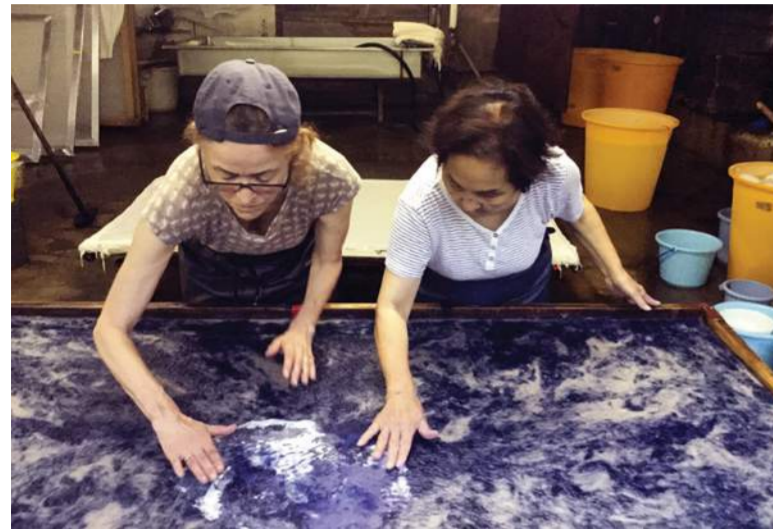


In Pursuit of Inner Light

SARAH BRAYER

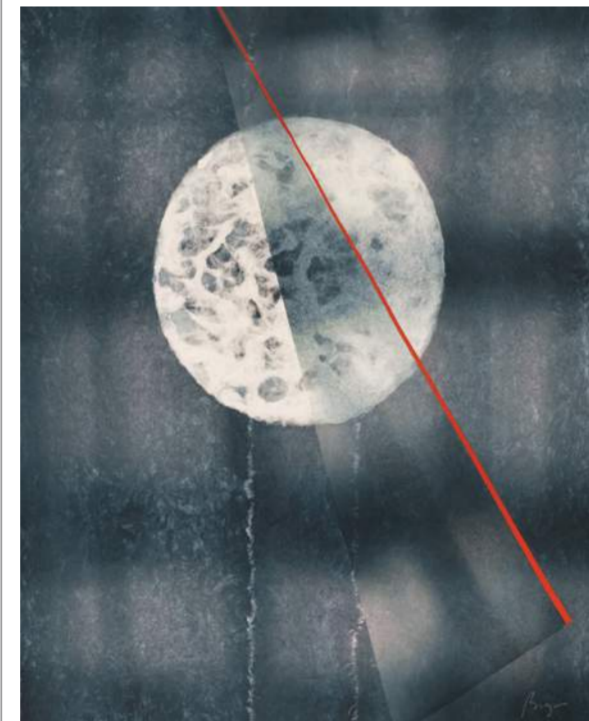
by Madison Folks



Sarah Brayer working with Nori-chan on a large, poured paperwork. Image courtesy of the artist.

Asian Art Newspaper: Throughout your exhibition, your works are united by a sense of movement – from the flow of water and light, to that of the woodgrain and washi. What inspires this sense of movement and energy? What role does the material itself play in your creative process?
Sarah Brayer: I am fascinated by light and water. These natural elements are subject to constant fluctuation, thus movement is an essential aspect in my work. One of the things I attempt to do when I work in paper is to coax the fibres in the directions they naturally want to go. Water is the agent for movement, and I find the element of serendipity that occurs in my compositions quite exciting. There is a constant dialogue of control and letting go.

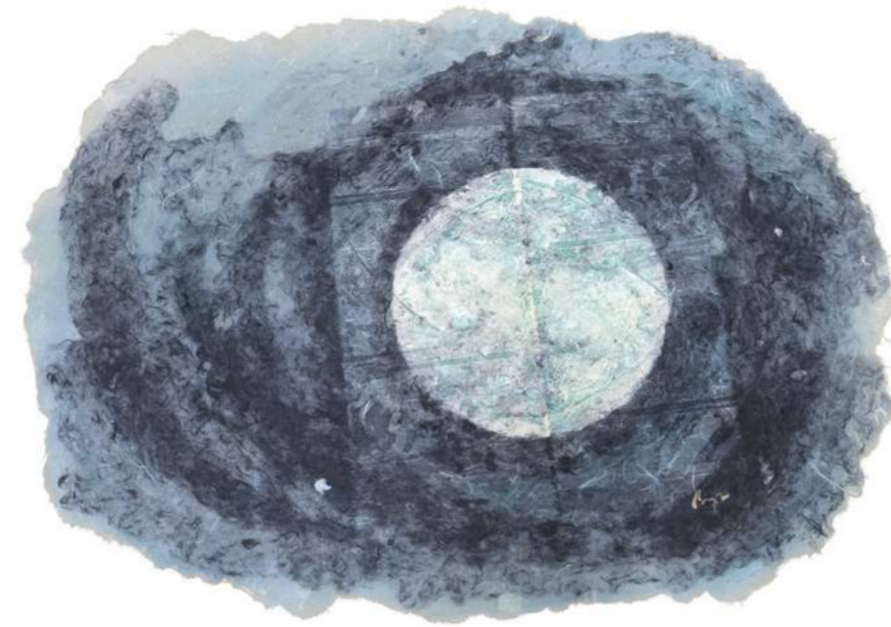
AAN: Your monoprints also bring the medium to the forefront with their strong, flowing wood grain.
SB: Yes, the woodgrain on the block is a design element that I incorporate into the work. In a sense, the block is alive with its



Red Thread: Revealing Moon (2018), poured mulberry paperwork with phosphorescent pigment and tenguji washi, 25 x 21.5 inches



Hidden Falls (2023), poured mulberry paperwork mounted as a screen, 68 x 76 inches



Indigo Night Glow (2011), poured mulberry paperwork with phosphorescent pigment, 27 x 38 inches. All images, courtesy Ronin Gallery

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Expressing the dynamism of water in poured paper was a great challenge
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own pattern. The woodgrain will often suggest landscape or water forms. My task is to enhance those patterns instead of covering it or carving it away.

