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DWIGHT HWANG

IMPRESSIONS OF THE SEAS

JAPANESE GYOTAKU FISH PRINTS

JAPAN FOUNDATION 
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Dwight Hwang (b. 1974) was born to Korean immigrant parents in Los Angeles, California, USA. From the age of seven, he would go on fishing trips with his uncle to freshwater locations for carp and off the ocean pier for croakers and eels. He began fishing solo at 13 and gravitated toward the tebo style, a challenging type of fishing done with no reel and an ultra-sensitive float. After graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Character Animation from the California Institute of the Arts in 1999, Hwang was selected to show his animated short Goo at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival and was offered a directorial internship at the Japanese animation studio Production IG, which lasted until 2002. For four years, he did storyboarding for Nintendo of America in Seattle, Washington. Hwang returned to Japan in 2006 and served as the storyboard artist for the 2009 film Oblivion Island: Haruka and the Magic Mirror. He then freelanced as a storyboard artist for the live-action films Gantz (2010), SP: The Motion Picture (2010), and Inuyashiki (2018). Hwang returned to the USA in 2011 and completed a Master's degree in Live Action Film at the University of Southern California between 2012 and 2015, during which he also worked at the art department of Blizzard Entertainment on their Hearthstone, Starcraft II, and Diablo III titles.

ABOUT

DWIGHT HWANG





Hwang's first exposure to Japanese gyotaku occurred in 2008 at a tackle shop in Tokyo. The walls had been covered with fish prints and Hwang, with his background in fishing, was immediately captivated. The inability to find a master under whom to study led Hwang to experiment with fish, calligraphy paper, and bottled sumi ink in his free time. His first attempts lacked refinement, but with time came success. The realization that a fish was not only the subject, but the tool by which art is created, led Hwang to more adeptly

manipulate the fish into naturalistic positions. This, combined with the natural softness of sumi ink and Hwang's ability to convey perspective, adds lifelike energy and vitality to the final images. Hwang is a traditionalist in that he works only with mixed sumi inks and handmade papers. He specializes in a variant of the direct printing technique (J: chokusetsu-hō), where ink is applied directly to the fish and the paper laid on top. The image is transferred by pressure from the fingers. Hwang purchases his materials through specialty shops in Korea and Japan. He most commonly works with papers made from mulberry, called dak in Korean and kōzō in Japanese. The similarities between the two render a consistent

"A FISH WAS NOT ONLY THE SUBJECT, BUT THE TOOL BY WHICH ART IS CREATED"

final print with little discernible difference between the results.

Dwight has shown his work in the United States and Monaco, and has had his work published in several books including Yvon Chouinard's Simple Fly Fishing: Techniques for Tenkara and Rod and Reel.

IMPRESSIONS OF THE SEAS

by Michael VanHartingsveldt



As an island nation, Japan teems with live saltwater and freshwater specimens. A visit to the centuries-old Tsukiji fish market demonstrates the importance of fish and fishing culture to the national identity. Samurai retainers in the mid-19th century, well-versed in ink painting due to their standard education in calligraphy and the literary arts and their knowledge of ukiyo-e woodblock printing, melded the two into an illustrative trophy using familiar materials: paper and lampblack sumi ink.

“GYOTAKU CAN BE BROKEN INTO ITS TWO PARTS: ‘GYO’ MEANING ‘FISH’ AND ‘TAKU’ MEANING ‘RUBBING’ OR ‘IMPRESSION.’”

The word gytaku can be broken into its two parts: ‘gyo’ meaning ‘fish’ and ‘taku’ meaning ‘rubbing’ or ‘impression’. Just as the Chinese would make impressions of stone carvings to preserve them, the Japanese of the mid-19th century developed fish printing to record the size of a notable catch. While historical records are scarce, the use of ink and paper pinpoints the origins of gytaku to East Asia, where these materials were readily available. And though it was once thought that gytaku was a Chinese import to

Japan, recent scholarship shows the converse to be true, and even then did the medium enter China only in the past century. While *gyotaku* was once a term which specifically referred to prints of actual fish, it has since become somewhat of an umbrella term encompassing prints of any aquatic or terrestrial specimen, from cephalopods and crustaceans to seaweeds and deciduous foliage.

