

THE MAGAZINE OF TEXTILES

FIBERARTS

VOL. 29, NO. 2

SEP/OCT 2002

\$6.00 (can. \$8.00)

**Paper, Pigment, and Thread
Mystical Visions on Calico
Teaching Fiber Down Under**



The Largest Reaches of Life

For these three artists, paper resonates as a medium for exploring paradoxes, miracles, and mysteries.

by Micah Pulleyn

Upon first glance, the works of Michelle Samour, Lucy Arai, and Marijke Arp are seemingly unrelated. However, as we learn about what quickens the hearts of these three, it becomes apparent that there is more than a common medium—paper—that unifies their work. Samour, Arai, and Arp, whose guiding principle embraces the paradoxes found in their lives and work, have dedicated their hands to working with a material that is capable of realizing their vision. While their creations are formally very different, the concepts and intentions they share create a wonderful dialogue. The reasonable response to their work is that of a deepened awareness of the world, a spark of inspiration, perhaps even a call to look at the art of paper—one of the most versatile and immediately rewarding materials in the world—with fresh eyes.

Michelle Samour

The works of paper artist Michelle Samour seem to throb, dance, vibrate, glow, and breathe, and rightly so, for her images are

direct references to cosmology, biology, archaeology, religion, chemistry, and other fields of inquiry. Samour's drawings allude to things seen through both a microscope and a telescope. She writes:

In my work, the paper is the field for discovery. It is at once earth and sky. The images that emerge from, or float on, the surface make references to fossils, stars, atoms, and microorganisms. These images talk about beginnings without end. When I am working I think about digging away the earth or opening up a rock to reveal a fossil. I think about looking through a microscope and seeing the seemingly inanimate, move. I think about gazing up at a night sky, waiting for my eyes to adjust enough to find a star. From dark to light, from finite to infinite, my work is a meditation on the power of the unknown.

Michelle Samour approaches her primary medium, pigmented paper pulp, as a means to an end and believes that the conceptual and intentional backing is of utmost importance to her work. At the same time, she is a deeply skilled craftsperson committed to her studio experience. She has been working with paper and exhibiting her work for more than 25

Below: Michelle Samour, *Animal (studio shot), 2001*; pigmented pulp on wood, four panels; 66 by 120 by 3 inches. Photo: Robert Schoen.



years and currently teaches papermaking at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts. She has worked collaboratively with other members of the papermaking community to refine her process, and in 1999 she visited papermaking villages throughout Japan, a trip that deepened her respect for the craft. Her pieces show a mastery of material and an understanding of the organic nature of paper pulp.

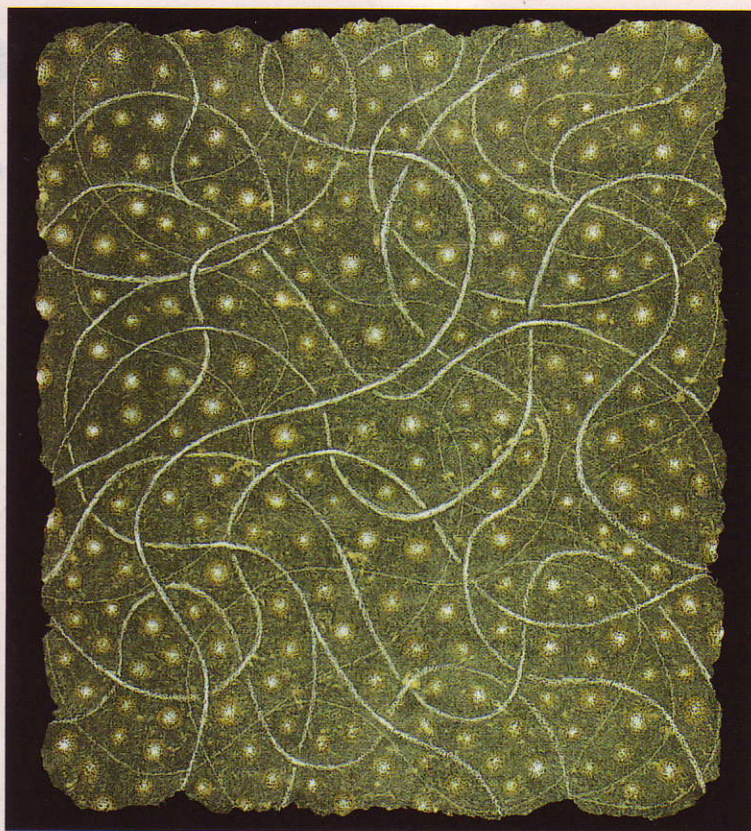
The process is simple, but not easy. She pigments both abaca and gampi pulp with aqueous dispersed pigment specific for papermaking. She then manipulates the pulp in a 4- by 8-foot vacuum table, which sucks the moisture out, or applies the pulp onto large wooden stretchers. After it has dried, she uses gelatin to size the paper and then draws on the paper with oil stick or paint.

