

Intersections of East and West: Contemporary Printmakers in Japan

By April Vollmer

As a New York printmaker teaching Japanese woodcut, I was very excited to finally have an opportunity to visit Japan for five and a half weeks in late 2004. My trip was made possible by an invitation from the Nagasawa Art Park to participate in their woodcut training program on Awaji Island. Masahiro Takade, of the Kobe Sosaku Hanga Association, generous and helpful beyond the call of duty, introduced the technique. A week later Shoichi Kitamura joined us from Kyoto to focus on carving. He is a young man who studied woodcut at Seika University with the renowned teacher Akira Kurosaki. His decision to train as a master carver is unusual because it is considered a less than glamorous profession. He astonished us by his facility with the hangi toh knife. My two and a half productive weeks at the Art Park's Nagasawa studio, a tatami room with views of terraced rice fields, gave me a deeper understanding of the place of Japanese woodcut in Japan. The program also provided me with an opportunity to travel to Kyoto and Tokyo to visit contemporary Japanese printmakers, a wide variety of artists unified mainly by their generosity in sharing their experiences with a visiting printmaker.

Professor Tetsuya Noda had invited me to visit Tokyo University of Fine Arts, so I took the shinkansen bullet train. He had arranged a special demonstration by the Adachi workshop printers for his woodcut students; his desire to introduce his young creative art students to older workshop-trained reproductive printmakers arises from the same desire to combine tradition and innovation that I saw in his artwork. His Diary-print series, recently on display at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, is an ongoing documentation of his everyday life. He first prints soft backgrounds of traditional Japanese woodcut color on washi, handmade Japanese paper. Over the soft color and shimmering surface he screenprints his manipulated photographs of his family or household objects that embody meaning for him. It is the contrast between the soft woodcut and the-hard-edged photo-silkscreen that make these images so moving.



Noda's wife reads the Japan Times, keeping up with international news. She moved to Japan from Israel and has raised their children in Tokyo.

The Nagasawa Art Park program is designed for a small group of established foreign artists to learn the traditional Japanese technique of moku hanga. I was invited as a special guest to assist and to observe the master printers.

As documented by Hiroshige the trip from the old religious capital of Kyoto to the new mercantile center of Edo (now Tokyo) took many days of travel on the Tokaido Road. Now it takes a few hours.

***Tetsuya Noda, Diary;
Feb 17th, '92.***
Color woodcut and screenprint on Japanese paper, 28 x 45". Photo: Asian Art Museum, San Francisco

While in Tokyo, I also visited Choichi Nishikawa, a younger printmaker and teacher I had met when he worked as master printer in New York in 1999. His abstract prints show an understanding of the minimalism of artists like Sol Lewitt. He generously took me to several print exhibitions in Tokyo, and showed me his studio. He teased me about my infatuation with Japanese paper, and showed me his nuanced prints on western BFK. The beauty of surface he achieved was undeniable. By embossing texture into the paper and overprinting many layers of oil-base ink, he creates rich, dark abstractions with bits of glowing color. He makes the impressions in his paper from traditional koyori string. Usually made from strips of washi, he and his wife and students make his koyori from Arches. Choichi will never convince me that western paper is superior to handmade Japanese washi, but talking with him made me understand his desire as a contemporary artist to incorporate western materials with a Japanese way of using them. Western paper is part of the language he needs to make these exquisite minimalist prints.



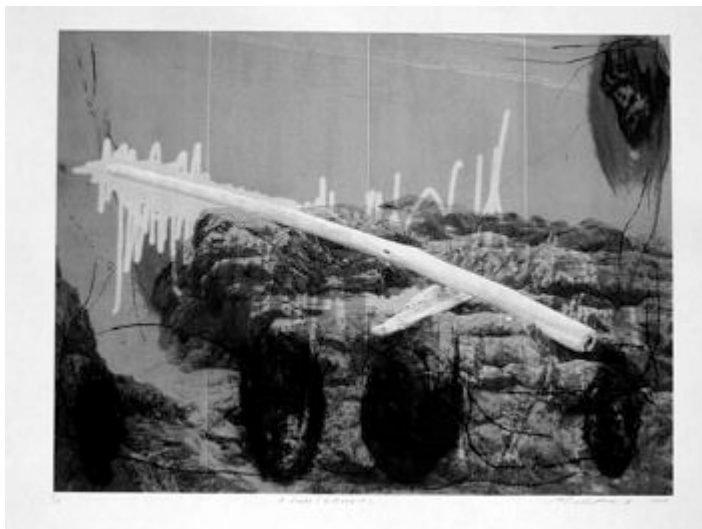
***Choichi Nishikawa,
Relationship of Black, White
and Colors #104, 2003. Color
monotype with oil-base inks,
embossed with koyori string,
30 x 22"***

Sarah Brayer, an American whose art career led her to a life in Japan, made a contrasting choice in her printmaking. She has embraced the possibilities of working with Japanese materials in Kyoto, the city of traditional crafts. She established a studio in the ancient Japanese paper village of Imadate outside Kyoto so that she could work with traditional papermakers there. She studied woodcut with Toshi Yoshida, and makes prints as well as poured paper work. Her imagery often includes Japanese subject matter, but it is her feeling for materials that makes her work special. When I visited her studio, she had just received a crate of paper from the women at Imadate: she had worked with them on a special project to create large scale abstract paper work made from poured dyed paper, using old techniques in new ways. She told me how they were aging, and how reluctant younger people are to engage in the difficult life of a papermaker.