The surface to be printed is hereon called a fish due to its prominence as the subject of printing. The direct method of fish printing, called *chokusetsu-hō* (literally “direct application method”), produces a mirror image of the fish. Ink is first applied to the fish using a brush or roller, then dabbed to avoid any blotches or bleeding of the ink. A piece of paper is then laid atop the fish and the fingers or an applicator tool (J: *tanpō*) are used to put a soft pressure on the fish to transfer the image. The result is a bold, crisp print with clear details of fins and scales. Only the eye is painted in later, as it is too gelatinous to take and transfer ink. The indirect method, *kansetsu-hō* (literally

“indirect application method”), delivers a much softer and smoother image. A thin paper is laid atop a fish and gently pressed into the naturally occurring details,



such as the gaps between the scales and the ridges of the fins. Ink is then applied to the relief using a *tanpo*. The result is an exact copy of the fish with clearly yet subtly defined edges and details. The third method, devised by one Hidenosuge Tanaka and called *tensha-*

hō (literally “transfer print method”), enables a fish print to be affixed to a surface typically unable to receive a print. The process produces a similarly crisp mirror image as chokusetsu-ho, but on a carrier surface, such as nylon, which is then pressed onto a harder surface to transfer the image. This technique is often used for wooden or plastic signs, or anything with a rigidity which prevents it from adequately hugging the fish contours and thus the complete transferral of ink. A final method, developed by Hideo Sato, combines the choku- and kansetsu-hō techniques into a “quick method”. A thin paper is laid atop the fish and pressed into the crevices, then ink dabbed sparingly on it. A second paper is laid atop that ensemble and pressed to transfer the image. This technique preserves the fish for eating, but is not so exact as the original methods. No one printing technique is superior to the others; it is the desired outcome which leads the artist to choose one over the others.

The oldest extant fish prints, in the collection of the Honma Museum in Sakata, Yamagata Prefecture, date to 1868 and are said to have been commissioned by one Lord Sakai, a feudal lord with an affinity for fishing, on the occasion of a single night’s catch of legendary proportions. A majority of these depict

sizeable red sea bream and were produced using both the direct and indirect methods of printing, which suggests that one technique did not predate the other as later gyotaku artists claim. For the most part, the Honma Museum prints depict saltwater fish; however, Japanese sources have recorded the existence of gyotaku depicting crucian carp from the freshwater moats of Sakata Castle.

Between those prints from Lord Sakai and the early 20th century - circa 1920s - not much survives in the way of prints. No one knows whether this is due to a lull in the practice or that none of those produced between these dates survived. However, under the auspices of printmakers such as Yutaka Aso, Seijin Murakami, and Funaji Endo, the connoisseurship of gyotaku made a resurgence in the years before the Second World War. Before the 1940s, gyotaku was done with black sumi on washi paper. The polychromatic indirect method, introduced by master Kōyō Inada, was first developed through the use of pigmented inks on silk, then on paper. This was passed on to Inada’s student Boshu Nagase after five years of training, who himself came to be a master of the polychromatic tradition.

In 1955, the Association for Gyotaku (J: Gyotaku-no-kai) was formed to promote the little known medium as a fine

art. To this end, traveling exhibitions were organized to maximize exposure to the Japanese public. The following year saw the first live demonstration of gyotaku techniques to an international audience, by one Janet Canning during a gyotaku exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History, New York. Dr. Yoshio Hiyama, author of the seminal text dealing with gyotaku - *Gyotaku: The Art and Technique of the Japanese Fish Print* - also presented live demonstrations and workshops and made public appearances on American television and radio programs to further popularize gyotaku in North America. The stylish yet anatomically accurate depictions of fish through gyotaku printings made the art form an optimal choice for illustrating natural history textbooks and scientific journals. It was first employed

“THE STYLISH YET ANATOMICALLY ACCURATE DEPICTIONS OF FISH THROUGH GYOTAKU PRINTINGS MADE THE ART FORM AN OPTIMAL CHOICE FOR ILLUSTRATING NATURAL HISTORY TEXTBOOKS AND SCIENTIFIC JOURNALS.”

in the 1950s. However, the transmission of gyotaku techniques were not solely through the efforts of the science community or the Gyotaku-no-kai: individual practitioners also made a concerted effort to bring the artform to the enthusiastic audience in the USA. Chiura Obata trained in both the western and Japanese painting traditions, then traveled to the United States to study art. After a short return to Japanese soil following his father’s death, Obata took up a position as a professor emeritus of art at the University of California, Berkeley. Exhibitions featuring his fish prints were well-received; a print of a steelhead was even published in an issue of the *Oakland, California Tribune* in 1932.

