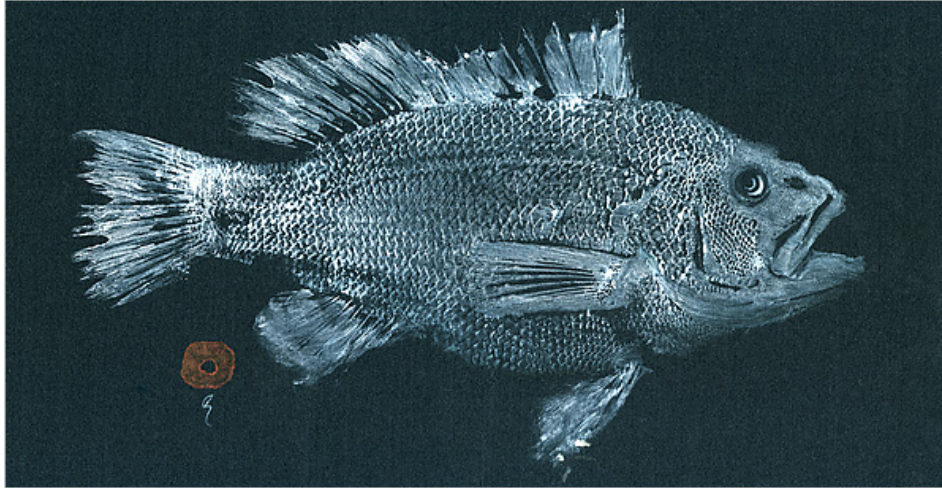




First a Hook, Then Ink: An Artist's Catch



Annie Sessler

ART OF THE DEEP A black sea bass, inked in white and printed on black silk by Annie Sessler. More Photos >

By BRETT MARTIN
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A Fish Story

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THIS is a fish story: a whopper (or at least a keeper) about a peculiar intersection of nature, art and food. Annie Sessler, an artist living here on the East End of Long Island, makes fish prints — impressions of sea life, mostly on vintage textiles, for which she uses fish themselves like rubber stamps or wood blocks. The prints, made with a process dating to the 19th century, are lovely, often haunting images. To whatever extent a fish can be said to have a personality, Ms. Sessler has a gift for capturing and honoring it.

But before inspiration can strike, the fish must. And that's where Ms. Sessler's husband, a longtime fisherman named

Jim Goldberg, comes in. It's an elegant hunter-gatherer arrangement: he catches the fish; she prints the fish; then, together, they eat the fish.

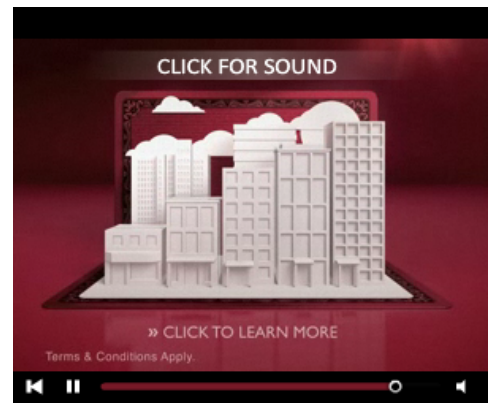
"I'm not like other wives who sit at home, waiting for jewelry," she said. "When Jim comes home, I'm like, 'What fish did you bring me?'"

Early one misty summer morning, Mr. Goldberg, who is 57, sun-blasted and wiry, headed out into Montauk's harbor in a small borrowed boat. Baiting his hook with strips

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of squid, he pattered a few hundred yards toward the mouth of the harbor, dropped his line and let the incoming tide carry the boat back toward the dock.

After only a few such passes, just about the time reveille sounded at the Coast Guard station on shore, he had already hauled up a handsome fluke, a flounder and a sea robin. Many fishermen discard the bottom-dwelling sea robin as inedible, but Mr. Goldberg said the firm tail meat was delicious. Also, the prehistoric-looking head and spiny wings make beautiful prints.

As the fog burned off, Mr. Goldberg steered his boat into open water, toward Block Island Sound. Over the years he's made his living as a lobsterman, a clam digger and a skipper on commercial draggers, taking multiday trips miles offshore in search of cod and other fish. If there is any reason to be nostalgic for those grueling, often freezing journeys, it's the wild and weird varieties of sea life he used to bring home for Ms. Sessler: dogfish, skate, John Dory.

Once his haul included a small, blazing red deep-sea creature that the couple simply called Mystery Fish. Mr. Goldberg now makes his living primarily by shaping and repairing surfboards, so his wife has to make do with more quotidian species.

On this day, the catch included two bluefish that Mr. Goldberg wrestled into the boat within 10 minutes of cutting the motor out on the open water. The second fish flopped and squirmed in the bottom of the boat as he tried to remove the hook with a delicate touch. "Come on, lay down and be quiet," he told the fish through gritted teeth, aware that broken scales would provoke his wife's wrath.

His mesh sack filled with more than enough to produce what he called a "seafood extravaganza," Mr. Goldberg steered toward shore. The meal, he promised, would be "psycho."

Like her husband, Ms. Sessler occasionally talks to her fish. As Mr. Goldberg unloaded his catch in the garage, she peered into the cooler and clapped her hands. "Oh, you're beautiful!" she said, lifting a bluefish. She carried it inside by the tail and lay it in the kitchen sink to begin the "desliming" process.

"You're gorgeous," she said, running warm water over the body and gently sponging it with paper towels. "I love you." Once, when Mr. Goldberg arrived with a large yellowfin tuna, she had to climb into the shower with it.

In Japan the tradition of fish printing, or gyotaku, goes back to the 1800s, when fishermen began using ink and paper to record their catch. Ms. Sessler, who studied design in college, began making her fish prints two winters ago, when her husband got home from a long fishing excursion. On a lark, he took a small scup, or porgy, and a stamp pad and demonstrated how to make a print. Then he went to sleep. When he woke several hours later, the house was filled with dozens of fish prints.

Since then, Ms. Sessler has made over a thousand prints, refining her technique through trial and error. Under the name East End Fish Prints, she began selling her prints last spring, for up to \$2,500 each, and quickly found an appreciative audience.

Alexa Van de Walle and her husband, Henry Owsley, saw some of the prints at an arts fair in Southampton, N.Y., and promptly bought eight for the dining room of their summer house.

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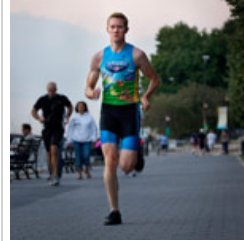
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