

Signpost featured artist of the month
BUNNY BOWEN INNOVATES IN BATIK,
USING SOYBEAN WAX

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—BILL DIVEN

More than two thousand years ago Asian artists found a way to use wax and dyes to layer complex images on fabric.

But it took Placitas artist Bunny Bowen to bring the art known as batik into the twenty-first century. Three years ago, while seeking a source of traditional beeswax on the Internet, she happened onto a candle maker who had invented a wax made from soybeans.

Curious, she ordered ten pounds.

“To my knowledge, no one else was using it,” Bowen said. “No one had heard of it.”

In her greenhouse studio, she followed the ancient wax-resist method of waxing areas of fabric so color doesn't penetrate when the fabric is immersed in dye. She waxed again and again, working from lighter to darker colors through as many as twenty layers, until landscapes and other images emerged.

Not only did the wax work but its organic source made it more environmentally friendly.

“Soy is not as toxic to work with as petrochemical waxes,” Bowen said. It also washes out with water, while other waxes often require chemical dry cleaning, she added.

Pleased by the results, Bowen wrote a paper on her discovery and presented it in June to the World Batik Conference in Boston. With the word out, organizers of the Kuala Lumpur International Batik Conference invited her to Malaysia, where she delivered her paper again last month.

A New Mexico resident since 1967, Bowen is a portrait and landscape painter by training, with a master's degree in art history from the Uni-

Bunny Bowen in her Placitas studio with recent work, God's Glory in the Morning



versity of New Mexico. That led to work researching textiles and dyes and coauthoring a book on Spanish textiles as a staff member of the Museum of International Folk Art.

Then, an artist in residence at the Placitas Elementary School, which her children attended, held a free workshop on batik.

“It just clicked because it brought together the painting part of my background and textiles and dyes,” Bowen said. “That was 1980, and this is the longest I've ever worked with one medium.”

“I guess it's the one I'm going to keep.”

With traditional batik, cracks develop in the wax which are filled in by the darkest dye when the fabric is immersed for the last time. The dark lines, known as crackling, give batik its special appearance.

Recently Bowen has worked in a Japanese batik form called rozome, in which color is brushed on without crackling. Working mostly on silk, rozome also allows gradations of color rather than solid pigments typical of batik.

The results may be the gentle God's Glory in the Morning, based on morning glories in her garden, or the starkness of a full moon seemingly cradled in the branches of a bare apple tree. The latter image appeared at Ghost Ranch, near Abiquiu, as she sat in the



In the Orchard, Ghost Ranch, a batik, made with beeswax and soy wax, by Bunny Bowen

apple orchard after teaching a class in silk painting.

Placitas residents would recognize her batik landscapes showing the rolling and textured foothills of the Sandia Mountains.

Bowen's work hangs in the Jezebel Gallery, off Canyon Road, in Santa Fe, and at Johnson's of Madrid, in that Santa Fe County community. Her images also will grace the Las Placitas Presbyterian Church March 4-31, with an opening reception March 5 at 1:30 p.m., as part of the Placitas Artists Series.

On the Internet, Bowen's batik and rozome can be seen by visiting www.sandovalsignpost.com and clicking on the featured-artist link.