Another big step in the dissemination of gyotaku in the United States occurred with the establishment of the Nature Printing Society (NPS) in 1976 by Christopher Dewees, Frederick (Eric) Hochberg, and the late Robert Little. Originally intended by the founders to be a small club for gyotaku connoisseurs, the community grew into a non-profit organization with membership from around the world. At its onset, the NPS stressed that all members practice gyotaku in the traditional method,

with no retouching (read: adding details with a tool) save for instances where the eye had to be removed. Then, and only then, could the eye be added by brush. The society had been heavily involved in the publication and demonstration of gytaku practices, whether it be in the form of articles, books, workshops and classes, and exhibitions.

A major exhibition of gytaku, 'Pressed on Paper: Fish Rubbings and Nature Prints', began at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and toured North America from April 1981 through February 1985, after which it continued in Australia until October 1986. The exhibition tour marks the first great collaboration of American gytaku artists with American institutions, as it was supported by the NPS, the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, and the Smithsonian Institution Travelling Exhibition Service.

Not twenty years later, the art of gytaku evolved to incorporate technological advances into the practice. The active import of internationally produced papers - from non-traditional producers such as Thailand and Bhutan - and the development of papers capable of receiving toners and printer inks has allowed gytaku

to 'go digital'. Some artists create the images through a traditional method, then import the result to a photo-processing program for retouching and other manipulations. Others scan the raw source - whether fish or leaves or some other natural thing or object - to their computer and work it to produce a print-like result. This is then printed directly onto a computer or traditional paper, or can be made into a 3D relief which can itself be inked and printed onto paper.

While some artists have seamlessly meshed the traditional art of gytaku with digital devices, others have preferred to maintain the original techniques and adapted it to new materials. Genny and Shane Anderson, for example, use paints and inks to print onto fabrics (usually polyester or blends). Honolulu-based artist Reid Yoshida presses his subjects into wet clay and finishes it with colored glazes in an attempt to fuse the essence of gytaku with the durability of ceramics. Naoki Hayashi and Dane Kai Kondo, both also working out of Hawai'i, have combined their love of surf culture with gytaku: Hayashi by printing onto surfboards and Kondo by collaborating with Billabong to create a gytaku-inspired clothing line.

But as some gytaku artists bring the practice forward

into the 21st century by involving the contemporary products, others remain the old guard by maintaining the traditional techniques. Dwight Hwang is one of these, as he works solely with traditional materials in the chokusetsu-hō method, with fish either freshly caught or flash-frozen quickly thereafter. He has worked with both freshwater and saltwater specimens acquired on his own fishing trips or through Californian fish distributors and Japanese seafood importers. Through his own work, Dwight has perfected strategies to ensure anatomical accuracy while still showing

“DWIGHT HAS PERFECTED STRATEGIES TO ENSURE ANATOMICAL ACCURACY WHILE STILL SHOWING THE TRUE BEAUTY OF THE FISH.”

the true beauty of the fish. One such is the removal of unwieldy or otherwise extravagant pectoral fins which do not allow for an easy transfer of details, as can be found on the lionfish. Dwight cuts off the fin, prints the fish without it, then prints the fin alone in its most attractive position on top of the first layer. Any unnatural foreground-background overlap resulting

from this strategy is dealt with using Dwight's second 'cheat': affixing strategically torn paper fragments to areas where ink transferred but should not be. This in lieu of the more prominent method of retouching areas with white paint to emphasize patterns. Dwight's minimal use of sumi and paper for touch-ups has led him to instead manipulate the fish itself by removing scales in striped and spotted areas to emphasize them through a darker ink transfer. Aside from this technical prowess, Dwight has brought a unique type of perspective to his prints. Many gytaku artists - past and contemporary - present a straight-on view of the subject in its natural orientation. And while Dwight has done this in many of his own prints, he has also successfully produced images where the subject is seen from a three-quarters view or even from above. Dwight moves the art of gytaku forward while retaining the techniques of its founders in mid-19th century Japan.

