

**JOE FEDDERSEN**



*TIRE*, 2003. SANDBLASTED BLOWN GLASS, 36.8 x 32.4 x 32.4 CM

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PHOTO: BILL RANSOM

## JOE FEDDERSEN: GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION—THE LANGUAGE OF THE LAND

Joe Feddersen (Colville) is recognized as a prolific artist who creates exquisite and richly detailed objects. Traditional Plateau cultures such as the Colville do not name art but call it “making.” In recent years, Feddersen has intensified his observation and presentation of materials to deliver refined personal interpretations that incorporate material from biographical grist and the emotional transitions of daily life. An inheritance of visual integrity and traditional roots fuels the emotional power of this focus, felt through each object in a varied and remarkable body of work.

Feddersen gained early recognition for his print work. He studied printmaking at the University of Washington under the tutelage of Glen Alps. In a review for *The Seattle Times*, Mathew Kangas wrote, “Partly because of small scale, quiet yet proficient technical tricks and modest subject matter, printmaking can be the most intimate of art mediums. A true connoisseur’s art, it reveals itself only to those appreciative of a delicate touch and restrained chromatic approach. In this sense, Joe Feddersen is a true master.”<sup>1</sup>

An interest in landscape and pattern emerged strongly in Feddersen’s work of the early eighties. His *Rainscapes* depicted the land of the Northwest. This focus also surfaced in suites of work such as the Pendleton blanket series and the self-portraits, followed by the basket suite of the nineties and the *Plateau Geometrics*. The latter suites embraced abstract designs found on baskets of the inland Salish people. Using these designs as a departure point, Feddersen used all the techniques learned over the years. Etching, waterless lithography, stencils, and relief combined to embrace process while maintaining ties to Native tradition.

While earlier works strive for the intimate quality of the artifact, such as the cornhusk bag or “sally bag,” the monumental pieces, such as *Okanagon 4*, speak to the landscape through scale. Patterns envelope space, allowing separate elements to rise to the surface and then ebb into the overall design. They allude to an aesthetic distinctive to Native language, utterances given by the volcanic landscape and spoken by a tongue of water. A Columbia River Plateau Native language speaker said, “If you knew the language you would ask no questions. The language is complete in its knowledge of our land and lifeways.” Feddersen, in essence, is a visual Native speaker, distilling vibrations of color stirring within the viewer.

The artistic intention is to work the viewer into the “zone,” as Feddersen calls it, “where signs tenuously dissolve into a modernist aesthetic while still maintaining direct ties to Plateau designs....

Achieving scale through the manifestation of a grid of elemental components, patterns are translated to a series of printing plates holding textures and abstracts of designs. Like a library of brushes, each is printed with color and through a series of layers to achieve rich, dense textures, taking advantage of qualities inherent to printmaking....The multiple printings carry residues of ink; layering by overprinting and use of common plates build surface textures in a manner only achievable by [the] print process.”

While I taught Feddersen simple twining of traditional root baskets, his intensity and instant absorption of instruction immediately overwhelmed my abilities in the craft. The will of an obsessive weaver was intrinsically a part of him. As such, the pattern and rhythm count can be attributed to Northwest Columbia River Plateau basket design. In the interior basin of the Columbia River, traditions in basketry resisted two major design influences—those of the Northwest Coast and Northern California—over several centuries. Baskets were common in the household until recently. This calls to mind stories of Coyote, who was said to have made this, named that, and shaped the world. I asked my grandmother about Coyote’s legendary exploits. She said, “Coyote didn’t do anything. It was all ready for him when he got here.” In a way, I did not teach Joe weaving. His hands and thoughts were ready for weaving.

I marveled at his astonishing baskets of fine and unusual materials, woven of natural linens with surface obtrusions of feathers, hair, buttons, and beads. They took over his house and appeared in his shows. There were waxed paper baskets and many other types for purposes other than holding seasonal foods. Major museums, including the Eiteljorg, the Hallie Ford, and the National Museum of the American Indian, have purchased Feddersen’s baskets.

Joe Feddersen was born a weaver. Like the Plateau basket weavers before him, he innately absorbed the vocabulary of geometric design, perhaps by virtue of his heritage, certainly by a voracious visual appetite and good wit. The glass baskets presented here explore material forms of Columbia River Plateau subsistence technology in a fresh approach that places a contemporary grid over a durable, older language pattern. Feddersen’s use of glass speaks of our human fragility, and deep layers imbue the shell of the basket with the ephemeral density of a cloud.

These works express a Columbia River Plateau spiritual concept, *E-Wah'-Cha'-Nye*: “that is the way it has always been; that is the way it is today and always will be.”<sup>2</sup> They also speak of a new imprint on

our vision as we search the landscape. Languages and land were intertwined for thousands of years. With each vision quest, an individual brought back to the community a new understanding learned from the environment. Our land bestowed knowledge and practical intimacy through its processes and qualities. This cultural practice—a personal journey deep into myth for reclamation of ancient elements and acclamations of respect for all life to come—potently binds originality to enduring values.

The cultures of the Columbia River Plateau speak of time immemorial—the beginning of this world, the demise of previous epochs, and what is to come—a visceral prophecy. As much as language, the patterns of the people have documented, preserved, and carried on their culture. Feddersen brings the new into the potency of image. This is the “then, now, and tomorrow.”

— **ELIZABETH WOODY (WYAMPUM/TYGH/WASCO/WISHRAM/WATLALA/DINE)**

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<sup>1</sup> Visual Arts Section, *The Seattle Times* (September 16, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Pitt, Louie. Quoting Warm Springs Elder Pierson Mitchell on the core teachings.

