

EMILY RIDINGS

Weaves Her Own Story

HAILING FROM RICHMOND, KENTUCKY, 27-YEAR-OLD BASKET
WEAVER AND FASHION DESIGNER EMILY RIDINGS SITS DOWN WITH
LIFESTYLE EDITOR **RANA ALSOUFI** TO REFLECT ON HER CAREER SO
FAR, HER TIME IN NEW YORK, WHERE SHE FINDS INSPIRATION AND
WHAT LIES AHEAD. PHOTOS BY **LILY FOSTER**.

Emily Ridings holds two handmade baskets in her living room.



Vintage magazine clippings and a paper displaying Emily Ridings' name is hung on the wall of her at-home studio on Saturday, Aug. 5, 2023, in Lexington, Ky.



A shelf full of materials used to create baskets and a rack with different baskets hung on it are displayed in Emily Ridings' at-home studio.

basketry [bas-ki-tree, bah-ski-] noun

1. baskets collectively; basketwork.
2. the art or process of making baskets.

Almost anywhere you look inside Emily Ridings' Lexington home, you'll find a basket. The 27-year-old designer's house is decorated wall to wall with all kinds of artwork, from ceramic pieces her friends have made to framed sheets of paper with poetry written on them.

But hung on every doorknob and perched on every mantle and shelf is an intricately-crafted basket made either by Ridings herself or her grandmother, who taught her the art of basket weaving when she was growing up.

With big baskets filled with throw blankets and pillows, medium-sized baskets holding magazines and vintage fashion books and small baskets balanced on top of lampshades and hung on her walls, it would be easy to assume that basket weaving plays a crucial role in Ridings' life.

And then there's her studio, a room in her house with shelves on every wall filled entirely with Ridings' various creations and the materials she uses to construct them. There isn't a bare surface in sight, yet everything in the studio seems to have been placed in their rightful spots with intention and thought.

Ultimately, Ridings' home is a reflection of the importance of sentimentality in everything that she does. Every piece of artwork displayed in her home has a meaning and a story behind it, such as the framed copy of the poem "Yes, Of Course It Hurts" by Karin Boye, which Ridings carried around with her for two years during college.

"It's my favorite poem," she said. "It's talking about nature, but it's saying, 'Yeah, it hurts, it's change, but change always happens, and immutable things have to change, but you have to allow it to happen.'"

Ridings grew up in Richmond, Kentucky, in an all-around creative family where she recalled she had been "making things forever." Her first sewn creation, a purple pillow with a blue star, marked the beginning of a

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lifetime dedicated to craftsmanship, and fashion has played a significant role in her life for as long as she can remember.

"I was always extremely particular about what I wore," Ridings recalled. "When I was two, my mom made me the smocked dresses, and they were super frilly, and I told her I was not wearing it."

She started making her own clothes when she was around the age of 14, leading her to decide that she wanted to go to school for fashion design.

Ridings chose to pursue her fashion education by attending Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, where she majored in fashion design and minored in sustainability.

She said what drew her to Pratt was how the institution prioritized both the conceptual and technical aspects of fashion design, which allowed Ridings to really hone in on her design skills and learn about what it takes to create a brand.

Despite what could appear glamorous, however, Ridings' experience at Pratt wasn't much different to that of a typical college student's.

"I wanted it so much that I gave everything to it," she said. "And it wasn't the most joyful time of my life because I also was just, like, 18 to 21 and feeling a lot and not knowing how to name anxiety. But it's hard for me to regret some of the isolation that I had in that time because I was not wasting that time ... It was still me just trying to get to the root of what I want to do and what I want to say and how do I do that."

Ridings graduated from Pratt in 2018, during which she revealed a collection of her own designs as part of her senior showcase during Pratt's annual Fashion Runway Show. Ridings' runway displayed numerous clothing pieces made primarily using recycled and second-hand materials, such as scrap pieces of fabric her friends had given her. She chose to focus less on creating a spectacle for her showcase and more on creating pieces that were personal to her and her own journey as a designer.