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THE PROCESS

Traditional Techniques Finessed

The original method of Gyotaku is deceptively simple in both its technique and the materials used. A brush to swab Sumi ink onto the fish, and then a sheet of Washi paper to press onto the inked surface. However, it would take years for artisans to finesse their craft so that their prints appeared recognizable. And then years upon that to bring them back to life.

Preparing the ink

Bars of compressed Sumi (pine coal) is ground with water into a pestle until the desired consistency is achieved. The thickness of the ink depends on the surface of the subject and the quality of the paper intended to be used.



Inking

Sumi ink dries very quickly, within seconds on certain surfaces. And so once the ink is brushed onto the fish, there's a small window of time in which to control the different layers of pigment before applying the paper.



Paper

Once the ink is applied how I wish for it to be, a sheet of Japanese Washi is carefully placed onto the surface. Varying the pressure on the rub while recreating the shape of the fish onto the paper, all the while being careful not to create 'cracks' within the image due to the roundness of the body.

Detailing

After the raw print is created, details such as the eye and patterns within the body are painted in until completion.



CATALOGUE



Butterfly Koi

鯉 (Hirenaga Nishikigoi)

"One of the most beautiful creatures I have ever seen. Like rolls of silk flowing in water."

Koi w/dragonfly

鯉 (Koi to Tonbo)

"One of my favorite moments while fishing is when a fish notices something on the surface of the water and rises to inspect it."



Small Koi w/dragonfly

鯉 (Koi to Tonbo)

"Most people wouldn't recognize Koi fish from their side. But when looking at them from above, everyone knows exactly what it is. It's how most of us see them in garden ponds all over the world. By printing them from the top, I hope to recreate that experience and memory of gazing down at these special fish."

Octopus

真蛸 (Madako)

"Cephalopods are particularly enjoyable for me to print as their very expressive arms and legs lend well to creating movement and subtle emotions."





Octopus w/sea fans

真蛸 (Madako)

"When printing other objects such as sea fans, plants, shells, etc., the dry surface quickly absorbs nearly all of the ink leaving nothing to transfer onto the paper. So what I'll do is to either thicken the ink with wheat paste and/or soak the object prior to printing."



Small Octopus

小蛸 (Kodako)

"A study of printing small octopodes in expressive poses."

Giant Pacific Octopus

水蛸 (Mizudako)

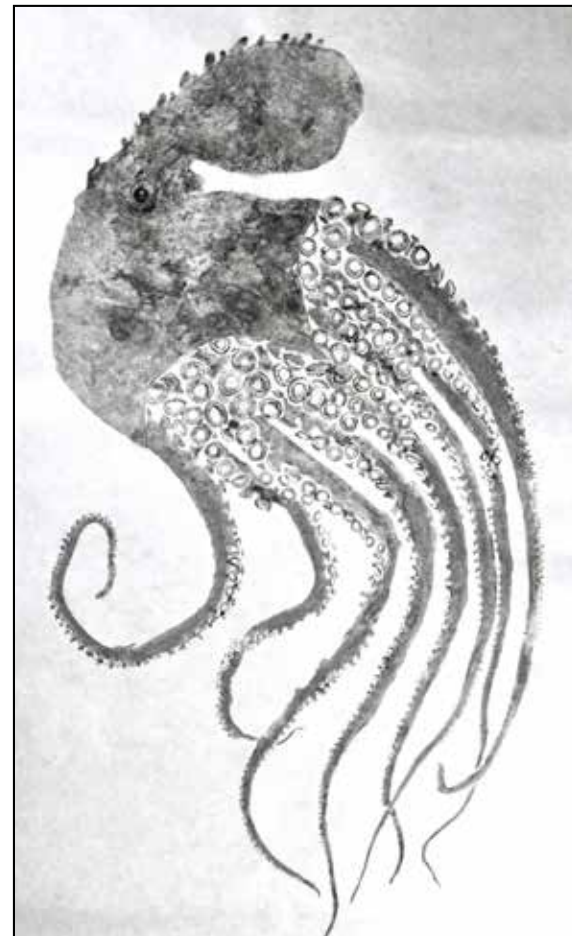
"Given their intelligence, there are times when I will opt to pose these creatures with a more human-like character."



