing ability to combine the organic and geometric. She adheres to mosaic techniques learned over the years while letting go of others. “There are rules of sound construction that must be followed, then there are other ‘rules’ of the kind that can be broken once you have really learned them,” she notes.

In 2010 and 2011, she takes another leap, creating the tour-de-force large-scale diptychs for Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College, facilitated by Oklahoma Art in Public Places. The two works, *Daytime* and *Dreamtime*, combine her beloved stones, gems, glass, and natural materials. Inspired by the architecture of the building renovation, the history of the area, and the natural phenomena, she relates the panels to human growth and potential. One work represents daytime and rationality, while the other symbolizes the capacity to dream.

The compositional elements of the panels complement and complete one another. Branches stretch over a detailed patchwork of intricate patterning, elegantly unifying the two sections of each side. A mesmerizing spiral globe forms a focal point in each piece. Her talent as an

artist, dedication to the medium, and deep knowledge of its technical aspects coalesce in this ambitious undertaking.

*Piercing the Veil* (2012) exploits relationships between the organic and geometric through a golden dagger-like shape with curvilinear edges embedded in a vertical andamento, now complemented by delicate curved lines. She created the piece from a rejected one of several years prior that had been stripped of its elements, leaving the substrate bare. In it, she expands and exploits her medium once again. She speaks candidly about her process:

*In the beginning there is simply a need to create. I often have only a vague sense of what I want to do, but usually, there is some effect I want to explore. I develop a compositional idea for how to best use the materials, and as the piece comes into being, a conceptual meaning often comes to me. But more than that, I am in a space where I can inhabit the sensations, sit with them, and allow them to find their way.*

Jacqueline Iskander continues to put on her boots and venture out into the woods. Her adventurous spirit lends her mosaic work its beautiful life and authenticity, and her art continues to lead her forward through its often mysterious and sometimes inexplicable process.

—Katherine Duncan Aimone, independent arts writer