

Harry Bower: Lifetime Achievement in the Arts

By Pat Johnson

After announcing that it was an honor to receive Ocean County's Lifetime Achievement Award in the Arts, Harry Bower made a small joke, "Does this mean I'm done? No, life is not over—I hope to have still more achievements."

At home in his studio in Island Heights his art-making abilities and passion to do so is immediately evident in the work that hangs all around the spacious room --and in the collections of buttons, plastic rings and other assorted doodads that enhance his constructions. Bower could be grouped under the heading of "fiber artist" though he calls himself a weaver. On the wall behind his antique counter/storage cabinet is a large memoir "quilt" made from the woven scraps of German language romance magazines his mother collected and the plaited scraps of his father's New Jersey Transit paychecks that his father kept in a shoebox. Above the quilt's surface are empty plastic hangers that held his parents' clothes before they were donated after they passed. The hangers are now artfully connected in a pleasing color construct. The title is "Hanging Onto Memories."

Other works include pieces made for a show called "Animal Architects." Tubular-shaped weavings are Bower's interpretations of caddis fly houses. The woven 'baskets' are decorated with buttons, milk carton tabs and chopsticks. For this traveling exhibit, which was in the Princeton Art Alliance and the Monmouth Museum, he also created a squirrels' nest out of pink paper and spider dungeons out of paper and wire. A hanging paper 'bird's head' mask was for another exhibit on masks. Presently he is weaving a



Harry Bower in his studio.
Photo Credit: Pat Johnson.

kimono out of chopstick paper wrappers. When he eats at his favorite Asian restaurant he asks diners if he can have the wrappers, he said. Lately he also found a prince's ransom of plastic rings that he got for a song. "I haven't decided what I'll do with them yet." He suggested he might be a hoarder but there is nothing askew in his beautiful studio. Rather he is making art out of trash—not just recycling but up-cycling.

"I'm fortunate to have a really good art family and our slogan might be 'Push beyond where you have settled,'" said Bower. "I have lots of art in my head ready to go."

Bower keeps his pulse on contemporary craft movements by attending workshops around the country. He recently returned from Florida where he took a workshop in traditional paper-marbling. In 2006 he received a

Harry Bower continued...

Geraldine Dodge Foundation Grant to do an Artists Studio Residency at Peters Valley where he made standing baskets that appear able to walk on their own. “This was letting the material suggest the form,” he explained. In 2002, the Geraldine Dodge Foundation funded his work at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts where he learned to make tunnel books—three-dimensional books that can be read from the inside out.

Other workshops and opportunities he has attended included ones at the Savannah College of Art and Design, Vermont Studios, a stint in Japan and Spoleto, Italy. In Spoleto he learned about Masks and Performance Art. “I knew nothing about performance art at the time but we made four giant animal puppets that converged on a square in town. We heard the applause but I was inside the wolf puppet.”

All these workshop opportunities enhanced his teaching. Bower taught in Toms River Schools for 29 years. “I hope to always be a student and it helped to see how other teachers taught; it made me a better teacher.”

He has received Teacher of the Year status in both elementary and high school levels and in 2019 the Art Educators of New Jersey named him High School Art Educator of the Year and he received their Distinguished Achievement Award.

The furnishings and all the various items of the Peto house and studio had been packed up and put in storage years ago by his granddaughter. It was Bower’s task and pleasure to unpack these treasures and, with the help of photographs taken by Peto himself, to reconstruct a window into the artist’s life. Due to the dedication and hundreds of hours of work by Peto and others, visitors to the museum are transformed into a gentler time—when streets were lined with trees and horse and buggies traveled slowly in the summer heat. Inside, one can almost smell the paint and linseed oil and see the artist studying his arrangement of objects before mixing and adding another dab of color to his



John F. Peto Studio Museum.
Photo credit: Pat Johnson.

canvas. Bower is most pleased with the fact that objects and letters depicted in Peto’s work have been chance findings, found in the household’s storage boxes – one letter even fell out of a book Bower was shelving.

With Bower as docent, visitors learn not just facts, but a lasting impression of the artist’s family life and work. Bower also curates two to three contemporary art exhibitions upstairs at the museum. This April he is installing a portrait exhibit, “The Many Faces at Peto.”

Bower was nominated for Ocean County’s Lifetime Achievement in the arts by a former John F. Peto Studio Museum board president Judith Carluccio, “Harry was one of the very first volunteers who took on the task of turning the Peto family home into one of the premier Ocean County cultural and arts institutions.”



A hanging paper ‘bird’s head’ mask by
Harry Bower made for an exhibit on masks.
Photo credit: Pat Johnson.