

Coastal Constellation: Anastasia Azure's New Work Soars

by Cashen Conroy



ABOVE: Finished installation of *Coastal Constellation*, by Anastasia Azure. Photograph by Perry Day, Graystone Studios.

When weaving student Kathy Bourque asked Anastasia Azure if she would create a personal commission for her home in Westerly, Rhode Island – a commission involving original iterations of the artist's signature woven sculptures – Azure knew that the challenges of this process would be far different than creating work that reflected her own interests or pieces designed for retail venues. Azure was ready to embrace a new project and enthusiastically agreed. Now, less than a year later, four custom sculptures hang in the landing of Bourque's home, a focal point for enchanting guests lucky enough to stay for a visit.

A Perfect Pairing

Bourque considered hiring Azure for a commission in the spring of 2018 during a weaving class at the Handicraft Club in Providence, Rhode Island. One day Azure arrived with exciting news about a fifteen-piece commission she had just secured for a hotel in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates. Listening to Azure, Bourque thought about her own ongoing search for the perfect piece of art to hang in the landing of her home and wondered, *what if?*

Bourque had been looking for a unique piece of art that fulfilled two requirements: first, it would reflect her home's surroundings – namely, it would evoke the essence of the nearby ocean and marsh ponds – and second, it would be the work of a local artist. Azure's sculptures, handwoven from nylon monofilament and wire on a 4-shaft Macomber loom, are defined by graceful undulations and hypnotic patterns that echo the movement of waves and eddies. Azure is also based in Pawtucket, Rhode Island – less than an hour from Westerly. It was a perfect match.

A Place to Begin

Bourque visited Azure's studio to start the commission process. When Bourque arrived, she found herself surrounded by walls covered in mesmerizing geometric sculptures made up of almost gauzy-looking arcs of golds, turquoises, emerald greens, and soft purples. As she walked around, the sculptures seemed to shift in shape, a

ABOVE: Anastasia in her studio. Photograph by Stacey Doyle.



ABOVE: Temporary installation of paper models.

BELOW: Digital rendering of potential layout.



phenomenon caused by the moiré effect – one that Azure makes all the more intense through her meticulous dye work and careful attention to hue, tint, and tone.

At the studio, Bourque selected a few favorite shapes and styles to inform the creation of the new designs. Five days later, Azure and an assistant drove the chosen pieces down to Westerly to get a sense of how the work would look in the targeted location.

Standing in the alcove made by a stairwell landing, studying the sculptures against the wall as Azure’s assistant held them up, Azure and Bourque were able to see how different colors interacted with the natural light and the wall’s robin egg blue color. After some discussion, the pair decided that the new work should feature a blue palette in order to resonate with the wall color and reference the nearby ocean. Within the blue family, Azure planned to create a custom hue of cobalt with a dash of navy, so the pieces would pop against the light wall. In addition to giving Azure a sense of the colors she would be working with, the visit to Westerly also informed her of some spatial considerations – namely, she realized that the sculptures couldn’t protrude too far from the wall because the residents would be passing by in close proximity when traversing the landing.

The Technical Details

Back in her studio and armed with the critical information she needed to begin the design process, Azure used Adobe Photoshop® to experiment with different arrangements, placing images of already-created pieces onto a photo of the blank wall. Azure

presented three different sketches that varied in number of pieces and, as a result, price. Bourque chose her favorite of the digitally created configurations: a collection of four pieces with the largest in the center of the alcove wall and three complementary pieces positioned to the left of the largest work.

Once a clear vision had been established and a 50% deposit made, Azure’s next step was to determine the exact measurements of each warp’s length and width to achieve the correct circumference for each piece. Azure achieves the dimensional structure of her sculptures with doubleweave, a technique in which multiple layers of cloth can be woven parallel to each other simultaneously.

“I need to account for the interaction of the layers. How many times they intersect before converging to a single layer determines the shape of the form. I’ve developed a method for creating paper models that allows me to reliably forecast the necessary ratios to create balance and intrigue...well, somewhat reliably,” Azure says with a smile.

