

The Unique Art of Sarah Brayer

Initially, Sarah Brayer was known primarily for her editioned prints.¹ She made her first etchings as an exchange student in London in 1978 before graduating from Connecticut College in 1979 with honors in printmaking. With a backpack and a one-way ticket, she took off for Japan with a friend and settled in Kyoto, the country's historic cultural center. A tiny apartment was where she etched her first plates. Artist Yoshiko Fukuda opened her studio as a place to print. From 1982–84 Brayer studied Japanese woodblock printing with T shi Yoshida (1911–1996), son of influential woodblock artist Hiroshi Yoshida (1876–1950). In 1986, she opened her own print studio in an old Kyoto kimono-weaving factory.

Brayer discovered the art of poured washi in 1986 while making color aquatints with the master printer Kathy Caraccio in New York. When Caraccio introduced her to the nearby hand-papermaking workshop Dieu Donne, she was hooked. The process of working with poured paper pulp gave her a freedom of movement and color that she had not until then experienced. Her forms became more fluid, and her works larger and more expressive. Pouring paper to make images introduced an element of chance to her practice,

challenging her imagination as well as her technical skills. When she returned to Kyoto, she immediately sought out a workshop in which she could experiment with washi. Her local paper dealer, when she asked him for advice, directed her to the papermaking factory and studio run by his family in the 1,500-year-old Imadate town, currently Echizen City, where she has worked continuously, the only Western artist to do so, since 1986. She is assisted by a female team of master papermakers who help her move the giant screens that are essential tools for her large-scale works.

One advantage of making art at this studio was the possibility of creating on a much larger scale than a printing press allowed. The papermakers had equipment and expertise to help her make fusuma (paper for sliding doors). *Biwako Blue* (1988), a poured mulberry paperwork mounted as a screen, was the first large-scale landscape screen she made in Echizen. Brayer made large paper patterns to control the flow of the washi fiber. That way, she could make each panel individually and have a composition that would flow consistently from one panel to the next after drying. She made numerous colors and poured them over a dark paper ground, which acted like an under painting and

made the colors appear more vibrant. This was a way of extending her experience with painting into the paper medium. She was attracted to the texture and “voice” of mulberry and mitsumata paper fibers, whose feather-like qualities could be layered.

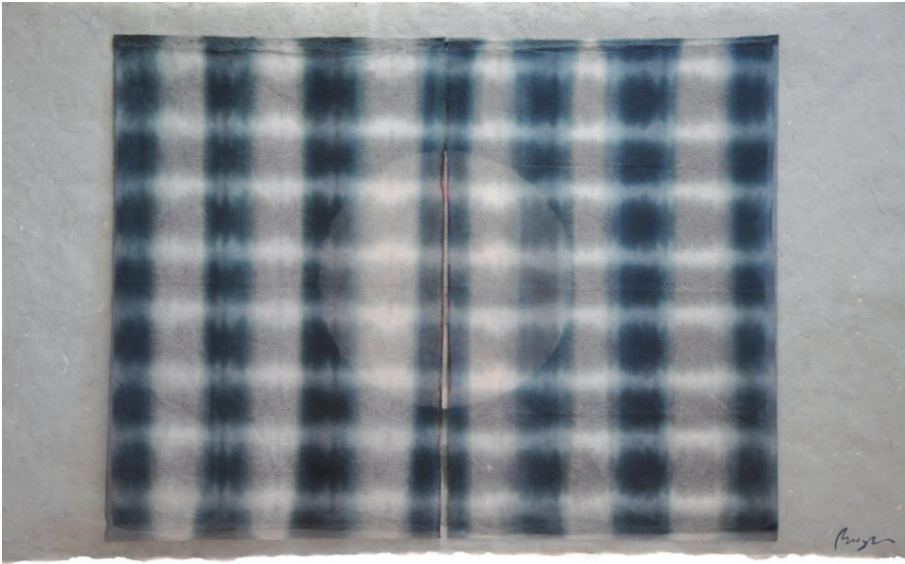
Fusuma are usually 180 centimeters by 90 centimeters, the same size as the tatami mats that cover the floors in traditional Japanese houses. By combining several such panels side by side, Brayer made more expansive compositions than would have been possible with a single sheet. One of her earliest, *Moon Traces: Sea of Creation* (1998), was created for a private residence in Kyoto. She continued to make paper in the mold for fusuma, but eliminated the frame and left the paper's natural edge to create architectural murals instead of doors. In 2008, she created *Blue Surge*, with seven panels, for a floating glass wall in the Ozumo restaurant in Oakland, California.² Two years later, she created *Katsura Squares* (2010), with twelve connecting panels, for another wall in the restaurant. Although most of her compositions use organic and curvilinear shapes, at times straighter lines and more rectilinear patterns emerge, as in *Layered Moonlight* (2015). Is this an allusion to the modular nature of Japanese architecture and interiors?