"That was, I think, kind of the breakthrough point

at that year, because I was spending so much time during the first three years wanting to be cool and interesting and make things people would be excited about, including myself," Ridings said.

After changing her mentality during her design process to prioritizing what kind of message she wanted her work to say, she said she started focusing less on trying to be innovative "and more about the sentimentality of it and how I specifically relate to it without worrying what anyone else thinks."

One piece that particularly stands out from Ridings' senior showcase collection is a large hoop skirt made out of a woven basket material, the first real basket she said she ever made, with help from her grandmother. It was from that point on that Ridings decided that she was drawn to the craft of basket weaving and how detail-oriented the process is, making it the focal point of her brand even today.

Ridings' collection ended up winning the Christopher Hunte "On Point" award that year, named in honor of the late Pratt instructor, for her creative designs.

"I was kind of terrified because there were so many emotions going through me at the same time," she said of the moment she won the award. "And it's the culmination of this super personal body of work that I am now just putting out into the

world. It's vulnerable, super vulnerable."

Ridings' talent in basket weaving and design has taken her as far as the 2019 Met Gala, where she had the opportunity to design part of a look for Canadian activist and fashion designer Aurora James, only one year after her graduation from Pratt.

Ridings had been working at Anthropologie at the time in Philadelphia as a designer, a job she described as "corporate and chaotic." James' assistant had initially reached out to Ridings about a month before the Met Gala was supposed to take place about collaborating on James' dress for the event after James had discovered Ridings' work through her Pratt senior showcase.



Emily Ridings poses in her living room with her baskets.

"I mean, super exciting," Ridings said. "That's, in theory, exactly what I would want."

What was supposed to be an exciting, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Ridings to get her work showcased on the fashion industry's largest stage as a young, up-and-coming designer, however, ended up being an incredibly stressful and complicated process. Spotty communication, vague descriptions of what James wanted and the pressure of a rapidly-approaching deadline all contributed to the chaotic experience that Ridings described.

"She [James] had a vague idea of what she wanted; she wanted a woven corset, she wanted a raffia skirt, so I just went to work," Ridings said. She recalled coming home from work at 6 p.m. and working on the look until the late hours of the night every day for a week.

The entire design took 10 days for Ridings to finish constructing, after which she flew to New York City for the Met Gala to help James get ready for the event and to make some final adjustments, an experience Ridings greatly enjoyed getting to be a part of.

Ridings had high hopes that this experience would be the key to getting her name out there as a designer and getting her foot in the door in the fashion industry, but unfortunately, the outcome of her 2019 Met Gala involvement wasn't all she had wished it would be.

"She [James] goes to the Met Gala and starts posting about it, and she's not really crediting

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me, like, at all," Ridings said. The only article which mentions Ridings as a contributor to James' 2019 Met Gala look was published on The Zoe Report, which Ridings said was only after she had brought up her concerns with James' assistant of the lack of credit she was receiving for her work.

"She's connected with so many people that I would have loved to get connected with because of it, and some opportunities did come from it afterward, but not like they would have if she had been fully transparent," Ridings said. "She's done some nice things for me; I know she's recommended me for other things, like people have told me that that's how they heard of me."

The look that James wore for the 2019 Met Gala is currently on display at the Brooklyn Museum as part of the "Africa Fashion" exhibit, due to the inspiration James drew from African fashions and materials when conceptualizing her look with Ridings. The woven bodice and raffia skirt are on display at the museum with credit to Brother Vellies, James' brand, as the designer.

Handbaskets and basket-weaving materials hang on a rack in Emily Ridings' at-home studio.



Emily Ridings displays her basket creations on her arm.



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“The closure that I found around it was I'm doing what I want to do,” Ridings said of the entire experience. “I've grown a lot to know how to protect myself and I'm doing that now and moving forward. It's still there, and I know I did that, and that's okay.”

