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Fish Prints: Love and the Art of Fish

By R. B. Stuart

In 1972 10-year-old Annie Sessler would spend everyday fishing off Manhasset Bay on a local pier. "I saw home movies taken before I was born of my father fluke fishing," she recalled. "But as a child, watching my friends and other kids fishing, I learned how and realized I loved it. I'd fantasized of growing up and going deep sea fishing and surf casting."

Unknowingly, the future Montauk artist would one day turn her love for aquatic creatures into art, by bringing them up into the sun and breathing life back into them with color and precision. Honoring their underwater existence by capturing their essence within the frame of life.

At the same time in parallel lives, Jim Goldberg, from Bayshore had been visiting Montauk since the age of two, and in 1971, at 22, would make it his home. His love for the water took hold as a teen when he began to surf the waves of Montauk. At five he caught his first fish with his father on the coast of Maine. For several years he worked on an offshore lobster boat, eventually purchasing a lobster boat years later. His career as a fisherman and lobsterman took him to working as a longliner, a commercial dragger, and on tugboats.

Their lives collided around 1993 when Sessler's brother introduced her to Goldberg, who privately built and repaired surfboards. "I had just learned how to surf and needed my surfboard repaired. So my brother took me to him, and I thought he overcharged me. I felt 'what a rip-off,'" she remembered of Goldberg, who was married at the time.

Even so, she loved visiting his shop, and found his work compelling. Within time they became friends. "I never thought one day he'd be my husband," Sessler admitted. "He is a great artist and craftsman, and as an artist myself he was so inspiring."

By the age of 18 Sessler had become impassioned with art, having been influenced by her Art History Studio teacher at St. Paul's School in New Hampshire. By the time she entered Stanford University she knew what she wanted to study. "I chose Design/Studio Art as it offered flexibility in a variety of mediums," she explained. "I loved everything - painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, printmaking, and design." Sessler earned her B.A. and went on to study drawing, painting and sculpture for two semesters at the N.Y. Studio School.

After WWII in 1946, her father founded the B. Sessler Co., located in downtown Manhattan. A family owned and operated import and brokerage business in food commodities - with not just nuts, dried fruits and olive oil, but imported fresh and frozen seafood from around the world. Flying in weekly containers of fresh salmon from Norway, Iceland, and Ireland. The company serviced wholesalers and distributors at the Fulton Fish Market, as well as in northeast and southern states.

Sessler said although she worked there for 15 years, up until 2001, it was a coincidence that she was around fish even after college. "I worked in the back offices and it was rare that I saw the fish." But indirectly it taught her about the different species looming in her horizon by her future husband, a commercial fisherman.

Her life would take a different direction when she moved to Brazil for five months to help her father with her mother who had suffered a major stroke. "In 2002 when I returned to Manhattan I had the desire to have my own family and pursue art." Turning 40, she left the city in 2002 and moved to Montauk. "I loved Montauk for its natural beauty and the surfing. And Hither Hills Park for running, mountain biking and hiking."



Annie Sessler and Jim Goldberg with a custom created surfboard with one of her fish print designs.



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She discovered Goldberg's marriage had dissolved; with his children now grown, they reconnected. The following year her father died, and her mother eventually moved back to Long Island. In 2004 she and Goldberg wed.

With their first child on its way, Goldberg asked if she wanted to make fish prints. "I'd never heard of it, and didn't know what he was talking about. So he demonstrated it and we had a few hours of fun. The next year he asked if I wanted to make fish prints again, and brought home a basket full of fish from the dragger he was working on, and we made more."

Goldberg had seen fish prints 25 years ago and was struck by their uniqueness and assumed it was easy to do. "I knew my wife was artsy, so one day I showed her. Anybody can do it - you just throw ink on a fish and press paper over it in a rubbing motion. The image reveals itself on the paper when it is peeled off. They've been doing it for thousands of years in Japan," he nonchalantly said. The Japanese named this process Gyotaku and used this method to record their catch before the advent of photography.

