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The 2010 Pulp Painting Symposium in San Antonio

LYNN SURES & BECK WHITEHEAD

Lois James demonstrates how she uses a mouth atomizer with high-shrinkage painting pulp. All photos courtesy of the authors.

From the moment we picked up the first person at the San Antonio airport the energy began to grow. As each additional pulp painter entered the paper studio at the Southwest School of Art there were introductions, warm greetings to old friends, and building excitement about this historic endeavor. Eleven artists from around the country were meeting to talk, share, and exchange ideas about approaches to painting with pulp. From January 14 through 17, 2010, we participated in an intensive symposium on an intimate scale—a Pulp Painting Think Tank.

The two of us first discussed the idea at the Baltimore gathering celebrating *Hand Papermaking* magazine's twentieth anniversary in October 2005. We imagined a situation where a group of pulp painters could share their acquired knowledge through a series of individual demonstrations and conversations that would continue morning to night for a period of days. We determined that the group size needed to be large enough to have a vigorous exchange of ideas but small enough so everyone could participate equally.

Originally, we thought we would schedule round table discussions on selected topics during part of each day. Ultimately we decided to concentrate on studio demonstrations. Each participant was allotted an hour, after set-up, to show whatever he or she wished. Time followed to permit everyone to experiment with the techniques shown. We all had specialties that were familiar to each of us, but few of us had actually watched any of the others work to see these personally developed processes in use. In fact, most of the participants had not met all the others previously, although everyone knew at least one other person.

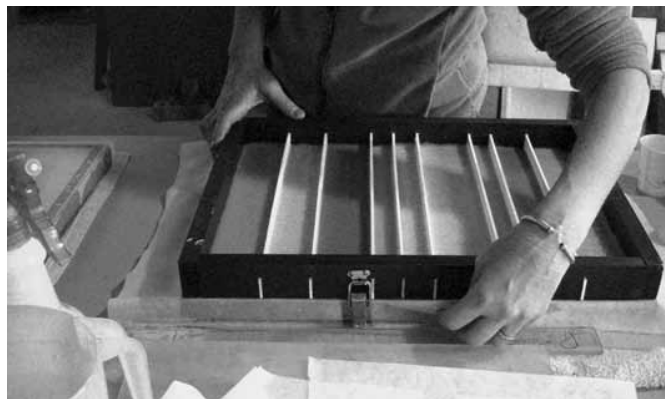
Joining us for this adventure were John Babcock (Soquel, California), Laurence Barker (Bloomfield Hills, Michigan), Shannon Brock (Carriage House Papers, Brooklyn, New York), Joan Hall (Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri), Lois James (Washington State), Anne McKeown (Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey), Michelle Samour (School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), Preston Sampson (Silver Spring, Maryland), and Peter Sowiski (Buffalo State College, New York). These artists are diverse, unique, and open, making for a bountiful exchange.



Beck Whitehead shows how she uses stencils to create her abaca and cotton rag paintings.



John Babcock gets help from Lois James and Peter Sowiski to sponge the back of his newly poured sheet comprised of pigmented cotton segments without a base sheet.



Michelle Samour built a special deckle to create a striped sheet of translucent paper of pigmented high-shrinkage abaca.



Lynn Sures demonstrates her painting technique of pouring a base of abaca into a floating mould, then layering translucent layers of pigmented flax or abaca.



Peter Sowiski talks about his work exhibited at the Southwest School of Art during the symposium.



Shannon Brock uses stencils attached to the mould and a syringe to apply pigmented cotton linter and flax to an abaca base sheet.



Joan Hall pours pulp on a large, dry sheet.



Peter Sowiski demonstrates his methods and tools for working wet on wet.

We all had the sensation of being in a room with giants. The excitement was strong. Demonstration after demonstration unfolded, and one kept feeling that the next could not be as good, but then it was, and again it was. Questions and answers abounded. Lunches took place in the projection room, with all of us munching through 10-minute slide shows of each other's work. Dinners out, heavy on delicious Tex/Mex fare, were festive with high-energy conversations. Stories about papermaking adventures, historical figures in the field, and more came from every quarter. Falling into bed exhausted at the end of the day, we were nonetheless back in the studio the next morning at eight o'clock, fired up for the next round of presentations.

Widely credited as the originator of pulp painting, Laurence Barker began the symposium with a slide lecture covering the development of his work at Cranbrook and later during his decades living in Spain. John Babcock, another major influence on the pulp painters gathered, demonstrated his pigmenting technique and his unique method of sheet forming and laminating. Preston Sampson, Peter Sowiski, and Lynn Sures showed variations on direct, painterly freehand methods on large wet sheets. Lois James, Shannon Brock, and Beck Whitehead worked in distinctly individual systems using stencils and intensive layering. Anne McKeown shared her method of technically consistent painting/printing through silkscreen mesh. Michelle Samour used pure color and light in dynamic combination, and Joan Hall applied fresh wet pulp imagery onto a pre-dried room-scale base sheet.

Discussion about the processing of the various painting pulps, the coloring methods, stencil-cutting techniques, sheet-forming procedures, fiber choices, and imagery sources peppered the demos. At times there were no words. As another skilled hand gradually produced an unexpected result, there was nothing better to do than watch and learn.

In addition to the activity in the studio, The Southwest School of Art hosted several paper-related exhibitions including "Engaged and Fragmented" with Peter Sowiski, John Risseeuw, Eric Avery, and Combat Paper Project, and *The Art of Pulp Painting* portfolio produced by Hand Papermaking. These shows were a compelling refuge for us at break times.

Most of us work alone in our studios with little or no exposure to other pulp painters at work. We develop techniques—sometimes idiosyncratic ones—in response to requirements in our own practice or to help students or other artists. The peer exchange in San Antonio led each of us to raise questions we had never thought of asking and to reevaluate habits and assumptions we might have held unknowingly. The "think tank" model met our greatest expectations.

As the symposium came to an end, we had the sense of achievement accomplished by the tremendous willingness of all involved to bring it about. The dynamic was one of grateful interdependency. It was difficult to part, but plans have already been hatched for an upcoming reunion.

Editor's note: The authors are currently working with videographer James Sander to produce a 2-hour DVD documenting the event. For information, please inquire with the authors, lynn@lynnsures.com or beckhw@gmail.com.

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