Giant Pacific Octopus

水蛸 (Mizudako)

"I asked an Alaskan boat fisherman how large of an octopus he could send me. This is what arrived on my doorstep."





Monkfish

魚安魚康 (Ankou)

"I find that the stranger and more displeasing a fish looks, the more interesting the print will turn out."

Rainbow Trout

虹魚鱒 (Nijimasu)

"Under perfect conditions, the water's ceiling (the underside of the water surface) can reflect what is directly below."



Opah

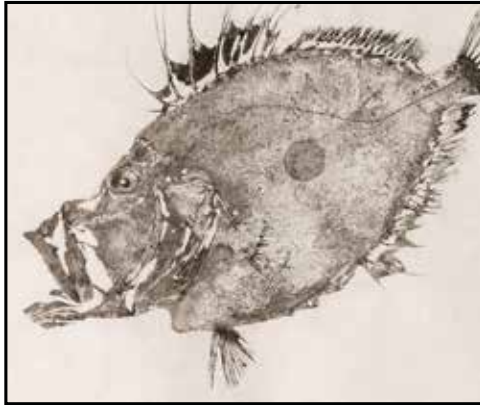
赤翻車魚 (Akamanbo)

"Despite its casual appearance, the Opah was easily the most difficult for me to print thus far. Acquiring one in pristine condition and small enough to fit my largest paper wasn't any easier. What you see is the fruit of massive coordination by Catalina Offshore Products, from their processing crew all the way to their boat captains."

John Dory

的鯛 (Matoudai)

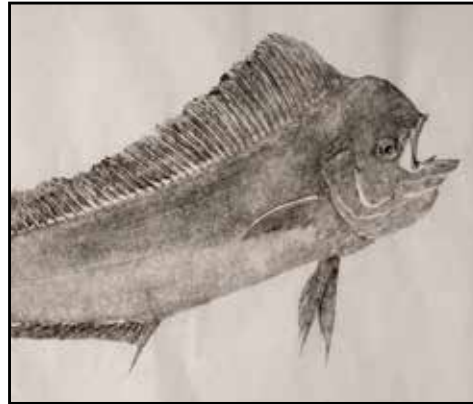
"I often look back at the years I spent in Japan, specifically of the grand fish markets there. Endless aisles laden with exotic fish. I wish I could return there in hopes of maturing my art even further."



Mahi Mahi

鱈 (Shiira)

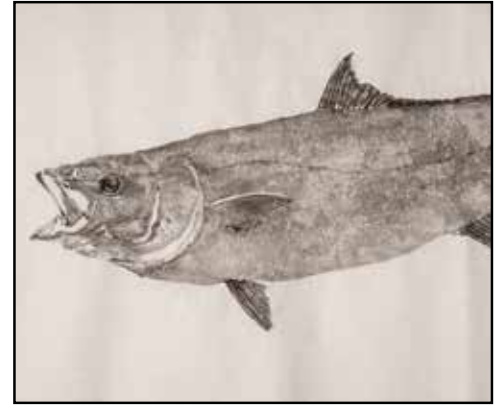
"To witness a dolphinfish die, one gains a pure appreciation for how vibrant life is. The moment it succumbs, its ever-changing colors fade into a quieting dullness."



Yellowtail

鮭 (Hamachi)

"The largest fish I have caught was a Buri class Hamachi. With a print, it's easy to recall every detail of that capture, from setting the hook to holding the catch up with pride."

