

S T E V E N S O R M A N



r u m o r s o f v i r t u e





Steven Sorman cutting a "persimmon paper" stencil.



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1. Steven Sorman (center), Kenneth Tyler (right), and papermakers discussing the unique papers.
- 2-4. Watermark sheet being *coupled* onto conventional sheet of *washi*.

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MONOPRINTS BY STEVEN SORMAN

Steven Sorman explains that his titles are “oftentimes little doors”¹ into the art. A set of images is woven into his latest project, a group of seventy three monoprints. Each image or “rumor” appears and reappears, a visual *leitmotif*, changing with every repetition.

The “rumors” began as arabesque patterns which the artist designed and cut originally as stencils in his Minnesota studio. He created twenty or so, working in the manner of an ancient technique called *katazome*, which is traditionally used in Japan for papermaking and kimono stenciling. The artist made his calligraphic patterns in Japanese paper treated with the tannin-rich juice of unripe persimmons. “Persimmon paper” or *shibugami*, is a strong, water-resistant *washi*² which Sorman decided to use on this, his maiden voyage in Japanese papermaking.

He sent the stencils to the Fuji Paper Mill³ in Tokushima, Japan and several weeks later, journeyed there with Kenneth Tyler. Tyler had arranged to work in the mill for a period of two weeks to collaborate with the papermakers and assist Sorman in the creation of richly colored and layered handmade papers. Sorman and Tyler envisioned a project wherein *sukimoyo-gami* would be employed.

Sukimoyo-gami is an umbrella term for a wide range of innovative papermaking techniques that were developed in the 8th through 12th centuries in Japan. Translated as “elegantly designed papers,”⁴ they are characterized by sumptuous use of color, layering of pigmented fibers, and the creation of various forms of *duplex*⁵ and watermarked sheets. The techniques flourished as the court and aristocracy, excited by the rapidly evolving craft of papermaking, demanded elaborate papers for writing poetry or copying Buddhist sutras. *Sukimoyo-gami* papers were created in order to interact with calligraphy, to rarify, bejewel and coalesce with the painted inscriptions.

With Kenneth Tyler, Hiromi Katayama of Hiromi Paper International, and the papermakers at Fuji Paper Mill⁶, Sorman utilized his persimmon paper stencils in producing nearly 200 one-of-a-

kind papers. At the mill, Sorman made two kinds of duplex sheets: “lace” and “watermarked.” For the lace, water droplets were showered from above, through his stencils, and onto newly-formed pulp layers. The resulting ethereal sheets were then *couched*⁷ to a conventionally formed sheet or they were dried alone. Sorman used some of these water perforated papers as stencils for printing and hand-coloring later in his studio.

His “watermark” papers were made in two parts. The first layer of paper was formed as a solid sheet. The second layer formed in and around the persimmon paper stencils which had been stitched to bamboo papermaking screens, called *sus*. Each pulp design was then *couched* from the *su* onto a larger newly-formed sheet of pulp in a contrasting color and the two layers were dried as one.

Upon returning to his studio, Sorman used many of the papers “to print both from and on.”⁸ Unlike his ancient predecessors, he did not copy Buddhist sutras. Sorman did, however, apply his own brand of poetry, letting the themes fly from his papers. Sorman describes the process:

Some of the papers were overpainted with polymer medium. When the polymer dried, a Plexiglas plate was flat rolled with a color and printed on this painted sheet. A ghost of the polymer painted image was left on the plate and this was used to print another sheet. The first flat printed sheet was then counter printed on a third sheet. In many cases, the polymer image was dusted with dry pigment and this was counter printed on a piece previously printed in ink. The process was basically one of ghost and counter printing using ink and pigment. Some of the pieces were printed and counter printed numerous times, some only once.⁹

Sorman improvises freely, explaining that he is “always striving for something beyond the materials,” that he wants “to refer the viewer to a larger continuum of ideas and feelings.”¹⁰ The processes are continually revived in an attempt to mimic the mind’s meanderings.¹¹

Notes

- 1 Interview of 1989, with Pinky Kase, in *Vignette: Prints by Steven Sorman*, Kansas City, University of Missouri-Kansas City Gallery of Art.
- 2 Japanese term for handmade paper. **Wa-** as a prefix means Japan(ese); **-shi** and **-kami** (or **-gami**) as suffixes mean paper.
- 3 The Fuji Paper Mill, also called "Awagami," dates back to the early 1800s. It has been owned and operated by seven generations of the Fujimori family and is presently run by Yoichi and Mieko Fujimori.
- 4 Sukey Hughes, *Washi, the World of Japanese Paper* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1978), p. 208.
- 5 Two layers of paper, usually of different size, color, and/or composition, laminated together while still wet and pressed and dried as one sheet.
- 6 Yoichi and Mieko Fujimori and a team of several craftswomen.
- 7 Papermaking term derived from the french *coucher*, to lay down. Couching is the transferring of wet, newly formed paper from the mould or *su* to a another surface, usually a felt or another sheet of paper.
- 8 Artist's text, 1992.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Dealer Catalogue: Chris Waddington, *Up To Now: Paintings by Steven Sorman, 1974-1990*, Northfield, Minnesota, Steesland Gallery, St. Olaf College, 8 February-19 March 1991.
- 11 Conversation between the artist and the writer, 26 April, 1993.

Marabeth Cohen-Tyler

On the cover:

Steven Sorman removing *kozo* pulp from *su* after "lace" paper has been formed. Fuji Paper Mill, June 1992

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