

WILLA COX (ABOUT MY WORK)

INTRODUCTION TO MY WORK

While nature was never the subject of my work while living in Hawaii, since moving to New York City, all my work has been based on nature. My main inspiration comes from qualities of water, rock, earth, atmosphere, light, and vegetation that I remember from my childhood in Hawaii or that I now experience throughout the seasons in New York. My work is also informed by my love of Asian monochrome ink painting, Persian miniatures, and European landscape painting (in particular, the works of Caspar David Friedrich, John Constable, and Emil Nolde). Three late twentieth-century artists who have been especially important to me are Joan Mitchell, Willem de Kooning, and Richard Diebenkorn.

I find it natural (and in fact necessary) to move back and forth between representation and abstraction in monotype and mixed media. Studying and depicting the forms, lines, rhythms and atmosphere found in nature informs my abstract language. The processes and ideas that I continually develop doing my abstract work give me tools that I use when I return to representational work. Since 1992, I've worked exclusively on paper. I use archival papers with a wide range of fibers, colors, opacities, textures, and weights, and methods of manufacture. My monotypes are almost always representational, my work in mixed-media is always abstract.

MAKING MY WORK

To make a monotype, I apply etching ink to a flat, rectangular metal plate using a wide variety of materials. When I am satisfied with the image I have created, I place a dampened sheet of paper over the plate then run it through an etching press. This transfers the ink to the paper. As only one image is created, the process is called monotype. I often work in series of a particular place: Hawaiian waterfalls, oceans, and mountains; Bear Creek in Ashland, Oregon; the peach tree shadows on our garden fence; Central Park ponds, lakes, and trees; Chinese Scholar Rocks; clouds seen in our neighborhood and in Holland. While the size of my press limits me to a maximum paper size of 23x12 inches, I sometimes make multiple-panel pieces to increase the scale and engage in more complex compositions.

To make a mixed media piece, I begin with a substrate, which might be:

- a single sheet of heavy-weight paper; or
- a laminate comprising differently-colored sheets of paper which I have glued together and then drilled, torn, and sanded through the layers in different places to different depths to create a variety of effects of depth, color, and edges; or
- a crumpled piece of heavy-weight piece of paper on which I've poured a watercolor wash; let the watercolor pool and dry in the crevices; and then flattened.

Processes that involve chance, such as the last two described above, are particularly significant at this stage of my work as a means of suggesting imagery that I would not deliberately create. Once I begin to see where where the piece might be going, I often develop it by adding smaller irregularly shaped collage elements that relate to the imagery already created. I have made elements over the years using:

- many processes (such as monotype, marbling, wax resist, embossment, perforation, and rubbing)
- many media (such as watercolor, pastel, Chinese ink, etching ink, pencil, and charcoal)
- many tools (such as natural sponges, cotton swabs and balls, rubber spatulas, metal scrapers, plastic brushes, wooden shapers, knives, sand paper, brushes, liquid droppers, and air blowers).

To affix the elements to the substrate paper, I use acrylic matte medium. To create organic transitions between the elements' edges and between the elements and the substrate, I use acrylic molding paste. The molding paste has considerable body, which I can use to add a variety of textures. To match the molding paste (which is white) to the surrounding areas and to further develop the piece, I use acrylic gouache. It works well for these purposes because it is matte (like the other media I use); its varying degrees of opacity allow for many different effects; and it can be applied in many impermeable layers. I may go through this sequence of steps (affixing/transitioning/developing) more than once in various areas of the work. Often, elements that seemed important in the beginning of a piece wind up completely covered by other elements or acrylic gouache.

For many years, I worked on 30x22" substrates. Currently, I am working at one-quarter this size (15x11"). The starting substrate for these is one of the four pieces I get when I cut an abandoned 30x22 work into four equal rectangles. After rotating each 15x11 piece to the orientation where the randomly created imagery most intrigues me, I begin again as described above. Working in this scale while using the same tools and collage elements that I used for the larger works is resulting in a greater prominence of texture, a spareness in composition, and a tendency toward bolder contrasts.

My work generally evolves slowly over many sessions, and I sometimes return to works I started years earlier. There is a constant balance between precision and abandon in execution as well as between moving the piece in a direction I see in my mind's eye and being open to unexpected developments.