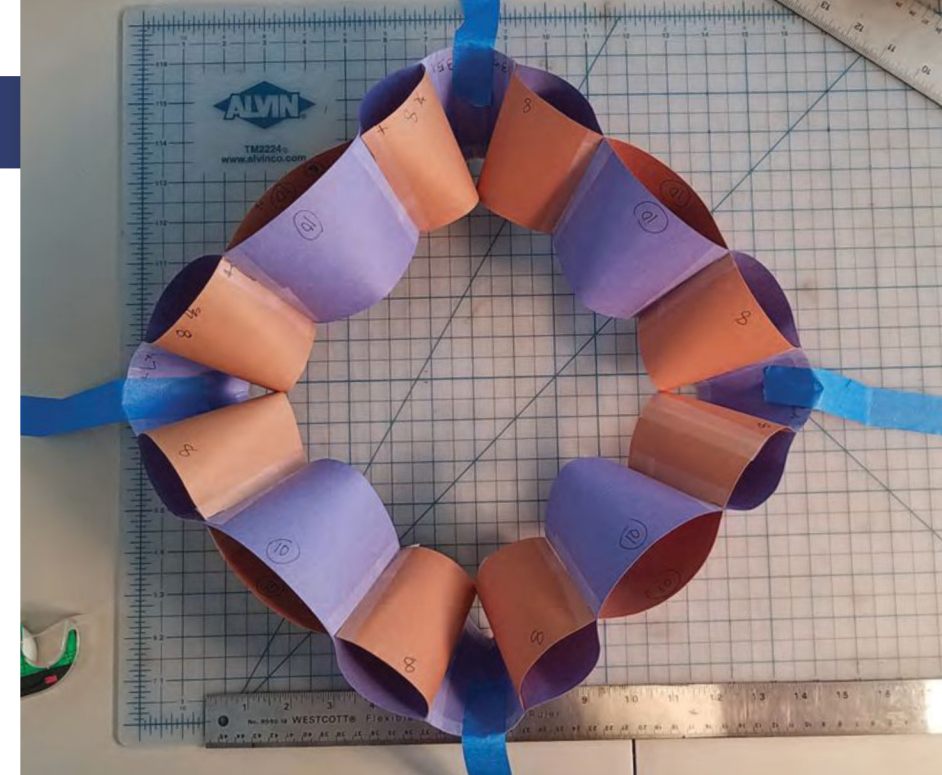
Azure completed multiple paper models and blueprint silhouettes, just in time for the second appointment to visit the Westerly home to examine how the proportions would look from every one of the landing’s vantage points. When the host and artist were satisfied with both the dimensionality and overall composition of the configuration, Azure began warping.

Determining warp color stripes is another complex variable, especially in conjunction with the myriad of possible weft combinations. Based upon past experience and meticulous notes, Azure dyes the nylon monofilament warp using Pro™ WashFast Acid Dyes. She keeps an open mind, knowing that the creation process is still one of trial and error, even with careful planning. “You can’t always predict exactly what’s going to work,” she said. “You have to actually try it.”

Three of the pieces that Azure wove for the Westerly house didn’t turn out exactly as she had imagined and therefore, did not make the final cut for inclusion in the installation. Azure views unexpected outcomes as design opportunities that can lead her to consider new strategies. One orphan sculpture has generated an innovative collaboration with her neighbor, a glassblower and lighting specialist.

A Successful Installation

Five months after the process was initiated, the sculptures were ready to install. Bourque hired builders to set up a scaffolding platform on the landing. The pieces, of substantial size to fill the space, have a weight range of .5 to 5.25 pounds. In just one hour Azure installed her work on the featured wall, received her final payment, and was able to see her work interlace with the natural light just as she and her patron envisioned.



ABOVE: Paper models estimate layer interchanges and final circumferences.

Many fiber artists anticipate the day they receive a commission. A commission represents validation that their work is highly regarded and is a substantial investment in their vision. It will come as no surprise to members of the Handweavers Guild of America that well-known weaver and instructor Anastasia Azure (2009 HGA Scholarship recipient) has entered this stratosphere



LEFT: Close up of the final arrangement. Photograph by Perry Day, Graystone Studios.

“Visiting Kathy’s home and having a personal conversation critiquing the attributes of the different color choices and potential shapes was a wonderful way to start the investigation process.” – Anastasia Azure

One crucial step remained for the fiber artist: documentation. In March, photographer Perry Day of Graystone Studios met Azure at Bourque’s house to photograph the sculptures. After a few digital touchups – removing a sconce from the wall and replacing the backyard pool’s visible green tarp with the image of blue water – the commission was complete.

Overall, the process revealed the many advantages of working on a local commission. The artist can actually visit the space where the commissioned work will reside and use the resulting knowledge to inform their designs. Furthermore, having a friendly relationship with clear communication can also lead to a greater understanding of what the client seeks; this, in turn, makes the art truly resonate with its destined home and owner. For Azure, it’s all about the personal connections and creating work that enlivens spaces and enriches environments.

Photography provided by the artist unless otherwise noted.

Writer Cashen Conroy graduated from Brown University with a degree in Nonfiction Writing. She met Azure while writing a story on a community garden for The College Hill Independent. Her specialty is feature writing, with a focus on profiling interesting individuals and reporting on environmental issues.

Artist Anastasia Azure earned her MFA in Textiles at the Rhode Island School of Design in 2011 and her BFA in Jewelry Metal Arts from California College of the Arts in 2005. She explores the grace of geometry through handwoven, dimensional art. Currently residing in Rhode Island, she teaches and exhibits internationally. Her artwork is collected by museums and luxury hotels.