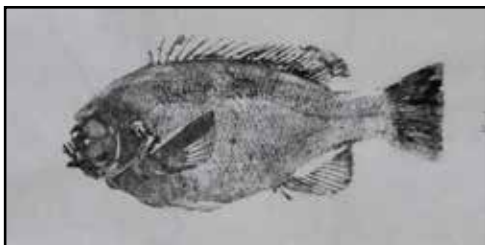
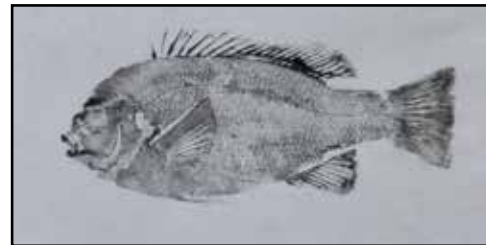
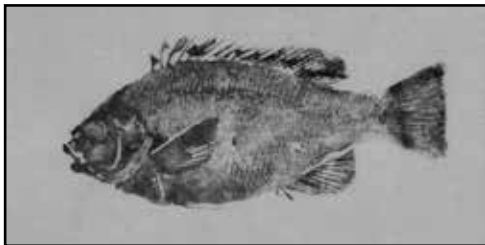


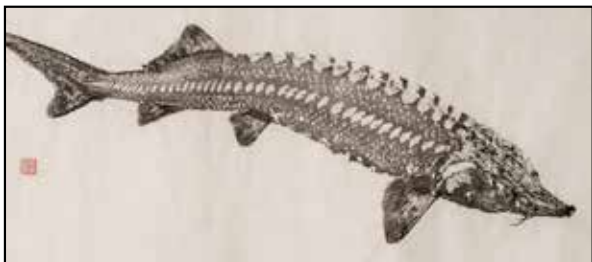


Opaleye

眼仁奈 (Mejina)

"Printing fish can be very easy and straightforward. In time, one will find that results will vary slightly with different types of paper. And since every fish has a unique surface, it's beneficial to match the most receptive paper to the fish being printed. Most of these test papers were donated by Hiromi Paper, Inc."

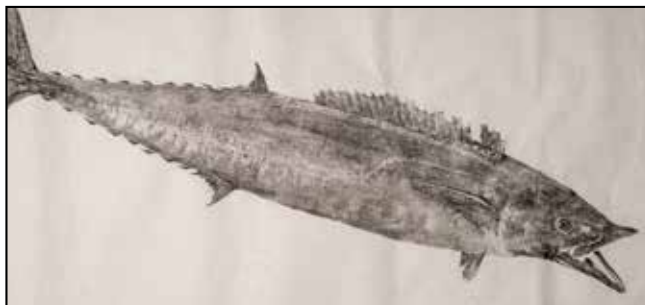




Sturgeon

蝶鮫 (Chou Zame)

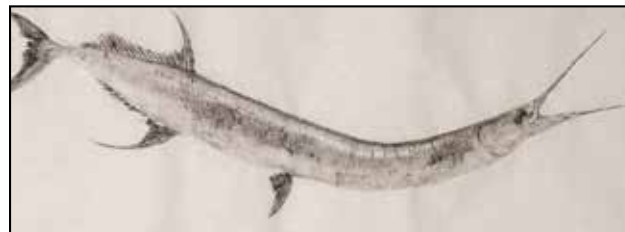
"In Korea, they are called the Armored Shark, which I think is very telling of Korean culture. In Japan, they are called the Butterfly Shark, which I also think is very telling of Japanese culture. Function vs aesthetics."



Houndfish

沖鱧 (Oki Zayori)

"Fellow fish printing friend Heather Fortner brought this fish back from Peru and kindly gave it to me when I visited her studio in Oregon. World traveler in its post life."



Wahoo

鮪鱈 (Kamasu Zawara)

"I tried printing this fish flat, but the result lacked their inherent power and presence. Rolling it into a slight 3/4 angle gives it a much more formidable demeanor."

Flying Fish

飛魚 (Tobiuo)

"Above the surface, their flight appears carefree and joyous. But the reality of what we witness is panic due to dangers unseen below."



Bluefin Tuna Head

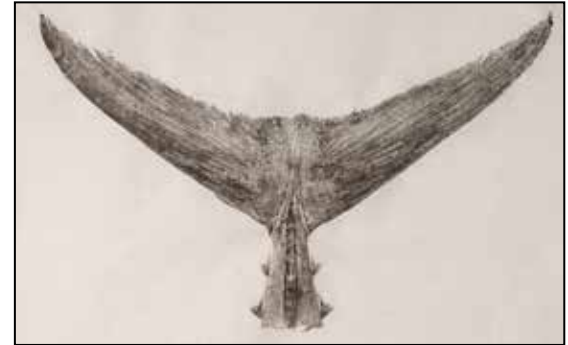
鮪 (Maguro no Atama)

"One man's trash is another man's treasure. Meant to be discarded; now given back some of its original glory."

