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## Interview with Betty-Jane Shreve

Betty-Jane Shreve

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**Interviewer: Catherine Fisher**  
**Interviewee: Betty-Jane Shreve**  
**Makers@PPL, Portland, Maine**  
**4.25.2015**

CF: We're here at the Portland Public Library for Makers @ PPL. It is the 25th of April, year 2015. This is Catherine Fisher and I'm here with Betty-Jane Shreve. So Betty, you are an exhibitor here. Would you tell us a little bit about what you've brought to show today?

BS: I make—rather, I design—wastepaper baskets. I buy the baskets from a maker in the United States. They're that vintage style, the oval ones, with the turned brims, that go straight up. It's something that I, when I was a kid, admired at other people's houses. My parents weren't able to afford such luxuries. But when I went to a friend's house whose parents could, I loved looking at them. They always had a nature scene on them or painted flowers or something special that I could relate to. Over the years, I continued to love these baskets. I was nursing for thirty years and stopped when my mom came to stay with us 'cause she had Alzheimer's. That's how I went off into this avenue of latent love of wastebaskets. I've been working and making these for the last five years. And still loving it.

CF: So you buy the object itself and then you adorn it with prints? Or what's the process?

BS: I do. I buy the raw metal oval baskets, which are very hard to find these days in this style. Then I choose an illustration—be it a map or flowers or nautical ideas—and work with it to pull up the colors to enhance the illustration as best I can. For instance, this one that is in front of us now is purple and kind of a dark plum, with images of hyacinths on the sides. I made the background of the illustration white, and then spray painted the outside of the basket white and the inside, a deep purple. So it all matches. And then I was able to find hydrangeas and explode them a little bit and add them to the back. I'm making this one for somebody to give as a present. It's really exciting, to do that, and to have that personal relationship with people like that. I've done baskets with wedding invitations, too, for people to give as gifts to the bride and groom.

CF: So in your process, then ... it sounds like the precipitating event for you living a creative life really was your mother becoming ill and coming to live with you. And so you really made that a positive thing.

BS: Yeah, I did. Well, I had gotten laid off, too. It just all happened at once. I was at Maine Health and my nursing job got eliminated. My mom had just come to live with us, and I said, "No, I don't want to do anything but stay home with her." But it got to be a little [sighs] "Oh, my goodness, what am I ever going to do?" kind of thing, you know? And then it just kind of fell into place.

CF: It looks like they're pretty involved, as far as spray painting and all. Did you have to build a special area in your home?

BS: Well, it's funny that you mention that. This is a part of my story that happened this year. In January, I was getting ready for the Portland Flower Show. It doesn't happen until the first

of March, so I had to deal with spraying forty baskets in the winter. I tried to do it in my garage with a space heater, and, it ended up, one of the full cans of black spray paint got too warm near the heater, and it exploded. I had it in my hand, so it exploded in my hand, breaking my finger and injuring my thumb. The smock that I was wearing was made of polyester and it caught on fire. I was all lit up. I knew I had to lay down and roll on my garage floor, and I was able to put the fire out. There wasn't any structural damage except for the little plastic greenhouse I used inside the garage. Anyway, I got second and third degree burns right on the edges of my ear and blisters on my chin and on my other ear and the back of my head. A bunch of hair got singed right down to nothing.

It was a terribly scary thing, and I decided never again would I do that. I'm 67 years old and I love what I do, but I'm not going to be able to work things the same way. But I still had the flower show to prepare for, and I had forty cans that were just undercoated. That's all I had done. I hadn't done any colors or anything on them. I went to the Open Bench Project down on Thompson's Point and I talked with Jake there. And he said that he could make me a 12 by 12 room—it wouldn't be just for my use, it would be for anybody's use who wanted to spray paint. Also, he had somebody, he told me, who was doing a surfboard in fiberglass, and he would need a heated space that had a good vent system, which is exactly what I needed. So I did my forty baskets there at the beginning of February, and it's been wonderful, just wonderful, to have that space. I don't use it as a studio for everything—I bring home the spray-painted baskets, and then do all the other hand work that I can do on my sun porch.

CF: And it's not cost prohibitive for you to do it that way?

BS: No, no. It costs me, for two to three days a week, thirty dollars a month.

CF: That's a real testament to the need for that wonderful resource for makers. And Open Bench is a sponsor of this event.

BS: Jake's willingness was great: "Well, let's get this done," he said. "You've got this show you've got to have these ready for." He just went ahead and he erected the paint booth in this big old brick structure that he leases at the end of Thompson's Point. He said that the fellow with the fiberglass had come to him first, but that was still a little in the offing, and mine was an immediate need.

CF: Now, will you branch out to other things? Or will you continue to just focus on the baskets?

BS: I take authentic sap buckets, and apply really nice black and white 1800s lithographs of two lobsters in their natural environment. I call it the Yankee Bucket.

CF: So then mostly, people find your work through shows?

BS: I've done shows. I'll be in Down East, an advertisement for the June issue showing one of my baskets, which has got a lovely illustration of a lobster boat going out at Two Lights. So we'll see. I'll make 25 of them, and hopefully ...

CF: So do you think you'll ever go back to nursing?

BS: Oh no, no, no. I love what I do and I love my free time too, because I'm on my own.

CF: Well, this is great. Anything else you want to say about your creative process or your product?

BS: I think one of the more exciting things, personally, for me, to do with this business is that I have learned a lot, in the arts. Things that I had never learned before but was interested in, but not enough to take a course. Historical art, for example. That's been an avenue that's been fun for me to explore.

Thank you for this opportunity, Catherine.

CF: Thank you so much. And I neglected to ask at the outset, what is the name of your business? And do you have a website?

BS: It's Visionary Vessels From Maine. It's [www.visionaryvesselsfrommaine.com](http://www.visionaryvesselsfrommaine.com).

CF: Thank you, Betty-Jane.

BS: Thank you.