

ANCESTRAL DESIGN WITH NATURE AS THE MEDIUM

Well-known basketweaver and educator Vivien Hailstone is quoted to say “It has always amazed me [to think of] the first person that walked into a forest and come out with a basket.” Vivien taught basketweaving and advocated for basketweaving to be added to a Northern California junior college curriculum, despite twenty years of rejection. She won her battle. She also fought to change K–12 California curriculum to include accurate representation of California Indian history. When retelling these years of work to create a positive and empowering place in history and education for basketweaving and weavers, she was also heard to say, “I dare anyone to walk into a forest and come out with a basket!”

For many years, Dugan Aguilar was staff photographer for the California Indian Basketweavers Association (CIBA). CIBA was born out the grassroots efforts of California Indian weavers, like Vivien, who saw the risk of basketweaving becoming a lost art and feared the harmful effects of pesticide exposure to weavers when harvesting and processing plant material for baskets. Dugan photographed weavers, baskets, and events at the annual CIBA gatherings. The design and knowledge of weaving baskets is a practice that relies on patience, botany, plant management, artistic talent, and math in order to produce the warp and weft of a basket that reflects tribal patterns and purpose (e.g., ceremonial, fishing, or food preparation). The scale of ceremonial roundhouses is far greater than baskets, but both rely on plants and trees (nature) and knowledgeable hands taught from lessons passed from one generation to the next.

Dugan found inspiration from the weavers when he saw firsthand how much time and effort is required to weave a basket. He learned that weavers pray to the Creator for the materials they’ve gathered and reflect upon the basket they intend to weave. This rang true to his own film-based photographic experiences. Darkroom work means printing over and over until the combination of dodging and burning and chemical mix meets the photographer’s expectations. It seemed fitting for Dugan, before entering the darkroom, to offer a prayer to the Creator, to light white sage and meditate on the images that would emerge from the reaction of paper, chemicals, and water.