THE CRAFTS STUDY Centre.
The Devon Guild of Crafts-
men and Contemporary
Applied Arts joined forces
in 2007 to create an exhibition,
a book of essays, a symposium,
a website and a DVD, as well as draw
in some thirty craft practitioners in
an ad hoc collective. The outcome,
still alive and under active discus-
sion, was Urban Field.

Urban Field proposed a new re-
fection on craft practice located
in the rural outpost, the city or at
the edge of town and countryside.
Sarah Pank, living at the far end of
an impossibly high-banked Devon
lane set some miles out of Buck-
fastleigh, made an especially no-
table collection of functional and
artistic pieces in willow and other
hedgerow materials for the ground-
breaking exhibition at Contempo-
rary Applied Arts in London.

Her work, alongside that of oth-
er innovative willow artists such as
Lizzie Farey (who first inspired her
to take up basketmaking in Gallo-
way), Jenny Crisp, Caroline Sharp
and Susie Thomson, demonstrated
the vitality of this ancient craft,
reconfigured for contemporary use
and aesthetics.

The Urban Field show at Con-
temporary Applied Arts had a UK
perspective. The fine exhibition
European Baskets for the Crafts Coun-
cil of Ireland in 2008 took a broad-
er sweep. Both exhibitions – part
elegy for the passing of the tradi-
tional basket and part chorale for
the sustaining of new craft forms
and uses, symbolic and meditative
– emphasised the connectivity of
the finished work to the land and
river, to specific place, and to the
litany of the seasons.

These environmental values are
deeper sourced in willow artists
and basketmakers, and Pank is a re-
doubtable proponent of them. Her
sense of place is profound, lyrical
and contemplative. She seeks to im-
bue her work with these values, and
her output as well as her chosen
lifestyle expresses her need “to live
lightly on this Earth”. This way of
life and craft is also inherent in her
Dartmoor garden. It is unkempt,
loved and almost ungardened. Na-
tive plants, ferns and grasses are all
nurtured, but so are placed arrange-
ments of bunches of tied twigs and
carefully arranged mounds of terr-
cotta shards and stones, with the
river Mardle coursing by. These are
symbolic placements of ordinary
things, considered but not casual.

Pank’s work sits, then, within
wider concerns: for precious eclo-
y, for deep personal introspec-
tions, for the tension of the individu-
ai pathway and its fragile connec-
tions to social engagements. She
is, one might say, both withdrawn

THE WILLOW RIVER

The introspective work of ‘craft artist’ Sarah Pank
has first been woven by the river and the air.
and highly energised by conversation and ideas. Her basketmaking is therefore richly humanistic. Functional pieces such as vessels and baskets are rhythmically composed, ordered and strong. They are, simply, fit for purpose. Their artistic appeal is dependent on the subtle shifts of colour in the willow and the interlocking of repeat patterns in the wale weaving and randing of the material. Pank has nurtured this material: grown, gathered and prepared the willow herself. These functional baskets are robust, certain and honest.

Pank has also developed a more conceptual approach to her craft. For the fiftieth anniversary of The Devon Guild of Craftsmen in 2005, she made a signature work that brought together the functional and symbolic elements of her craft. The piece was a vast dogwood and willow vessel with an explosive and dynamic outer surface of hedgerow twigs and branches of blackthorn, creating an energetic force field of natural energy around the woven core. The piece demonstrated powerfully how Pank’s work as a basketmaker on Dartmoor is intertwined with “my deep love of Nature and the wild, and my feeling for the irresistible rhythmic weaving of plant materials”.

The self-contained interest in ‘wildness’ led Pank to explore the abstract and sculptural possibilities of willow and branch forms, made for the purpose of installation and art rather than use. A remarkable sequence of wall-hung pieces for the Urban Field exhibition followed. These were meditations on Nature, seasonality and the lifelong patterns of sap and water flow. The course of the Mardle as it runs past Pank’s Dartmoor garden seems to me to flow symbolically through her work, too: catching its eddies and stillness, its sound and silences.

PANK IS A craft artist who attends carefully and respectfully to the needs and innovations presented by her raw and natural materials. She will also take time out from the demands of making work to respect her own meditative needs. A long period of reflection and silence has now passed, and she is making baskets again, in even closer harmony with her principles, and still at the vanguard of this deeply symbolic and ecologically sustainable craft form. She shares the view of the eminent Irish basketmaker Joe Hogan, who has commented on the connection of the craft to the lifestyle as “a deeply satisfying involvement from growing through to making”.

A conversation with Pank is like a dance with time: she will pursue an idea in the round and, while speaking, will follow its course in both word and movement. She is spellbound in the moment. In the development of the formal grace of her willow baskets and the free lyricism of her wall pieces, she demonstrates her individual contribution to the vital abstract flow and latent energy of the best of British and European willow artists.

Her work is a search for order and poetry, and in both she finds a clarity of purpose and clarity of image. This work is deeply introspective and intrinsically connected to the Earth. Through ‘inner-ness’ she finds the means both to express order and to capture the way that a Devon breeze might ruffle a hedgerow; to capture the fluid movement of Nature. Her work, in fact, has first been woven by the river and the air.

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