

Artist's Biography - Karen Illman Miller

Karen Miller was born in Oakland, CA. She was a marine biologist before becoming an expert on katazome, the art of Japanese stencil dyeing. Using her own hand cut stencils to apply a resist paste she produces fabric for art quilts, as well as silk garments, linen hangings and indigo dyed cottons.

Her work has been exhibited twice in Japan. She has shown her work in numerous juried and group shows. Since 2009 she has had Oregon solo shows at the Portland Japanese garden, Newport Visual Arts Center, Benton County Historical Society, the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center in Portland, the Latimer Quilt and Textile Center in Tillamook and the Corvallis Arts Center. Her work is represented by Pegasus Gallery in Corvallis, OR and Gallery Calapooia, Albany, OR. Her work is in numerous private and public collections and was hung in the Washington D.C. office of Jane Lubchenco, the head of NOAA in the first Obama administration. She has made art for the American Ambassador's residence in Tokyo.

She has taught katazome nationally and internationally and published several articles on katazome. She was an invited lecturer at the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe New Mexico. She was accepted to Visions 2002. She was featured on Oregon Art Beat, OPB TV in October 2007.

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Karen Illman Miller

Katazome Artist

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I grew up in a home where both art and science were respected. My father was an organic chemist and my mother an artist, the daughter of one of the early naturalists in the Pacific Northwest. My grandfather traveled to Japan in 1910 and returned with an appreciation for the Japanese aesthetic as well as for their love of their own natural history as depicted in their art and textiles. He was a mentor for me as a child and his inspiration eventually influenced my choice of marine biology as a career. I spent 25 years as a research scientist at Oregon State University, studying Octopus oxygen binding proteins. I now realize I was always an artist as well, and my choice of career was made at least in part because of the beauty of the animals. I worked while raising three children but I always made time for art. My mother was a painter, and a good one, but I was genuinely drawn to textiles as my medium, first embroidery, then quilting and finally, my real artistic home, *katazome*, Japanese stencil dyeing. I had adored traditional Japanese stencil designs for nearly 30 years. Carving my first stencil in a class taught by a Japanese indigo dyer was a turning point in my artistic life and I have never looked back. Although I studied briefly with American *katazome* expert John Marshall, most of my work over nearly thirty years has been independent, carving hundreds of stencils and using them to make traditional and experimental textiles for art quilts, garments and interiors.

Katazome allows me to separate the production of the image from the application of color, a process more akin to printmaking than to painting. The stencil *katagami* is made from *shibugami*. Several layers of thin mulberry fiber paper, *kozo*, are laminated with persimmon juice, *kakishibu*, and smoked, yielding an aromatic brown paper. It is brittle and easy to cut when dry, but leathery and tough when wet. A layer of silk mesh, *sha*, lacquered on the top surface protects even the most intricate stencil from damage when the rice paste resist, *nori*, is spread through it onto the fabric. Then the fabric is either dipped into the indigo vat, or stretched like a hammock and dye painted. The pattern emerges when the resist is soaked off. I began carving stencils using mostly traditional Japanese patterns and they taught me much about cutting techniques and the layout of the design. I consider this time spent my apprenticeship, in time enabling me to design my own original stencils, inspired by the images which speak most deeply to me.

Combining art and science in my work, I care deeply that what I depict is biologically accurate as well as beautiful. Although I am not an abstract artist, pattern is my passion, pattern found in natural forms, detailed biological images like tree branches, leaf skeletons, or marine animals and especially the abstractions nature produces. Why invent when nature supplies such a wealth of beauty to use in my art?