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Weekly

Weekend Edition

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HANDS OF CLAY

Palo Alto artist
makes monoprints
using earthiest
of media
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Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Rebecca Wallace

by Rebecca Wallace

Martha Castillo has a pizza-dough roller hooked to her belt and a dozen Cheerios in her hand. Other tools stand at the ready: graters, milk crates, a pasta maker.

Oh, and a rubber ear syringe. And plastic bottles of pigment.

"I love this so much!" Castillo announces as she works. "I want to share it all."

Fortunately, she doesn't mean you have to eat what she's making. This Palo Alto room may have the blithe clutter and energy of a cooking class, but it's actually Castillo's home art studio, dedicated to the earthiest of media: clay.

Squint, and the room's centerpiece could be a butcher-block island. Instead, it's Castillo's work surface, which she calls her slab: plywood crowned with countless layers of pigmented, slightly soft clay. Tools are used to create shapes and patterns on the slab. Press paper or canvas down and peel it off, and a layer of clay comes with it, creating a print called a clay monotype.

The slab is huge: Castillo can pull prints as large as 34 by 46 inches. And because she's always adding new layers of clay, every print is different.

That's fitting, because clay monotyping is an uncommon art. When Castillo hosts workshops on the subject, her students often include curious artists from other media. One is Sophie Aix, who typically works with paper, but has taken three workshops.

Aix likes the feel of the clay and appreciates the versatility of monotyping; it (continued on next page)



Norbert von der Groeben



Clay monotyping is a richly layered process. In her studio, Martha Castillo uses a milk crate as a stencil (top), rolls damp clay from the underside of newsprint onto the slab (above), shapes clay between her hands (right), and peels off a finished print (far right).



ART of the EARTH

Palo Alto artist peels back the layers of life in her clay prints



Norbert von der Groeben



Norbert von der Groeben

"I love this so much!" Martha Castillo says of monotyping.

Art of the earth

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has room for both her more realistic style and Castillo's abstract work, she said.

"Martha seems to work wholly spontaneously — which is a characteristic that I admire and envy," she said.

Another workshop student, Aletta de Wal, works in glass and canvas but was "hooked" by clay monotyping's complexity: mixing colors, applying layers.

De Wal is also the director of Artist Career Training in Los Altos, which helps artists promote their own work. She says clay printmakers face a challenge in getting their art out there; the medium is unusual, so there are fewer market trappings — prizes, shows, magazines — supporting it.

Still, novelty can be a selling point, and de Wal says Castillo's positive energy is an asset.

"Her arts background and lively character combine to keep viewers engaged in her demonstrations and talks," de Wal said.

Castillo's arts experience is indeed rich. Starting as a young girl, she studied ballet for 13 years. She has a bachelor's degree in theater arts and a master's in art therapy, as well as a portfolio that includes acrylic paintings and mixed-media pieces. When her husband's work took the family to England for seven years, Castillo studied ceramics there.

The real click with clay came after she returned to the States. Castillo was on a trip in Pennsylvania about three years ago when she discovered clay monotype pioneer Mitch Lyons' workshops. He became a major influence — Castillo even brought him to Palo Alto once to teach at the Pacific Art League — and she speaks of him with reverence.

She learned that each clay monotype was unique, but that an artist could make a series by repeatedly pulling prints from the same section of a slab. Because a small amount of clay is removed each time, every print has a slightly altered design, but colors and patterns echo each other across the series.

The intricate nature of clay monotypes also drew Castillo in.

"In my experience, nothing is flat; not paper, brushes, tables, thoughts or feelings," she wrote in an artist's statement. "We reside among myriad layers of color, texture, and meaning. ... Everything, from my earliest memory up until this moment, is a potential element, layer or color; nothing is wasted."

In this world, history is clearly prized. On www.mitchlyons.com, Lyons announces that the slab he has used for all his prints is now 25 years old. Castillo's is about 2.

Clay's forgiving nature allows the slabs to live on. Layers used for printing are never fired; instead, they're kept at a "leather-hard" consistency, Castillo said. At night, she covers her slab with moist flannel, then wraps it in plastic.

"Clay is very stable," she says regarding her slab fondly. "If it dries out, you can just re-moisten it."

There are numerous ways to apply new layers for printing. White china clay mixed with water is Castillo's basic ink; she adds powder or liquid pigment for color.

Today, she chooses school-bus yellow clay, brushing a healthy portion onto newsprint paper she buys from the Weekly. The paper helps the clay dry somewhat — if it's too wet, the colors will "mush together" on the slab. The trusty pizza roller comes into play as Castillo puts the paper face-down onto the slab and rolls it flat, adding yellow to the slab's rainbow.

Castillo squeezes the ear syringe to apply clay like ink. A fat plastic comb leaves lines in the slab.

Another method utilizes dry balls of clay that look like misshapen Easter eggs. Using Cheerios as stencils, Castillo rubs a ball over a grater, showering the cereal with powdered clay and leaving bare circles underneath. She sprays the powder with water to maintain its shapes.

"You use everything you can think of," Castillo says, picking up a milk crate, whose grid also works as a stencil.

After a few more layers, she looks thoughtfully at her handiwork. Was it too much?

"Sometimes I feel like I ruined it," she says. "But you can never ruin it. You just add more layers."

To make the print, she takes a piece of paper and rolls it over her chosen area of the slab with the pizza roller, smoothing it in places with the back of a spoon, then peels the paper back. A busy world of color and designs emerges. In some places the hues are bold and clear; in others they are powdery from the clay balls, like fairy dust.

It's a typically imaginative print for Castillo, who likes to find "places to travel" in corners of her work. And if she decides to keep the creation, it may end up with just as creative a title. She gets a kick out of choosing monikers that invite multiple interpretations, such as "On the Square" and "Rain Shadow."

"I like to give titles that don't close you in," she says. ■

Info: Martha Castillo is currently exhibiting at the Flea St. Cafe at 3607 Alameda de las Pulgas in West Menlo Park. A reception is set for April 15 from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m.; call 650-854-1226. Castillo is also planning several workshops. Go to www.marthacastillo.net.

About the cover:

White clay is Martha Castillo's basic ink. Photograph by Norbert von der Groeben.



Castillo calls this print "Windy Skyline."