Sarah Brayer, *Biwako Blue*, 1988, poured mulberry and mitsumata paperwork mounted as a screen, 4 panels, 78 x 194 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Sarah Brayer, *Moon Traces: Sea of Creation*, 1998, poured mulberry and mitsumata paperwork, 4 panels mounted as fusuma doors, 76 x 168 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Sarah Brayer, *Layered Moonlight*, 2015, mulberry paperwork with tengu jo washi, phosphorescent pigment, 78 x 42 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

An arresting image is Brayer's ultimate goal. She begins with an idea of the final composition, but the process allows her to improvise, much like a jazz musician. In *Singing the Blues* (2009), an expansive paperwork, poured edges and tonalities suggest superimposed sky, clouds, sea, and mountains illuminated by a brilliant moon. The moon became one of Brayer's primary images as early as 1981, with an etching called *Moonlit Street*, and it has since remained central to her expression.

The unifying concern of Brayer's work is light, often embodied by but not limited to her moon imagery. In *Approaching Storm* (2011), made with poured linen, flax, and pigment at Dieu Donne, she poured extra water onto the paper, flooding it so the pigment bled into softer shapes that would suggest clouds full of water. She captured the sense of drama of the light in the water before an impending storm. Her light does not always come from a specific source; sometimes it is a disembodied phenomenon radiating from her phos-

phorescent forms, appearing and then disappearing with the passage from day to night.

Nature has been an important source of inspiration for Brayer throughout her career. The vastness of the sky and the ocean, the cosmos and the constellations of the night sky, challenges her imagination. *Celestial Spheres* (2018) invokes the infinite and the infinitesimal, the cellular and the vast. The forms can be experienced both as a macro-cosmos and as a micro-cosmos, as a dialogue between infinite space and the molecular level of the body. These spheres inform our understanding and perceptions of our place in the universe. The phosphorescent pigments in the paper look one way in the light and completely different in the dark. The experience takes us to the edge of our perception and challenges our sense of reality. Brayer's subjects may be monumental, as in *Mother Earth* (2013), or as transient as a breeze or a whisper, as in *Lightness of Being* (2016).

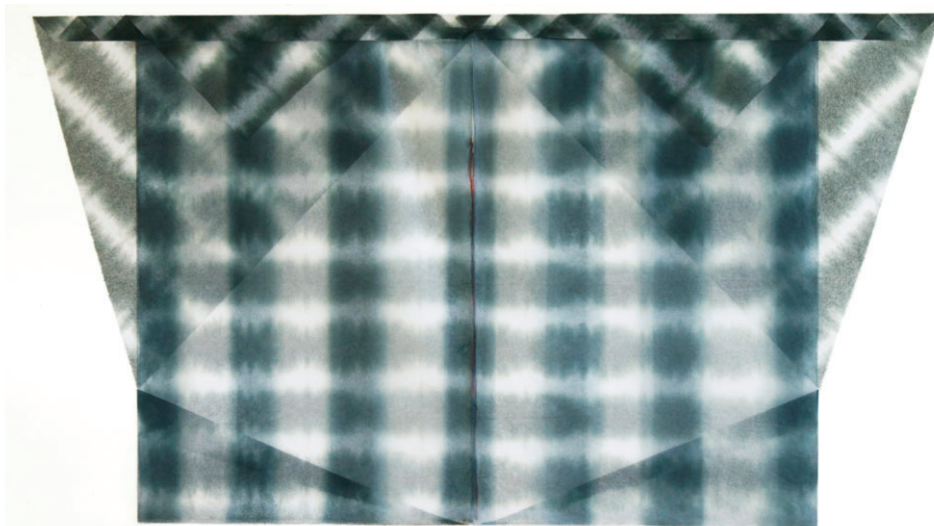
Brayer transforms natural and sustainable plant materials into tactile works of art with a more tangible physical presence than an image printed,