Samour is not only committed to advancing her career as a paper artist but also intent on honoring her curiosities for nature. In 1992, she studied fossils in the Southwest United States. It is evident that there is no distinct differentiation between Samour the artist and Samour the mystic. She is able to touch upon the innate awe and wonder with which we honor the riddles and paradoxes of the world. The pieces she creates on behalf of her wonder seem as though they are at once visual anthems to the spontaneities *and* timelessness of the universe, meditations on the intricacies *and* the mysteries of nature, and offerings of gratitude for the creative explosions in her life.

Lucy Arai

Lucy Arai has transformed the traditional crafts of Japanese *sashiko* (running-stitch embroidery) and *sumi-e* (ink painting) to emerge with a body of work that harmoniously pays homage to multiple polarities in her life. From her Japanese mother, Arai acquired a deep understanding of the aesthetics, customs, traditions, and arts of Japan. Working with thread most of her life, Arai learned *sashiko*, *shibori* dyeing, bookbinding, and *temari* (in which balls are “embroidered” with silk thread) while she was growing up. Arai’s American father shared with her a respect for the interconnectedness of all things and for the diversity of life. “It is through his love and curiosity of the vast world in which we live,” she writes, “that I am on a journey from within myself out into the largest reaches of life, from subatomic particles, social and cultural diversity and the universe beyond our planet.”

Honoring her bicultural heritage, Arai has combined the aesthetic, spiritual, inquisitive, and expressive gifts from her American and Japanese influences. Her pieces are grand creations of the spiritual and aesthetic ritual she refers to as “the



meditative nature of ongoing practice in the studio.” Exploring wholeness, unity, tension, balance, and self-awareness, Arai uses the language of her material to say what words cannot, and does so with the utmost grace.

The process Arai uses represents a diverse repertoire of traditional Japanese arts. She begins with handmade paper, which has, for thousands of years, been a product of Japan exhibiting unbelievable patience, beauty, and skill. Working on a sheet of handmade paper, Arai applies *sumi* ink, a dense black wash that enlivens the paper with contrast. She sometimes uses indigo dye in addition. Her vivid deep black (and blue) forms, which alone are lively evocations of natural phenomena, traditional Japanese landscape paintings, and minimalist calligraphic meditations, are then transformed with *sashiko*, Japan’s elegant stitchery tradition. Concentric circles, parallel lines, intricate patterns, and radiating lines stitched atop the painted organic shapes create a harmonious dialogue of tensions that represent the dynamics alive in her own life. She writes: “I have grown beyond the study of duality to embrace my Japanese and American heritages with perpetual awe in what they teach me about being a part of the world community.”

Lucy Arai has exhibited extensively in the United States and overseas for well over 20 years, is represented in dozens of corporate and private collections, and has lectured,

Above: Michelle Samour, *Laws of the Small*, 1999; oil stick on handmade paper; 45 by 39 inches. Photo: Robert Schoen.

Near right: Lucy Arai, 1998.9, 1998; handmade paper, *sumi* ink, thread; *sumi-e* painting, *sashiko* (running-stitch embroidery); 120 by 40 inches.

Far right: Lucy Arai, 2001.5, 2001; handmade paper, *sumi* ink, thread; *sumi-e* painting, *sashiko*; 120 by 40 inches.