AAN: You explored the woodblock medium when you first moved to Kyoto in the 1980s, studying with Toshi Yoshida, before shifting your focus to aquatints and poured paperworks. What inspired you to return to the woodblock?
SB: The beauty of gradation that is possible with woodblock led me back to the medium. I imagined orbs of light emerging from the centre. I knew that the transparent quality of the woodblock and water-based pigment would express this quality perfectly. I was also attracted to the purity of the materials: wood, pigment, water, washi – all natural materials.

AAN: Your masterful gradation in works such as *Soft Caressing Light* brings this idea of ‘inner light’ to life. How did you achieve such sharp woodgrain and subtle gradients?
SB: It is all in the layering of transparent colours that are printed numerous times. My experience in oil painting taught me how to layer light, to achieve a luminous quality. I am always looking to convey inner light in my work. The exhibition title, *Scintillate*, describes light as it moves across a changing surface. It explores light in motion and resonates with the ideas about inner, transient light that I express in my work.

AAN: How did it feel to return to the woodblock medium after many years? Has your approach to the medium changed? Did anything surprise you?
SB: One difference is that I consciously choose not to carve the blocks. That means I am brushing pigments onto the surface, making gradations, and then printing them. I also found that using my etching

press for printing instead of a *baren* allows me to achieve rich colour on large surfaces. I was surprised that the press worked so well!

AAN: As part of Ronin Gallery's *Moonlit Season*, your exhibition includes a selection of Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's *One Hundred Views of the Moon* (1885-1892) in conversation with your woodblock monoprints. Did you draw inspiration from Yoshitoshi's work while producing your monotypes?
SB: I started looking at Yoshitoshi's 100 Views of the Moon after I began my woodblock *Brilliant Light* series. I wanted to see if the locations he depicted resonated with the places that inspired me in Japan. To my surprise, there was overlap not only in geography but in some of the mythology and the verses accompanying his works.



Soft Caressing Light (2023), Japanese woodblock print, 17.5 x 11.63 inches

AAN: Can you give us an example?
SB: Yes, in *Chikubushima Moon* (1886). The island of Chikubushima is home to Benten, goddess of the arts. Rising from the middle of Lake Biwa, near Kyoto, the island has been a subject throughout my paintings and paperworks. In *Misty Chikubushima Moon*, I created the island forms with *washi* to express how Chikubushima sits far away under scintillating moonlight.

AAN: If you could highlight one work from your solo exhibition, which would you choose?
SB: *Hidden Falls*, my most recent paperwork, shows the power of falling water crashing on rocks. I love the idea of finding a secret waterfall hidden in the landscape and taking a moment to reflect on the power of nature. Expressing the dynamism of water in poured paper was a great challenge and joy.

AAN: *Hidden Falls* was produced around the time you completed the eight *fusuma* (sliding doors) for Komyo-in temple in Kyoto. Can you tell us about making large-scale poured paperworks like this one?

SB: I started with some small gestural sketches of rushing water, and then drew them to scale on a large piece of paper noting the directions of the pours. I took this drawing with me to the Echizen paper studio to assist me to direct the flow of fibres as I was pouring. Because I had a life-size sketch, I felt freer to pour the coloured fibres gesturally. As I worked, I imagined how it would look once dry, but this was sometimes elusive,



Misty Chikubushima Moon (2022), woodblock monotype with washi, 23.5 x 15 inches

and there were surprises. Eight of the waterfalls were mounted as doors in the Komyo-in Temple and two of them became the screen *Hidden Falls*.

AAN: Is it a multi-person task to work at that scale?

SB: When I work on the large washi paperworks, I am assisted by professional papermakers in Echizen, who help me in moving the giant screens that are part of my

process. We discuss the project on-site, and I rely on their expertise in bringing my vision to fruition. The photo below shows me working with Nori-chan, a master papermaker. One of my favourite parts of the process is the large scale. They are bigger than me, and I felt like I could dive into the work.

AAN: Taking the idea of inner light to the next level, your *Luminosity*

paperworks series literally glows. As you combine paper fibre with phosphorescent pigments, you create a single work with multiple appearances – one designed for the light, the other to come alive in the dark. What inspired these explorations with luminescence?
SB: I imagined an exhibition of moon phases with shifting light in a darkened space. As I was musing about how to create the shifting lighting, I learned about phosphorescent pigments. This seemed perfect – adding light to the works that would be charged by daylight. I imagined that viewers would be inspired to think more deeply about how we perceive light and how our minds change in different situations. The *Luminosity* series added another dimension to my creative role. I could not wait to see if the pigments would actually adhere to the wet washi fibres. Fortunately, they did, and the *Luminosity* series was born!

AAN: From luminosity to moonlight to inner light, your work is united by transience – twinkling moments of beauty that are brilliant but fleeting. What role does this impermanence play in your work?

SB: As we know, everything is impermanent. We tend to think of artwork as an object that can freeze a moment in time physically. The pieces in this exhibition result from processes that take form when I am creating the work, and then the work acts as a record of that moment.
 • The exhibition *Scintillate: Sarah Brayer* is on view at Ronin Gallery, New York, until 15 December, 2023

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