

Scorpion Martini by Cudra Clover

Le Jardin de La Joie by Cudra Clover

Octopus Flower by Cudra Clover

THE WAYS OF SILK

BY ALMA TASSI

India, 2nd Century AD. A skilled craftsman applies a dye on a silk canvas treated with a wax resist technique to hold his colors in place. Carefully he embellishes with gold and gemstone powders to add light to the vivid hues. Scenes of epic and religious stories have been his life's work, but this piece is of a beautiful, stately woman. When he casts his final stroke, it will adorn a wall in Rajasthan, a land known for its great kings and warriors.

Maui Hawai'i, Present Day. Haiku artist Cudra Clover plays, experiments, and joyfully paints in her bright Pauwela Cannery studio. Large scale biomorphic, abstract silk paintings cover the walls. Later they will be stretched on treated, rusted metal that has been welded into an industrial-looking frame, or left hanging on bamboo or driftwood. The music is loud. The energy is free flowing. And the art? Sublime.

The art of painting on silk has a history thousands of years old. Along the way, techniques and tools evolved with one goal—to control and manipulate the way color could adhere to the silk fibers. In Java, Indonesia 200 years after it was already popularized in parts of India, a thick, rubbery substance sourced from native *Pallaquium* trees was discovered. The technique of "gutta resist" emerged or what is today

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called Batik. Experiments with salt, sugar, and even alcohol produce various effects allowing the paint to chemically become part of the fiber, rather simply resting on top.

Naturally, Maui has its own community of artists pushing the possibilities of silk. Two artists in particular have been working with silk for over two decades. Diane Epstein, part of the Four Seasons Fine Arts and Crafts program, produces hand painted silk artwear. Her work clearly reflects Hawai'i's natural surroundings, but her passion of the Impressionists and Egyptian relief, as well as use of silk Jacquard, give her a distinctive, sophisticated voice. Another widely respected silk artist, Elaine Gima, can be found at her studio or galleries like Maui Hands. Inspired by the fluid linework of Japanese Ukioe prints she focuses on artwear as well as produces wall hangings and paintings. Using a modern Batik technique, Gima's style exudes a masterful tranquility.

Learning from her mentor Elaine and putting a new spin to silk art, Cudra Clover is turning traditional silk art on its head. It is surprising to learn she started silk painting quite by accident. A friend leaving the island gifted her the tools to get started in 2002. She began silk painting, but considered it a hobby, as she had no training. After her husband discovered her talent, he encouraged her to show her artwork. She secured a studio in Lahaina to dedicate herself to her art and was quickly invited to host a joint show in Japan. Art Maui soon came knocking and she was stunned by the response. "I knew then I had to get some training to expand what I could do." After some classes from Elaine as well as renown Rozome artist Betsey Sterling Benjamin, Cudra gained new techniques to communicate her vision.

Silk painting by its technical nature demands artists to outline and methodically plan out their work. Cudra does the opposite, painting in sections and asking the piece where it wants to go. "One teacher had me meditate for a half hour before I was allowed to even touch a

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Gaurdian by Jim Powlan



pencil. I couldn't even sit still." This is not surprising, considering she gets her inspiration from music. Loud music. "The more complicated and dynamic the music, from electronica to world music, the more intensely I can focus on my art." Historically, subject matter with this medium tends to be largely decorative and delicate—flowers, nature, birds, and butterflies. True to form, Cudra enjoys the contrast of soft elegant silk with bold colors of biological, sometimes even clinical, subject matter. She points to organic forms in nature such as magnified underwater creatures or even medical pictures of blood cells and bones as her points of inspiration. Clearly, Cudra Clover is no ordinary silk artist.

Meanwhile in South Maui, intaglio printmaker Jim Powlan takes an entirely different direction with silk. His studio sheds light on who he is as an artist, much like Cudra's. A large Takach Press dominates the room, while his supplies lay painstakingly organized. His process is time-consuming and meticulous, yet he emanates a sense of peaceful meditation. Zen-like feels too obvious to describe it, but a feeling of spirit is undeniably present.

As innovative as Cudra, Jim represents a new way silk as a canvas can be used while maintaining a sense of history in his techniques. Working with antique kimono silk from Japan, he prepares them for printing the same way scroll makers have done for hundreds of years by backing the silk with handmade Japanese Hadaura paper. He then prints his etchings on the silk canvas. He describes his art as "Art Decco meets Buddha. Blending old and new."

A printmaker more than a silk artist, Jim studied art at the College of Marin in the late 70s. He began working with aquatint and developed a technique of using an airbrush to spray a resist (asphaltum) on copper plates that he etches his images on. This led to the tonal qualities he desired rather than the traditional line art used in printmaking. After moving to Maui, he met Paul Mallowney, the director of printmaking at Hui No'eau



Madcap by Elaine Gima

Inspired by the fluid linework of Japanese Ukioe prints Elaine Gima focuses on artwear as well as produces wall hangings and paintings.

Visual Arts Center. Paul taught him how to back silk in order to use it as a canvas, which led to the art Jim makes today.

Jim says, "The style of my art has always been the same but being able to print on kimono silk opened up a rainbow of colors and textures I can print on. I now can have the color I was looking for while still being a very traditional black and white intaglio printmaker. It also gives me the option of changing the idea of printmaking. Traditionally the artist would strive to have each print in an edition be as close to identical as possible. When I print on the kimono silk my images are very close to identical however they take on a very different feeling depending on the type, color, design, and where I choose to print the image on the silk."

Jim buys his antique kimono silks in a flea market in Kyoto, Japan. It can be a challenge to work with, but Jim uses those limitations to his advantage. All kimono silk is 14 inches wide so when he needs a larger canvas, he must carefully bind them. Although the separation may still feel present behind the printing, the imperfection only adds to the beauty of the work. The etchings he designs are inspired by sculptures from shrines and temples in Nara and Kyoto from 700-1000 AD, which marks the beginning of Buddhism. This mash up of old and new—printmaking and scroll techniques, antique kimono silk, and the subject matter—offer a spiritual connection, a portal even, between today and a very ancient time.

Jim Powlan's work is featured at the Hana Coast Gallery in the Hotel Hana Maui and has been selected in juried shows in Hawai'i as well as purchased by collectors in Hawai'i and on the West Coast. His website is www.powlanart.com. For Cudra Clover, artist studio tours are available by appointment and visit www.cudraclover.com for more information. ■

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Dragon Trellis by Cudra Clover

