

From Basketry to Clay, the Bahamas to New York

An award-winning sculptor who works in clay, Anina Major recalls the years as a child that helped drive the creativity she exhibits today.



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By Sarah Archer

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At first glance, the shimmery green and deep orange surfaces of Anina Major’s sculptural works look as though they would clink audibly if you dared tap them with something metal.

“Beneath the Docks” takes the form of a basket with a handle, covered with an algae-colored glaze. The angled posture of “Hermit Armor” captures the stance of a cautious crab on the go. Their surfaces also bear the unmistakable pattern of woven fiber, material that’s soft and yielding, that twists and stretches, then inevitably frays and falls apart.

In fact, they are all of the above: Ms. Major’s sculptures are made from different kinds of clay, like luxurious porcelain and sturdy stoneware, but her inspiration is rooted in the basketry tradition of her native Bahamas, and the marketplace where her grandmother crafted woven goods — using a technique called plaiting — for the tourist trade throughout her life.

The artist, who has been named the inaugural winner of the Future Perfect Gallery’s the Future Perfect Prize this year, weaves a complex narrative in clay. The prize is one of just a few in the United States dedicated to design and offers the

recipient an unrestricted grant of \$20,000 along with an ongoing relationship with the gallery.

Ms. Major will debut a new body of work at the Future Perfect in 2025. A prominent design gallery with outlets in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, the Future Perfect represents more than 50 makers whose ranks include Lindsey Adelman, the sculptor and designer of the Branching Bubble chandelier.



“Beneath the Docks,” from 2022, takes the form of a basket covered with an algae-colored glaze. via the artist. Photo by Andrew White.



“Hermit Armor,” 2024, is designed to capture the stance of a cautious crab on the go. via the Artist

Ms. Major was nominated for the prize by a group of five outside experts. The consensus around her work coalesced quickly, David Alhadeff, founder of the Future Perfect in 2003, said in an interview.

One of the criteria for the prize was that it be “someone who stands at a pivotal point in their career,” he added. “There’s a kind of maturation and development to her work that felt really special, and just a little off radar. Even in the last couple of months, with her show at the Armory and the prize that she received there it was like, ‘We caught her at the right time.’” (Ms. Major won the Pommery Prize at the 2024 Armory Show.)

Ambitious and college-bound, Ms. Major left home in the Bahamas at 18 to study graphic design at Drexel University in Philadelphia, always planning to return, she said. But professional and creative opportunities kept her in the United States.

“I left for college with the intent of returning home and giving back what I’d learned from afar,” she said in an interview. “And when I realized that I had been gone for a while, some level of guilt started to weigh in. I admire how other creatives [from the Caribbean], like Jamaica Kincaid or Nari Ward, allow their upbringing to be present in their work. So I make a point to visit frequently and remain strongly influenced by my experiences there, until I am able to re-establish a home there.”

By her early 30s, Ms. Major was excelling in a career in online marketing. A promotion had resulted in a transfer to New York City, and she was happily settling into life in Harlem, spending time in her ceramics studio there as her schedule permitted.

She was working with different kinds of clay, including porcelain — the most unforgiving one of all. Though it has a reputation for being delicate, porcelain is tougher than other clay bodies such as stoneware or earthenware, which, along with its luminous appearance and luxurious history, is one reason it’s so well-suited to fine sculpture.

One chilly day, she noticed a woven straw doll in a Brooklyn thrift shop window. Ms. Major recognized it as exactly the kind of souvenir object her grandmother had created for decades to sell at one of the big straw markets in the Bahamas. Seeing it in a secondhand shop — evidence of its having been forgotten or rejected — affected her deeply.

“I had been working with clay, but in a very playful manner, making things that I wanted to see in my own space,” she recalled. “I was referencing water, longing to have remnants of water around me. Then, here comes this doll.”

Haunted by the doll’s forlorn state in a shop window far from home, something clicked. The material Ms. Major had been exploring in her studio with a sense of play now seemed to offer something quite profound: permanence, and a preciousness that could guard against the ravages of time and indifference.

“I bought the doll and immediately took it back to my studio,” she said. “I was like, ‘I’ll make you so you are never discarded again,’ because everybody thinks porcelain is precious.”



Ms. Minor's exhibition "The Landing," at the Armory Show in New York City this year. She was awarded the Pommery Prize at the show. Silvia Ros, via TERN Gallery, The Bahamas.

To Malene Barnett, a multidisciplinary artist and designer whose book "Crafted Kinship: Inside the Creative Practices of Contemporary Black Caribbean Makers" includes Ms. Major's work, this makes perfect sense.

“Clay is an archival material,” she said in an interview, “and if you’re thinking about reimagining Black diaspora archives, the material is an important part of telling the story. Being able to connect the clay with the weaving of basketry only just helps to solidify and expand the story even longer.”

As a child, Ms. Major spent time at the straw market where her grandmother had a stall, watching the adults weave and sell their wares, observing the shoppers and learning to work with the material herself.

“My grandmother showed me how to do different things, like embroidering somebody’s name on an object, and how to plait,” she said. “And, of course, it kept me busy.”

Her grandmother’s plaiting had real concrete benefits for her family: It enabled her to send Ms. Major’s mother and aunt to college. Her mother now works in the foreign exchange industry in the Bahamas; her father is an architect.

The plaiting tradition is itself a complex story that connects the craft techniques of enslaved people in the Atlantic world, the rising postwar tourist economy of the Bahamas and the material culture of souvenirs. The technique is commonly used to craft bags and baskets, dolls and other keepsakes from ribbons of dried silver grass, sisal or palmetto.

“This was a practical craft that was employed by enslaved [people] to make their lives more productive: This is how they gathered produce, and this is how they made mats to sleep on,” Ms. Major said. “This practice of plaiting has, over time, developed to sustain a group of people.”

In her mid-30s, Ms. Major went on to graduate school and spent two years earning a Master of Fine Arts in ceramics at the Rhode Island School of Design (R.I.S.D.), where one of her professors — and later a member of her thesis committee — was Simone Leigh, the multidisciplinary artist also renowned for her work in clay



"The Pearl," 2021, made from glazed stoneware and sand. via the artist. Photo by Andrew White.

Inspired by the experience of recreating the woven doll in porcelain, a big challenge for Ms. Major was how to translate the technique of plaiting into clay at an even bigger scale, and this required some experimentation.

"Ultimately, I'm trying to engage in the same manner [with the clay] that you would with the palms. It's technically hard, and that's what I spent two years doing at R.I.S.D.," she said, comparing it lovingly to boot camp. Like grass, clay is at once tough and terribly fragile, and there's narrative power in this complexity.

“Anina has been able to create such a specific language,” said Angelik Vizcarrondo-Laboy, who profiled Ms. Major in her book “New Women’s Work: Reimagining Feminine Craft in Contemporary Art.”

“Even when she is doing projects that don’t involve the plaiting, I can look at it and say, ‘That’s Anina.’ She has such a clear voice. Her work strikes nostalgic and emotional chords within me as a Caribbean woman myself. It feels like a return to home.”

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