

Images From Nature
Artwork By Sonja Larsen
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I am Sonja Larsen and the name of the show is “Images From Nature”. I was always interested in art, but I couldn’t draw. Even though I felt very creative, I didn’t feel that I couldn’t pursue it. Then as an adult, I saw a fish print and I was really struck, by this simple black and white fish print with a small seal chop on it, and I thought about it and thought about it, but it wasn’t until we moved up to the Nisswa area and of course fishing is what everyone does, and we became very ardent fisher people, my husband and I, and he caught a nice bass, a large mouth bass, which happens to be in the show, I direct printed it. He would tell people I made about nineteen prints and I finally got that print that I was happy with. And that started me printing.

Then in the eighties, a Smithsonian site show started and it came to the Bell Museum, and not only that but there was a man from Santa Barbra who was coming out and he was going to do one day of fish printing and one day of botanical printing. Well, that sounded really wonderful to me! So I went and I printed fish, but it was all direct printing, you ink the fish, put paper on it and got a print. The botanicals intrigued me, and he mentioned the Nature Printing Society and oh, well, that was interesting. And I pursued that, and they have annual workshops moving all over the country. So they had their workshop in Hawaii, and I managed to go there and they had a man from Japan who was a master printer there. So I could spend, with them, a whole week printing fish. And from there I switched to botanicals.

This is bloodroot, and the leaf, to get that detail in the leaf, you have to print it fresh. If you press it, it presses the veins out and you don’t get anything. So in order, and the flower is very delicate, the flower needs to be pressed and reinforced. And you can reinforce it by spraying Krylon or something like that, or something that will stick to it. First you print a lot of prints with

just the leaf, fresh. Later, much later, you print the flower to go with it. This is, a lot of people think that “Oh, you just ink it.” But no, it’s a process.

My neighbors are used to seeing me with a large childrens book, a thin book. *Where’s Waldo* happens to be my book. And I have that under my arm, and I’m walking in the ditch by the road, because weeds can be very beautiful if you just look at them and perceive them and print them and I have printed a lot of weeds and people go, “Oh, I never saw that before!” Obviously with fish, it started with fish that we caught, then certain people saw the prints and wanted me to print their trophy fish when they caught them.

I am very jealous of watercolor artists, because they can take a small kit and they can go out in the field and they can do beautiful work. I have, you have a lot of tools, and you have a lot of preparation of the piece that you are going to work on. So it’s cumbersome, you need a lot of area for pressing the plant, it’s just more of a combination of tools, brayers, rollers and pushing. I hope to sensitize people to just looking at plants. When I do workshops a lot of people tell me, after the first day or two, “I never noticed things like I am noticing now”. I look at leaves, I look at the under side of leaves I look at just, leaves and see objects that I just didn’t recognize before, and it just sensitizes you to nature I think. You talk about smelling the roses, well, this is looking at the roses and feeling the roses.

Right now I am much more interested in botanicals, if you’ve spent a couple of days with a northern, you start smelling ammonia and you can’t get the ammonia out of your nose. Botanicals smell a lot better than fish do after a couple of days, and if you’re going to do the japanese style of printing it takes almost a day to prepare the fish. Then you put it in the refrigerator, bring it out, let it get a little bit warmer, to work with it. You may work with it a couple of days like that.

Tell us more about your experience learning and studying from the Japanese master fish printers...

They are very patient and kind. They will explain to you the tools that you need and most of the tools, aside from paper and ink, you make yourself and there have been instances, with other teachers, they will make you spend a couple of days just making the tools that ink the fish. That ink the paper on top of the fish. They also talk about the importance of the paper. It just doesn't work to try to do something with inferior or cheap paper. It's ok to print with student grade, but when you really want to work, you want to get the best paper you can get. And you want space if you print a big fish, and you don't have more paper around it, it will, you don't have any ability to move it. When you put it in a frame you don't want the fish to just look straight ahead, you want it to have some movement. So you need a lot of paper and a lot of air. And when you get to botanicals, you want to follow Japanese flower arranging techniques. You don't use two flowers, you use three. Odd numbers, two, which is the Japanese word for two (ni), is in the middle of my name Sonja. And that is bad luck, you want three, five, seven.

The Nature Printing Society started in 1976 with three men. One was a Boy Scout leader from Pennsylvania who thought he had invented printing leaves. And was a boy scout leader and had scouts work and it was helping the scouts identify tree leaves. And when you think about it, a lot of kids need to physically touch and get the feel in order to understand that this is an oak, and this is an ash. The other two were fish printers. They had their doctorate in some kind of fish identification and work. And they were from California. They collected some friends that printed and they had taught and eventually since then the organization is international. It has around 300 members, all over the world. But it is dedicated to nature printing and appreciation of nature.

Tell us more about your connection with The Crossing Arts, and why you have chosen to exhibit here...

I've followed this organization since it first started in The Franklin Arts building and I had a small show there which was basically in their reception room. I still have the picture of it. And I admire what they're doing. This idea of Second Saturday, kits for kids. I just think it's terrific. And the workshops

and everything that they have done to sponsor, it's just a terrific organization and I really admire it. And I've had my work here ever since.

What's next for you? Any new projects you are working on after this?

I discovered from another nature printer through the nature printing society, something called paper clay. Where you can make an impression on this stuff that works like clay and air dries hard. I'm intrigued with impressing it with some plants. We'll see.

Is there anything you would like to add that you feel would be important and interesting to the viewer?

I would encourage them to look at the website of The Nature Printing Society. (Visit natureprintingsociety.org for more information)