Sarah Brayer, *Celestial Spheres*, 2018, poured mulberry paperwork with phosphorescent pigment, wall and floor installation, approximately 72 x 250 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Sarah Brayer, *Approaching Storm*, 2011, poured linen and pigment paperwork, 43 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Sarah Brayer, *Drifting Layers*, 2017, poured mulberry paperwork with tengu jo washi, phosphorescent pigment and stitching, 78 x 42 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

drawn, or painted on a paper surface. At Dieu Donne, she usually works with linen and flax, while in Echizen she favors more traditional Japanese fibers collectively called washi; fibers such as

kozo, gampi, and mitsumata have been used to make high-quality washi since the eighth century. She understands the visual and physical qualities of the fibers and manipulates the plant-based

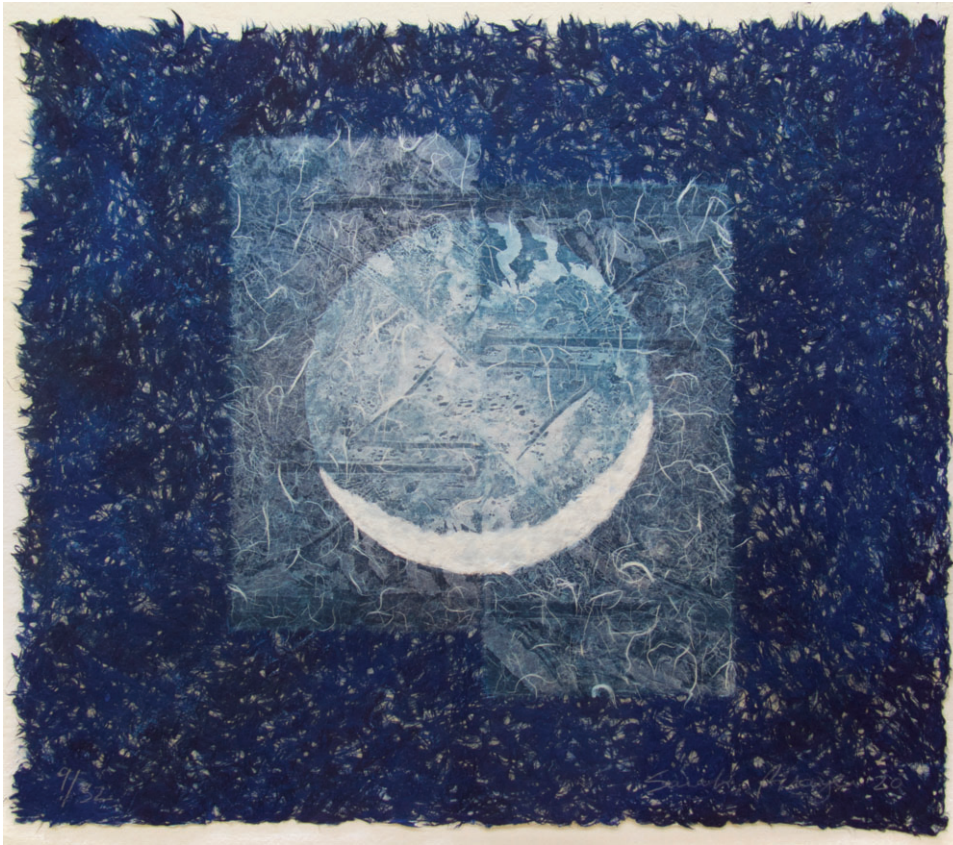


Sarah Brayer, *Tiger's Eye*, 2013, poured mulberry paperwork, tengu jo washi, pigment, 74 x 97 inches. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Purchase and partial gift of the Kenneth and Kiyo Hitch Collection from Kiyo Hitch with funds from the Mary Griggs Burke Endowment, S2019.3.130a-b3. Washington DC. Courtesy of the artist.

slurry to create heavy, opaque surfaces, as in *Oceanic Moon* (2011), or thin, translucent tengujo washi, as in *Gossamer* (2017). *Drifting Layers* (2017) incorporates a curtain-like veil that floats in the wind when a viewer walks by the piece.

