



Singing the Blues, 2009.

Acknowledgments

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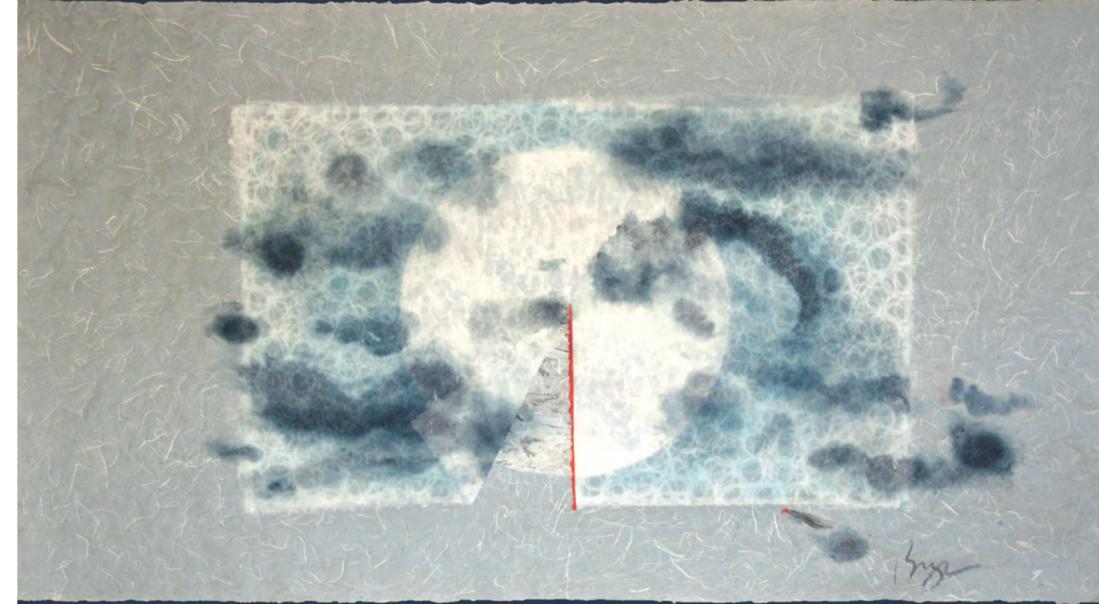
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BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: Poured Paperworks by Sarah Brayer

July 20-December 21, 2014



Round Midnight (Left: in light; Right: in dark), 2014.



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**CASTELLANI
ART MUSEUM**
OF NIAGARA UNIVERSITY



Mikazuki, 2014.

A STATEMENT FROM JAPAN'S FORMER COMMISSIONER OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

Gentle and merciful like a mother, powerful and stern like a father, innocent like an angel and mysterious like the Galaxy, Sarah Brayer's washi paperworks express these qualities. As I look into one of Sarah's paperworks of Mt. Fuji, it occurs to me that neither oil paintings, nor traditional Japanese paintings, nor any other medium could express nature with such an extraordinary touch: making full use of the characteristics of washi—its soft, graceful, shining, and resilient qualities.

It is certain that only Sarah Brayer, who has not only acquired the skill to make washi, but also has embodied an exceptional level of knowledge about washi as well as the Japanese aesthetic, could traverse this artistic field searching for what more washi can express. Sarah uses a contemporary aesthetic as well the most advanced materials, (as seen in her *Luminosity* series) to achieve this level of excellence in her washi art.

Seichi Kondo Director, Kondo Institute for Culture and Diplomacy (Former Commissioner of Cultural Affairs, Japan)



Journey to Kyoto, 2014.

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: Poured Paperworks by Sarah Brayer

Thirty-three years ago, Sarah Brayer, a Rochester-born artist, arrived in Japan with no plane ticket home. Not long after settling in Kyoto, she began making large-scale, handmade paperworks as the only Westerner working in the 800 year old papermaking village of Echizen. Recently, she has incorporated photo-luminescent pigments that glow in fading light. By combining her training in both Eastern and Western artistic styles, Sarah says her “task is to find new ways of expression in an age old tradition” known in Japan as “washi.”