Bluefin Tuna Tail

鮪 (Maguro no Shippo)

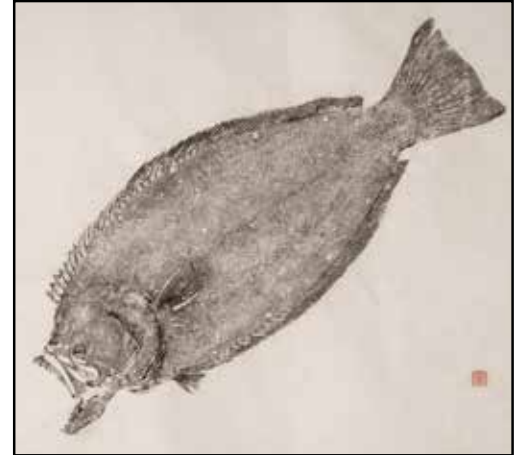
"I've seen many bull horns on display in Western culture. I suppose this is the Eastern version."



Asian Sheephead

瘤鯛 (Kobudai)

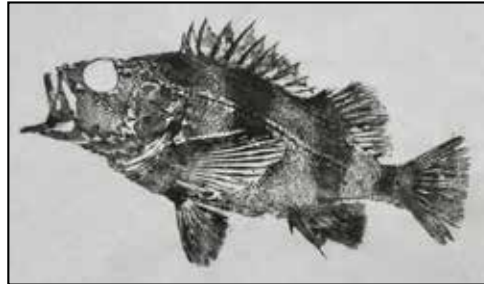
"An interesting note about the Sheephead Wrasse is that they all start out as females. Once they reach a certain size, they become males like the one printed here."



Rockfish

眼張 (Mebaru)

"Sometimes I'll print a fish that displays patterns of high contrast. Rather than painting the pattern after the print, I prefer to descale the darker areas where the exposed skin will allow the paper to absorb more ink, thus a darker pattern."



Halibut

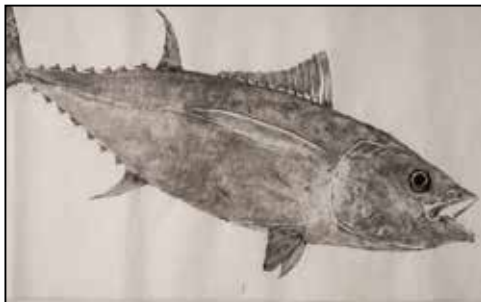
平目 (Hirame)

"A prize caught by a good friend while fishing together. Because he was glowing with pride, I thought he would take it home; instead, he turned to me and asked for it to be turned into a lasting memory."

Bigeye Tuna

目撥鮪 (Mebachi Maguro)

"I often see prints of tuna that appear disproportionately wide due the roundness of their bodies. To avoid this, I print all of the fins separately to keep the proportions as correct as possible. Also note the slight 3/4 angle which is a time consuming, but very rewarding process for me."



Coelacanth

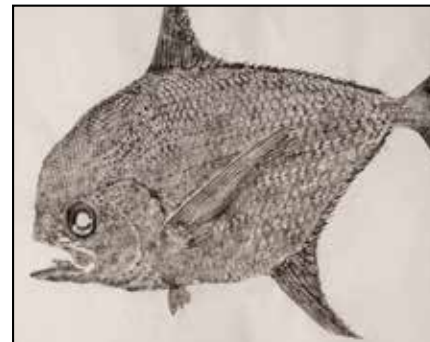
シーラカンス (Shirakansu)

"Without an opportunity to print an actual Coelacanth, I resorted to printing a plaster mould using a soy based oil ink as sumi would not adhere to its surface. This is the only print I've done without my favored sumi ink."

Pomfret

万歳魚 (Manzaiuo)

"This is a deep water fish I hadn't heard of until my seafood distributor brought it to my attention. Scales like armor and eyes that peer into the abyss."