Sarah Brayer, White Plum, 2003. Collagraph and chine collé on hand-made mitsumata paper, with hand coloring, 18 x 40"

Michiko Suzuki also uses washi, but with a completely different feeling. She experiments with new ways of printing on traditional fine washi, looking to the future rather than the past. I visited her exhibition at Gallery 219 on the Ginza in Tokyo, and was greeted by the artist with green tea and sweets. She relies on the refined surface of high quality washi to achieve dreamlike soft tones, with a technique called toner etching, which resembles a very fine aquatint. She combines this with realistic photo images generated from an ink jet printer. She gives immediacy to her prints with *chine collé* and by overprinting her delicate tones with etched lines, often finishing her prints with a final touch of inky, calligraphic drypoint. Her *Feeler* series of prints incorporates these techniques effortlessly into a personal vision of floating serenity.



Michiko Suzuki, A Feeler (Driftwood 4), 2004. Color archival InkJet print, toner-etching, drypoint, relief and gampi laminate washi paper, 28 x 37"

Many of my connections are with printmakers with a special interest in moku hanga, traditional Japanese water-base printmaking. I visited David Bull's riverside studio outside Tokyo, where he re-cuts and editions copies of ukiyo-e prints that he sells by subscription. As with papermaking, not many young people can afford the time and effort it takes to learn moku hanga. David is an important resource not just because he has become a master printer himself, but because he so generously shares his information personally and via the internet. His website: <http://www.woodblock.com> includes interviews with aging Japanese woodcut craftsmen.



**David Bull, Surimono Album
#3 Print #5, 2001.** Color
hanga woodcut (images in the
"fan" copied from ukiyo-e
prints), 7 x 8"

In Kyoto, I was astonished by the supremely ferocious, supremely merciful many-armed beings I found in the temples. Richard Steiner has created a place for himself there as a teacher of hanga, and has founded a woodcut school KIWA (Kyoto International Woodprint Association) where he sponsors exhibitions. He offers weekly classes in moku hanga to interested people, both Japanese and western. His affectionate and amusing portraits of people and daily life reflect his feeling for his adopted city. He has a studio near Nijo Castle, and treasures the unique life of Kyoto, a city that still values the old ways. (There are few kimonos in Tokyo anymore, but Kyoto taxi drivers give a 10% discount to ladies wearing them!) His generosity and enthusiasm for old Kyoto and Japanese woodcut make him especially suited to promoting moku hanga among visiting printmakers.



**Richard Steiner, Two Thirsty
Fish, Color hanga woodcut,
12 x 18"**

Finally, at the end of my trip, I had the opportunity to meet the well-known artist Akira Kurosaki, head of the print and papermaking departments at Seika University in Kyoto. He has written a textbook on woodcut and has done a great deal to promote moku hanga in the west, teaching and demonstrating at printmaking conferences. When I visited his university printshop he had just returned from the Mid America Print Council conference in Nebraska and was preparing for an important exhibition in Kyoto.

I have tried to give a flavor of some of the artistic personalities I met on my travels. What impressed me most at Nagasawa and among printmakers I met later in my trip was the cross-fertilization between east and west. The Nagasawa Art Park program is specifically designed to promote traditional Japanese woodcut technique among contemporary artists outside Japan. I met other printmakers in Japan who shared this commitment to transmitting an understanding of the special characteristics of Japanese woodcut and papermaking to the younger generation. But everywhere I found western printmakers using Japanese techniques, and Japanese printmakers using western ones. Both eastern and western artists are creating new kinds of prints that reflect their cross-cultural experience. ♦



*I spent a weekend in paradise
at an Izu Peninsula onsen
with my old friend Hirono, and
visited temples, shrines,
museums, and went shopping
at the Kyoto flea market. The
food was great, I ate
everything: raw-fish-textured
tofu, red octopus, plum
pickles, eel heart soup,
fermented natto beans, fish roe
and baby fish, abalone,
pickled daikon, fried, baked,
boiled and ice-creamed sweet
potato, and fresh-grated
wasabi until I cried.*

***April Vollmer, Crane Fly
Mandala, 2004. Color hanga
woodcut on Japanese paper.
I was astonished by the huge
bug-eyed temple guardians.
Fierce stinging demons and
sweet flying apsaras inhabited
the sacred spaces everywhere.
With their superhuman
abilities and multiple
appendages, they bear a
definite kinship with the
insects in my prints.***

This article appeared in ***Contemporary Impressions*** - Spring 2005, the Journal of the **American Print Alliance**
<http://www.PrintAlliance.org>