

Kumi-E

- The Art that originated in WA -

Living in Perth, Mutsuko Bonnardeaux is a Kumi-E artist who actively exhibits her work, both locally and to an international audience. Her creation of Kumi-E was brought about by her encounters with people and the environment in this beautiful state.

Kumi-E is the word Mutsuko Bonnardeaux created for her artwork, rather than calling it *Hari-E* (collage) or *Chigiri* (torn picture). As the Japanese word *Kumu* means to unite or to braid, Kumi-E translates as 'uniting into a picture'. The use of traditional Japanese paper and colours depicting the strong Australian sun and exclusive flora, as well as the application of western techniques to produce a three-dimensional effect are essential elements of a Kumi-E.

"I became interested in paper making when I first went to live in Kununurra in 1990, due to my husband's new job", Mutsuko says of living in the small town 3,000km north of Perth and with a population of 4,000. "I did not expect to find myself so isolated and far from everything. During those ten years, I was the only Japanese person living in Kununurra."

"I needed to occupy myself with something reminiscent of Japan. I learnt recycled-paper making from an Australian lady but that didn't satisfy me. I then got a scholarship from the Australian Japan Foundation to further my study of *Washi*-paper making in Hyogo prefecture."

The paper is entirely derived from *Kozo* (mulberry) and *Mitumata* (daphne), which contain no lignin so that it does not turn yellow with time. Also, the use of acid-free commercial paper brings about an opaque effect.

"It is a long process to make paper but the satisfaction is great and you



Mutsuko Bonnardeaux, cool night, 2008

can make it thick or thin, perfect or uneven. I have only ten different dyes from Japan and it is enough to make 1,000 different colours when you dye the papers yourself", Mutsuko explains.

Although she had always been interested in handcrafts and arts, Mutsuko had never thought of becoming an artist herself. She enjoyed experimenting with silkscreen, oil painting, watercolour, stained glass, batik, pottery, weaving, embroidery and doll making. However, it was not easy to make three-dimensional collages. She struggled, but eventually found her way by using the teaching and experiences she acquired while living in both Europe and Asia. The magic of light and colours, and the captivating beauty of the Kimberley gave the inspiration to her and eventually, everything started to fall into place.

In 1991, Mutsuko applied to exhibit her works at the Tokyo Crafts Expo and was accepted. She was the first and only exhibitor from Australia and received an offer of a free booth, worth \$7,000 at the time. The Expo was a world-class event, and Mutsuko's work was seen by the editor and director of *Crafts Art International Magazine*, as well as representatives from the *Ceramic Art Magazine*. Although Mutsuko and her art were totally unknown, the journalists suggested she participate in the Australian Crafts Show in Sydney. It was the turning point of her life.

"Through the Australian Crafts Show, I received a few offers to do exhibitions, 'artist in residence' and demonstrations", Mutsuko explains. "Since then, I felt like I was running the whole year round, from Ayers Rock (Uluru) to the Eastern states for two to three craft shows, then solo exhibitions and group exhibitions. I could do so because I was young with lots of energy", she laughs about her first several years as a busy artist.

In addition to her artistic pursuits, Mutsuko took some children of Kununurra, who were studying Japanese language and crafts, to Japan. Hokkaido, the northern island of the country, was the main destination, primarily to give the children their first experience of snow. Mutsuko took 14 students, ranging from seven to fourteen years old, including two Aboriginal students. She endeavoured to find families with children of the same age and sex as her students, in order to borrow winter clothes and shoes for them, as most students only had T-shirts and thongs.

"It was a very time-consuming trip to arrange, but at the end all the children enjoyed the differences in customs and the modern life in Sapporo", she recalls of the visit.

Mutsuko came to Perth after her husband transferred from Kununurra to Geraldton. Settling into city life was not easy, however, she grew accustomed to it quickly. She enjoyed the sophisticated city life and its many choices that her previous home did not have. Nevertheless, Mutsuko kept her life relatively simple.

Mutsuko holds solo exhibitions every year, alternating between Perth and the eastern states, as well as annual group exhibitions. In addition



Mutsuko Bonnardeaux, Happy feeling, 2008

to this, she works on private and public workshops in schools and rural communities.

Mutsuko is mindful of the challenges that being an artist entails. “To work as an artist is not easy”, she says. “It requires lots of preparation and hard work, like any other profession. People think artists only do painting and that it is an easy process, however that is not true. Of course painting is the main work, but inspiration is the second hardest part. You have deadlines and you are not always inspired. It will be a disaster if you do not meet the deadline.”

“I do love working on Kumi-E. I have the most enjoyable time. It is almost therapeutic or meditative. However when the date is set for an exhibition, I have to mentally prepare myself to work hard even if I am not inspired. It is exactly like preparing for exams. It is very stressful and a long journey. Although I have done many solo exhibitions, I still have that feeling of passing exams. Hopefully I am getting more relaxed with my age.”

Mutsuko has spent almost 25 years in Australia. She now hopes to live once again in Europe or Japan, to see how her stance to Kumi-E would change. “I would like to see how I discover the countries again.

I might reconsider the application of colours in my Kumi-E – more subtle perhaps. I am very interested to see the changes I would make if I lived abroad again. Would I draw as an Australian or would I become Japanese again? I have no idea if this will happen, but I would like to try.”



Profile

Mutsuko Bonnardeaux was born in Tokyo. Worked in Japan Air Lines in Paris, Sabena Belgian Air Lines in Brussels. She is married and has two adult daughters. While

living in Kununurra, Mutsuko received the prestigious WA Woman's Award for her artistic achievements in the town. She has also been awarded numerous prizes including a 2009 City of Melville Art Award 'works on paper', 2008 City of Victoria Park Art and a 2003 'Local theme' from the City of South Perth. More recently she had a group exhibition at Burswood Casino in October 2009, and is also scheduled to open a solo exhibition in May 2010 at Element gallery in Dalkeith, and Burswood Casino. To be confirmed.

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