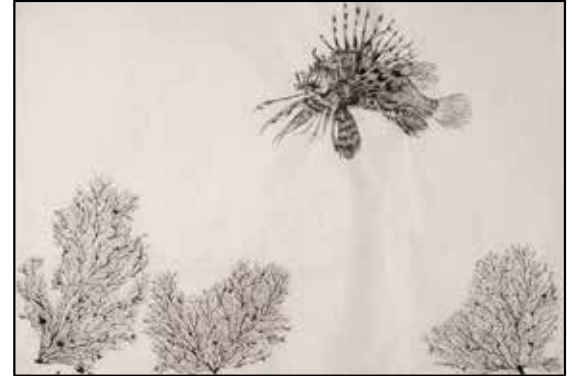




Cherry Salmon

山女魚 (Yamame)

“Japan is home to one of the smallest salmon species; I thought it would be a good subject for adding ink splashes to mimic the rush of water.”



Lionfish

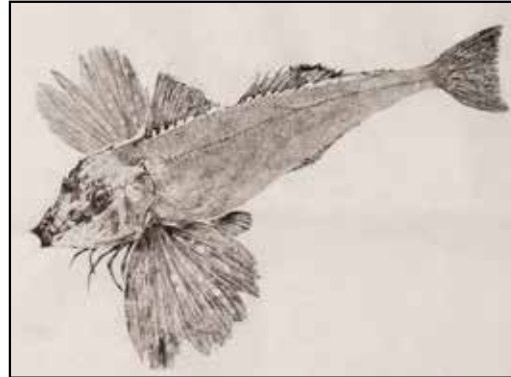
蓑笠子 (Mino Kasago)

“To match their elaborate fins, the process which I undertake in printing the Lionfish is just as elaborate in order to give as much beauty back to this fish: it requires the cutting off of fins and using them as a sort of separate stamp. Another name the Japanese have for this fish is Hanami-Kasago, which literally translates to the Rockfish of Fireworks.”

Bluefin Gurnard

魚方魚 (Houbou)

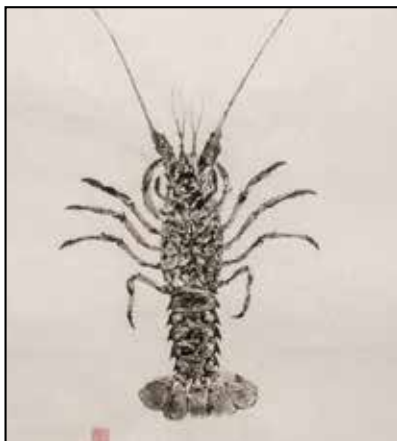
“Imagine my shock when I first pulled one of these out of Tokyo Bay. A fish with wings...and creepy spider legs.”



Spiny Lobster

伊勢海老 (Ise Ebi)

"I have seen many prints of lobsters from the side or from the top. But I had never seen one printed from the bottom, which prompted me to attempt it."



Sailfin Poacher/Dragonfish

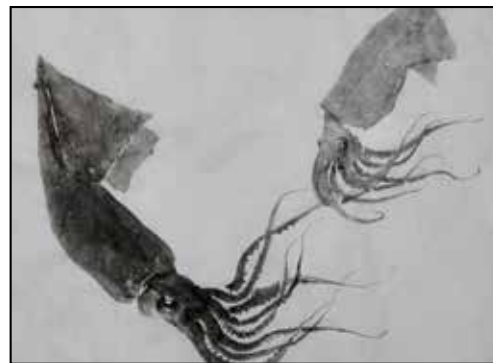
八角 (Hakkaku)

"The more and more I print, the stricter I become about adhering to using only sumi and washi. Even for white highlights in the fins and eyes, I tear appropriately shaped pieces of blank washi and rice paste them to create a unified look. Using white paint would be easier and much less time consuming, but keeping the image based within one world is more important to me."

Magister Armhook Squid

烏賊 (Dosu Ika)

"Every print I've seen of squid display them with their mantle fins spread out flat. So I attempted printing this pair at angles in relation to each other as if they were interacting."



CO-ORGANIZERS



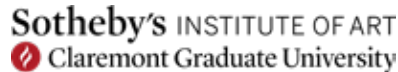
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