Though she didn't necessarily get exactly what she wanted out of the 2019 Met Gala experience, Ridings' brand and career as a designer has surely grown as more exciting opportunities have been presented to her. Recently she has been working a lot with interior designers on designing bespoke home decor pieces such as lighting fixtures.

Her work has been featured in a number of prestigious publications, such as Vogue, The New York Times and Harper's Bazaar, which has driven a lot of attention toward her business. Ridings recalled an article published in Garden & Gun Magazine in 2022 that brought a significant influx of orders coming in for a consistent eight months.

The basket products Ridings offers on her website range from typical picnic-style baskets, to “handbaskets” that resemble and function like handbags, to vases made of reed and cane, and so much more. Ridings also offers commissions for more custom and personalized pieces.

Being a young basket weaver puts Ridings in a niche category which opens her up to more business from older generations who she said are more associated with the art of basket weaving. The clients she works with want products that are unique and special while at the same time having a personal connection with the artist, which is why they often gravitate toward her for their commissions as their “go-to” for basket products.

“When you see a basket, then you'll think of me, and that is sometimes bizarre,” she said. “At the beginning it was bizarre because it was not my focus and I kind of resisted it, but it has carved out a space for me to do what I want to do.”

The products that Ridings loves to create the most, however, are the more abstract pieces where she focuses on making her work a reflection of herself, a callback to the process she implemented for her Pratt

senior showcase collection. These pieces aren't necessarily about functionality, but about serving as artwork.

“The pieces I have been the proudest of and the most invested in are the pieces that I'm talking about where it feels like there's so much of me in it,” Ridings said.

Though Ridings said she finds so much joy in getting to pursue her passion for a living, at the end of the day, she still has a business to run. Money has never been her motivation for working, but rather the curiosity she has for the process and exploring the range of what she's capable of, she said.

“I haven't explored all I can in basketry partly because I've been telling myself that it needs to be functional in order to sell because people will understand that better,” she said. “That's kind of true, but how can I know if I don't do it?”

As for the clothing, Ridings has not made a return to it since she graduated from Pratt. She said she can definitely see a future in which she comes back to designing clothes, especially as she continues to experiment with basket weaving and how she can incorporate other elements along with it, but for the time being she plans on continuing to focus on her baskets.

Ridings said that she doesn't think she would have been able to make as large of a dent in her industry that she has created today if she was designing clothing all this time.

“What happened to the clothing has kind of broken my heart, but then around a year ago I was like, ‘That's fine,’” she said. “That can come back around, it can be fluid.”