Tiger's Eye (2013) is the first in a series of paper works called "The Red Thread." The title of the series refers to *Red Thread Zen*, in which passion is used as a road to enlightenment, as represented by the red thread-like forms in the image. Brayer poured the moon panels several years before she finished the piece and put them in a drawer. One day she looked at them and decided to add dimension, movement, and bold contrast. She then ironed some tengujo washi over the moon panels. The static electricity from ironing held the paper in place and added a sensuous line from the fold of the washi pressed by the iron. She decided to let the pieces float on top such that she could roll the work and send it in a tube, so she began using silk as an underlay. She also stuffed some silk inside the forms to give them dimension. Experimentation is central to Brayer's process. Her exquisite craftsmanship and her mastery of her materials allow her to push past boundaries and invent new forms of expression.

In another work from this series, "Red Petals" (2016), Brayer incorporated an ink drawing into the washi as she was making it. The graceful calligraphic line contrasts with the more forceful lines of the red threads, but in the end they imbue the fan-like petals with tension and coherence. Often she integrates prints into her paperwork, as in *Sea of Clouds* (2012), an aquatint embedded in handmade washi with the paper fibers creating the clouds that surround her image of Mt. Fuji. She mounted the piece on a black mat so the image would appear more diaphanous than would have been the case were it over white. Brayer combines materials and techniques with complete freedom to achieve the effect



Sarah Brayer, *Midnight Moon*, 2020, aquatint on indigo-dyed hand made mulberry paper with washi chine collé, phosphorescent pigment, edition 32, 26 x 22 ½ inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Sarah Brayer, *Luminous R.B.G.*, 2020, mulberry paperwork, phosphorescent pigment on antique indigo cotton, 24 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

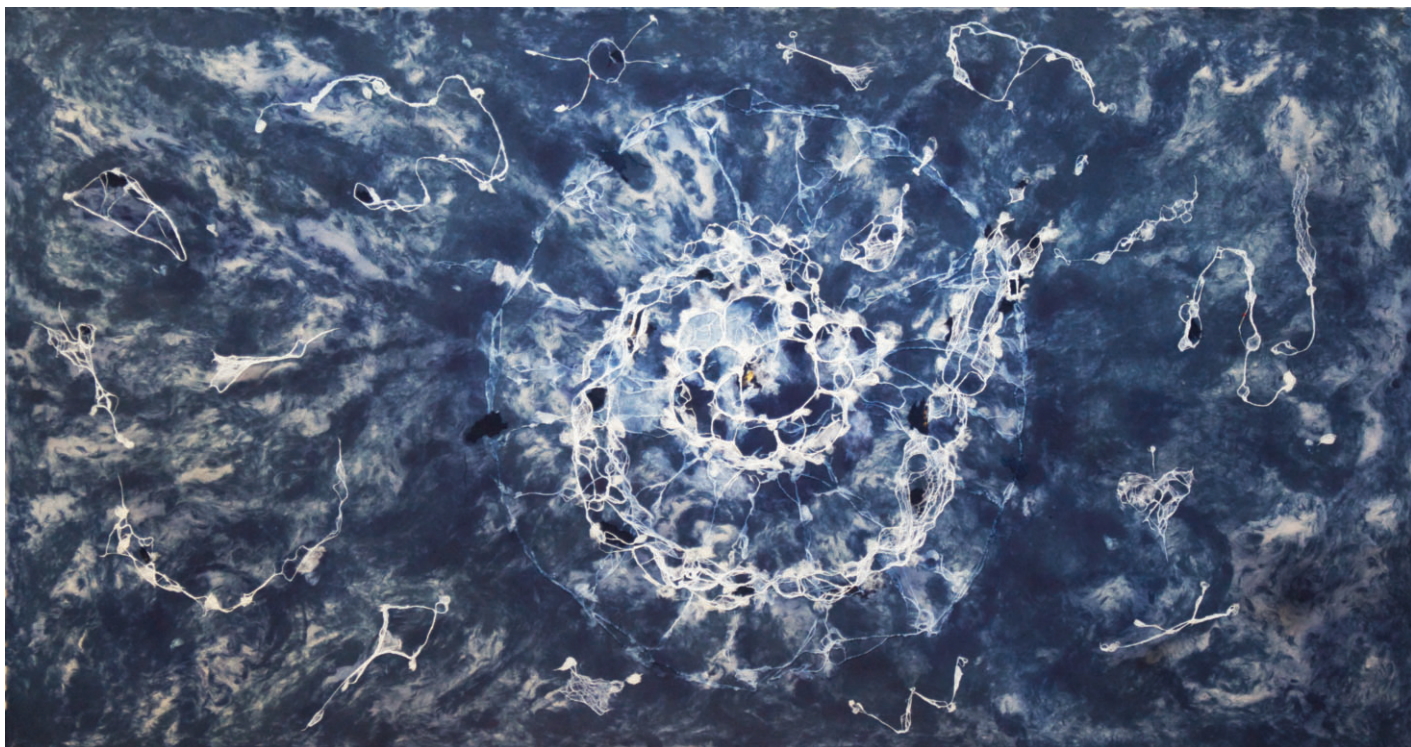
she seeks, as in *Apollo* (2010), an editioned paperwork with aquatint, chine colle, and hand-coloring.