Sessler was intrigued and excited by the printmaking, and the masterly execution of his rubbings. "I had done printmaking before, but thought, 'Oh, I married this Japanese master.' He is an amazing printer but downplays it. He printed this squid without apparent effort and it blew me away. It's a combination of art and nature, the two are compelling," she marveled over her husband's technique in which he now guides, directs, and evaluates hers.

Goldberg, a commercial fisherman for four decades, used his wife's inspiration to provide her with over three dozen different fish species. The selection process Goldberg says begins before he gets the fish. In the net he chooses the biggest of the species. "What I place the fish in can damage the scales and make dents. So they have to be kept in pristine condition, and as fresh as possible." He brings them home and Sessler washes and dries them, and covers them with a non-toxic ink, avoiding an oil based paint because of its inability to wash off, chooses the type and color of paper, then rubs and presses them. "Not every print is perfect, maybe seven out of 20 she's happy with. But I think they're all great. Because as a fisherman I know what fish should look like."

When a perfected replica is obtained, the fish goes back to Goldberg who cleans and filets them for dinner. "Different species deteriorate faster than others, so they are refrigerated until she's ready to print them. We eat 98 percent of the fish. When in doubt throw it out," he advises. One day he hopes to get her a walk-in cooler.

"I'm thrilled when different kinds of fish are caught because there's a different scale structure - a natural beauty. I don't have a favorite, but I love the fish scales of the striped bass. A skate fish has a very pointy top and is difficult to rub; the texture is gorgeous and very subtle." And whether one species makes a prettier print than another depends on the observer she says.

"What may be considered an ugly fish to others, some think are pretty cool. Like the John Dory, it's a beautiful fish, very thin with a wide mouth, it's very odd looking. The challenge is trying to get the cartilage to print. It's a struggle but very rewarding." Sessler adds, "The fish teach you about art, and I feel a tremendous respect for the fish. I do the fish prints with reverence. We're not wasteful. I'm grateful we eat them afterwards."

In 2005, Goldberg was awestruck over the prints, and suggested selling them, so the duo began East End Fish Prints. They attended art and craft shows. "People responded favorably, commenting they were beautiful. It encouraged me to continue. That people buy them is a delightful aspect of the business." In 2006, their fish print graced the cover of *Edible East End*, and last year the New York Times and CBS News Sunday Morning Show found interest and featured them. Now they attend 15-20 shows a year, from LI to NYC, selling through shows, word of mouth, and their website. "A lot of city people are fish lovers and fishermen. Some city dwellers have purchased the larger prints. No longer is there just local appeal, the audience has broadened," she informed.

Goldberg feels his wife created the market through her expertise and skill. "It's amazing, she can capture the authentic look and true essence of the fish. I've handled hundreds of thousands of pounds of fish so I know what they're supposed to look like," said the veteran fisherman.

With two young children in tow, as a family they travel, surf, and make fish prints and surfboards. Goldberg, who once worked for "Bunger Surfboards" used what he learned, and in 1989 began his own private label, "Hook Surfboards," filling custom orders for friends and family. They hope to expand Fish Prints into surfboards, and this year will be exploring rubbings embedded in encaustic wax, hangings, applied imagery, larger scale pieces with bigger fish, and murals with multiple species, possibly incorporating shower doors, screens, fabric hangings, flags, and lamps.

Goldberg has a cookbook in the works that will encompass not only recipes and cooking techniques; but stories from the sea, surfing and his international travels to Chile, Peru, Indonesia, and Costa Rica.

From those days on the pier in the early 1970s, Sessler has come full circle. "I definitely feel so much happiness and joy being back in LI with my family, the fish, my art and life with my husband - it's truly a blessing," she ended.

• East End Fish Prints are scheduled to appear in East Hampton at Ashwagh Hall Feb. 14 and Feb. 15. Other 2008 show schedules will be posted on their website www.EastEndFishPrints.com. For more information they can also be contacted at EastEndFishPrints@gmail.com or by phone at 631-668-5694.

[For more information, click here.](#)

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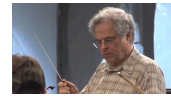
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