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Making Inky Use of Dead Giants

By Russell Drumm

(09/29/2009) It's been six years since Annie Sessler watched her husband apply ink to a squid he brought back from the dragger he was crewing on and make a print of it on a piece of paper.

"It was a masterly squid," she said the other day, and while he had no idea he was dabbling in the Japanese art of fish-printing known as gyotaku, Ms. Sessler, who studied graphic arts, including printmaking, at Stanford University, realized the experiment offered great potential.


Since then, she has perfected her gyotaku process and now participates in between 15 and 20 arts and crafts shows each year. It was during the Aug. 16 art fair on the green in Montauk that Capt. Paul Stern, a commercial tuna fisherman, approached the stall where she had her prints on display.

"I had prints I'd made from a white marlin, 6 feet 10



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inches long. He told me he caught big tuna. I said, 'How big?' He said, 'As big as this tent.' ”



Russell Drumm Photos

“I said if he brought in one not quite that big, I’ll do the rubbing and you can choose prints. I’ll have the privilege of making the print, you get the fish back and pick your favorites.”

Annie Sessler of Montauk, working with the largest fish she has ever done, used a thin ink wash and satin fabric to make gyo-taku-style prints of a 400-pound bluefin tuna last week.

On Sept. 20, she got the call. Captain Stern had caught what he called “one of the smallest of these [bluefin giants] I’ve ever caught,” a 400-pounder. The fish was landed at the Montauk Fish Dock. Paul Farnham, the proprietor, offered the facility’s large, and very cold, cooler to work in. The fish was to be sold the next day, so the printmaking had to be done in thermal clothing despite the summery weather outside.

Ms. Sessler said that as an artist it was exciting that “the unusual conditions determined the outcome.” She began mixing blue and black ink outside the cooler before entering the cold with roller and brush. The excitement is not knowing what to expect, she said, unlike another fish print process that involves laying the paper or fabric on the fish first and then inking over it.

In either case there are variations in fabrics to consider, and the type and amount of ink. “With the tuna I used light washes to guarantee there would be no stain and no harm to its food value. It was washed thoroughly after we were done. I did a lot of learning.”

Into the night, Ms. Sessler worked in the Montauk Fish Dock cooler, making prints of the bluefin on satin and cotton, altering the way the shroud-like sheets were laid upon the fish, leaving large sections of it uninked, using brush instead of roller to apply it.

The artist said she was not after perfection. “People like imperfections, or artist accidents,” she said, adding that while the indirect method, in which the fabric was placed on the fish and the ink is built up slowly, gave greater detail, it tended to eliminate the unexpected. “You see the image as you’re doing it. This is more of a surprise,” she said of gyo-taku.

Once she gets the hang of printing larger fish, Ms. Sessler said she would look into attending some of the larger fishing tournaments up and down the coast — marlin tournaments below the Mason-Dixon line, tuna tourneys above it.

“Buying prints could keep them occupied while they’re waiting for fish to come in to the weigh-in stations.”

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