

Palo Alto artist Martha Castillo masters a little-known artistic technique.

By Traci Vogel

Ever since Persian potters discovered that a glaze made of cobalt produced a brilliant blue color when fired, painting and pottery have been kissing cousins. Chinese artists in the 13th century rendered haunting blue-and-white landscapes on their earthenware. Three hundred years later, after European potters replicated Asian techniques, a mad rush of English porcelain artists began painting detailed portraits and still-lives on their platters and teapots.

But no one thought of reversing the process – of taking the paint off the pottery and putting it on a canvas – until 1968. That was the year Mitch Lyons, a Pennsylvania potter and printmaker, had a brainstorm.

What if he took rice paper and pressed it onto his painted slabware before it was fired? Eventually, Lyons refined his idea, giving up on firing the clay and using it instead as a plate from which to create multiple prints. Instead of rice paper, he switched to a spun polyester canvas. He has used the same slabplate for 30 years, and his method has become known as clay monotyping.



What Lyons discovered was that the clay slabplate, hardened to what potters call a “leatherlike” consistency, acts like the limestone in traditional lithographic printmaking – with a few important differences. Rather than being a neutral surface, the clay plate gives up little bits of itself as the colored liquid clay it’s painted with (called “slip”) is printed, lending the print a depth and texture that traditional monotypes cannot. The process also produces an archival quality print, because the clay slip and the polyester canvas create an incredibly durable electrostatic bond. Because the slip builds up on the clay plate but isn’t completely separate from it, the results are a little bit unpredictable. The artist is never quite sure what she’ll be peeling off the plate.

“I think I get a much richer, much more complex image,” says Palo Alto artist Martha Castillo, who learned the technique directly from Lyons. “With traditional monotype, you can go back and reprint and reprint and reprint until you get the richness or effects you want, but every time you do that you’re potentially covering up what’s underneath. In clay monotype, you’re revealing what’s underneath.”

Castillo is one of the very few artists doing clay monotypes today; the process is still fairly obscure. Although she had worked in both clay and printmaking, Castillo herself hadn’t heard of clay monotyping until visiting her son in Philadelphia last summer, when she saw an advertisement for a class taught by

Lyons. The description intrigued her, and she ended up postponing her flight home so that she could take the class. From that day, she says, “I was just totally hooked.”

So hooked, that Castillo not only got Lyons to teach a class last month at the Pacific Art League in Palo Alto, where she’s an active member, but she’ll be teaching the technique herself starting November 11. For her upcoming show, she has created 22 brand new prints. Castillo likes the technique because it feels more “immediate” to her, and “there’s something about the tactile messiness of clay,” she says. In her abstract pieces, Castillo combines stencil work to control where the pigment lands on the clay with sweeping brushwork to create tiers of color and texture.

“When I talk about myself as an artist, I talk in terms of being a layerist,” Castillo says. “I see the world in terms of layers of experience, layers of time, layers of history. I begin building layers from the moment I wake up in the morning.”

Which partly explains the title of Castillo’s show, Vibrant Earth. It’s an homage to clay, her métier, but also, she says, in light of the recent hurricanes and earthquakes, an acknowledgment that we live on a dynamic planet. Castillo plans to donate 10 percent of all proceeds from the show to hurricane and earthquake relief.

Clay monotyping, like the earth itself, may be messy and complex and unpredictable, but Castillo is just fine with that. “That’s one of the things I love about it,” she says. “I don’t want to be 100% totally in control of it. I like the happy surprises.”

Vibrant Earth, clay monotypes by Martha Castillo, shows from Nov. 1 – Nov. 29 in the Elizabeth Norton Studio at The Pacific Art League, 668 Ramona St., Palo Alto (650) 321-3891 www.pacificartleague.org.

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