Sarah creates wall panels, screens, and scrolls by adapting traditional papermaking techniques: strategically pouring pulp and manipulating it by hand in flowing water. Working with wet paper fibers demands openness to spontaneity and chance. The themes that Sarah explores in her work embrace the qualities of the medium; they are fluid, glimmering images of a mysterious natural world.

Just as Sarah entered a new world when she arrived in Japan, the artworks in this exhibition ask visitors to contemplate transitional realms. Vistas shrouded in mist, glowing celestial bodies veiled by clouds, swirls of luminescent stardust in a night sky: we can

see movement of light out of darkness, but our view is obscured. Some pieces suggest abstract windows, tempting us to question what lies beyond, but we are never offered more than a glimpse. Instead, we get a very human perspective of a vast and varied universe.

PAINTING WITH PAPER

Sarah describes her work as “painting with liquid paper.” Writing for *The Japan Times* in 1988, reviewer Stewart Wachs referred to her artwork as “a new genre,” one that bridges the traditional and the innovative.

Handmade papermaking has been practiced in Japan since the 5th century. As a versatile medium, washi paper has been manipulated in a variety of inventive ways: formed into simple sheets; folded into origami shapes; twisted or spun and then woven into fabric for kimono; coated in water-resistant wax for lanterns and umbrellas; fashioned into useful objects and lacquered. Traditional papermaking continues in Japan today, mostly within family-controlled cottage mills. Once a daily item, handmade paper has taken on new meaning in an era of mass-production. Defined by the Japanese government as an

“Intangible Cultural Property” worthy of celebration and protection, washi is recognized as an important and meaningful art form.

While living in Japan, Sarah noticed paper all around her, especially the sliding paper partitions known as *fusuma* found in home interiors. She was curious about the large screens that must be used to produce them. Eager to experiment with the medium, she visited a paper merchant in her neighborhood. He sent her to his brother's mill in Echizen, an ancient papermaking village. She continues to work in the Taki Paper Mill today, utilizing the large screens and purchasing processed fibers.

Washi is made from the fibrous inner bark of *kōzo* (paper mulberry), *mitsumata*, and less commonly, *gampi*. The fibers are steamed, beaten, and scraped away from the bark. Then washed, boiled in alkali, and beaten again until the long, silken threads can be loosened. Once the fibers are pulped, they are submerged in cold water and treated with *neri*, a viscous agent made from tororo-aoi root that thickens the water and helps it drain more slowly when poured. Traditionally, the pulp would be sifted briskly in the screen to create even sheets of strongly meshed fibers. Sarah uses a different process.

To make her paperworks, Sarah strategically pours dyed vats of pulp into the large screens, taking advantage of the movement of the slowly draining water. She explains:

“I use the element of flow—the water—and the suspension of the fibers. I'm coaxing the fiber into a screen, tipping it, using my hands, adding water. You can definitely never repeat the steps. There's this elemental freshness. I may have a sketch. I may have it all planned out, but as soon as you're working, it has a certain uncontrollable aspect to it. That little area where I'm not sure where it's going, that's the most fertile ground for exploration.”

Working with wet pulp is unpredictable, not only for how the fibers behave in water, but also for how they change during the drying process. Before gaining experience with the medium, Sarah found it difficult to predict how wet works would look later. She remembers, “I would unroll the dried paper and go, ‘oh, terrible!’ I would not look at them for a while and wonder what happened. It would take me awhile to forget my idea of what they *should* look like and look at them again with fresh eyes. Sometimes they were duds or failures, but other times they actually weren't.”



Blue Dragon, 2014.

The imagery that Sarah evokes—misty landscapes, celestial bodies, and expanses of deep space—serve as fitting subjects for a medium that follows its own natural, yet unknowable habits. Sarah's work reveals new potential in the living art of washi.

BETWEEN ROCHESTER AND KYOTO

After training in studio art at schools in Rochester, New York; London, England; and New London, Connecticut, Sarah moved to Kyoto. “I was strongly committed to being an artist when I got to Japan,” she recalls. “I just didn't know how I would do that. It was fairly clear after about six months that I could set up a kind of working life in Japan where I had my days for going out and sketching, exploring. I lived in this teeny-weeny apartment, a four and half [tatami] mat room. You just had to get out because it was so small. Then at night I could teach English. Three or four nights a week, that was enough to live on. It was like a gift.”

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