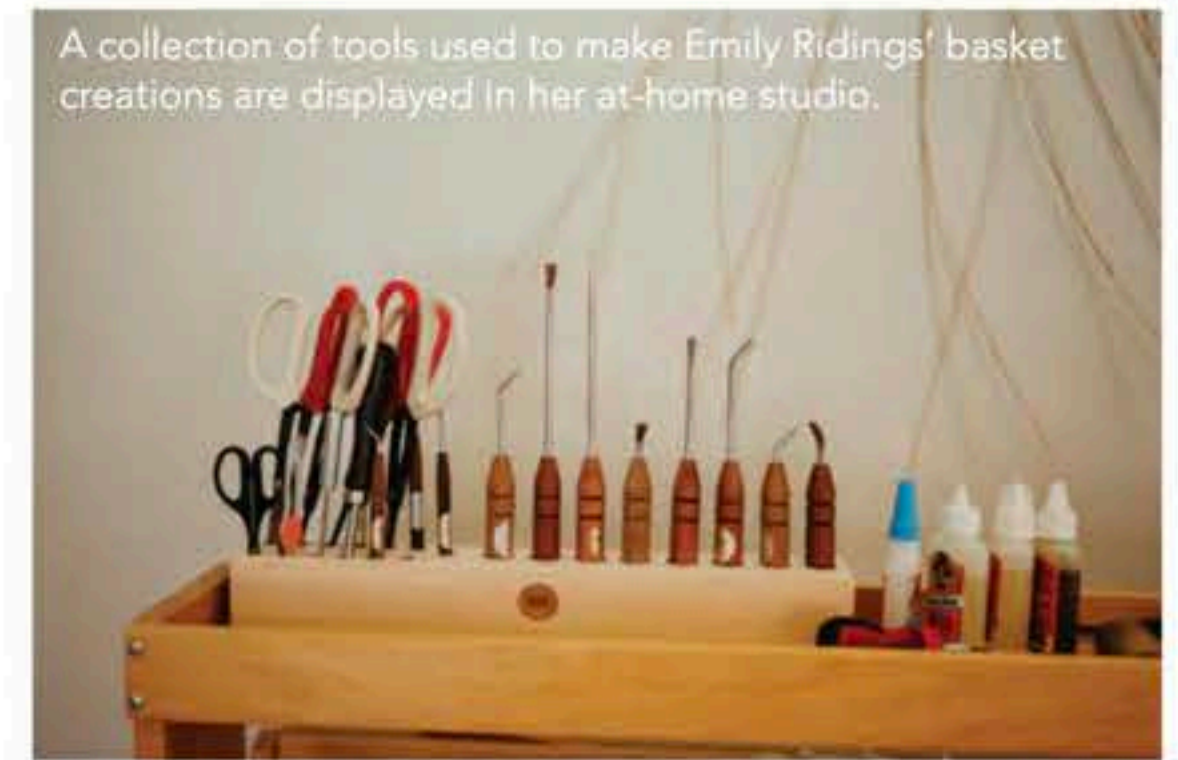
Ridings has made a home for herself in Lexington, Kentucky, where she currently lives with her boyfriend of over 12 years, but she said there is no telling how long she plans on staying in the city. She moved back to Kentucky after a series of poor experiences and feeling burnt out; however, she still occasionally works with people in New York every now and then.

“I'm not set on being here forever – at the end of

Pieces of reed and cane are displayed in Emily Ridings' at-home studio.



A collection of tools used to make Emily Ridings' basket creations are displayed in her at-home studio.



Emily Ridings weaves a basket in her home studio.



last year, I was convinced I was going back to New York City,” she said. “... Space is so important to me, physically and mentally. I don't need New York for inspiration, *'cause that just happens naturally.'*”

“Also, Lexington is cooler than I thought,” she said. “... It's kind of easier to meet people sometimes than it is in New York because there's such a saturation of creativity ... like, I've worked with the same photographer for five years and we have this really special dynamic ... I kind of like the intimacy of what's going on creatively here.”

Ridings' proximity to easily-accessible natural and sustainable materials from local businesses is another factor that keeps her in Lexington.

For example, the wooden bases she uses for her baskets are scraps locally-sourced from carpenters in rural parts of the country. Ridings continues to make sustainability a priority in her work, which primarily means using recycled materials and trying not to produce any waste.

“The main aspect of sustainability in my work is I don't really throw anything away,” she said. One of Ridings' favorite pieces she's made, an abstract vase-like basket with a distorted silhouette and raw edges, was constructed entirely using leftover reed from some of her other projects.

Ridings said that limiting herself to only using leftover and recycled materials creates an exciting opportunity for her to “take some creative pressure

off” and to work more spontaneously, rather than trying to meticulously plan every last detail out.

“Typically when I do that, and just wait and see it come together, it's fun. It works out better than when I'm trying to plan it out,” she said.

When looking toward the future, Ridings said she is interested in exploring her artistic side more when it comes to her work and seeing where that takes her. She has grown significantly as an artist and a business owner over the years, which begs the question of what comes next for the young designer.

“I think a lot of the functionality and design versus just the expression of art, and I'm really interested in what it would look like for me to have shows and exhibits,” she said. “I'm not in that world; most of my connections are still fashion- or interior design-related, but yeah, I don't want to hold myself back from that.” •

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A shelf of vases and wooden bases in Emily Ridings' at-home studio.