The traditional distinction between editions and unique paper works disappears in Brayer's recent edition *Midnight Moon* (2020). She began with hand-made mulberry paper in which the fibers swirl in suspension. After the washi is dried and colored, it looks like a deep night sky filled with stars. Each image is hand-painted with indigo and ultramarine pigments. She makes each crescent moon and penumbra by hand. After she assembles the parts and dries the sheets, she spreads the completed sheets on the floor and applies the finishing touches by hand before signing each one. Seen from a distance,

the 32 sheets look almost like a print edition, but up close, each image is unique. Not content to make identical proofs, Brayer has made variable editions and paperworks incorporating prints throughout her career.

Similarly, she merges drawing and papermaking into a single gesture in the series "Indra's Cosmic Net." Indra, whose sign is the thunderbolt, is the Vedic deity of the heavens, lightning, thunder, storms, rains, river flows, and war. This series is an exploration of the night sky in which the artist creates jewel-like cells by drawing with long fibers of mulberry paper. They are imaginary forms in the cosmos that glow in color in the dark because of the phosphorescent fibers from which they are created. The forms are like space debris that is in the process of coalescing into planets, moons, and constellations, an allusion to the creative power of the Big Bang. The artist was fascinated by the interconnectedness of all formations, from those as large as the universe to those as small as cells. The whirling form at the center of *From the Sea to the Stars* (2019) exerts centrifugal force that attracts the components of creation.

In the series "Constellations," Brayer refers to the ancient practice of grouping visible stars into perceived outlines or patterns, usually representing an animal, a mythological person, or an inanimate object, by linking a group of visible stars into a form with a perceived outline or pattern. As an artist, she has the license to create her own cosmic imagery. Many of the forms in this series are animals inspired by her recent trip to South Africa and Namibia, where no ambient light or buildings interfere with perception of the brilliant stars in a pitch-dark night sky. The most startling, however, is her series of five images of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (*Luminous R.B.G.*), created soon after Ginsburg's death in September 2020. They celebrate the light and illuminating nature of Ginsburg's stance on equal rights for



Sarah Brayer, *From the Sea to the Stars*, 2019, poured mulberry paperwork with phosphorescent pigment and gold leaf, 41 x 78 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

all persons. Through seeing her presence in the dark, we are reminded of how the arc of justice eventually bends towards the light. This group of images is the first and only reference to contemporary events in Brayer's work, with Brayer giving Ginsburg immortality as part of the night sky. When exhibited, the art in the "Luminosity" series, of which *Luminous R.B.G.* and *Midnight Moon* are part, is shown with shifting light in the gallery that echoes the day/night cycle of light in the natural world.

Though certain themes and imagery

persist in her work, Sarah Brayer does not hesitate to introduce new ideas and forms, and she continues to experiment freely with traditional methods of printmaking and papermaking. Her fertile imagination and consummate craftsmanship distinguish her as one of the leading artists of her generation.

JOANN MOSER

Joann Moser is Senior Curator Emerita of Graphic Arts at the Smithsonian American Art Museum where she worked from 1986 to 2016. Before coming to Washing-

ton, she was the Senior Curator of Collections at the University of Iowa Museum of Art in Iowa City for more than nine years. Dr. Moser received her doctorate in Art History from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She holds a BA in art history from Smith College.

1. Originally published in *Sarah Brayer: Inner Light*. Kyoto: Sarah Brayer Studio, 2001.
2. To view works not illustrated here, and to learn more about Sarah Brayer, please visit <https://sarahbrayer.com/>.