

Karen Illman Miller
Katazome Artist

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I grew up in a home where both art and science were respected. My father was an organic chemist and my mother an artist, the daughter of one of the early naturalists in the Pacific Northwest. My zoologist grandfather traveled to Japan in 1908 and returned with an appreciation for the Japanese aesthetic and for their love of their own natural history as depicted in their art and textiles. He was a mentor for me as a child and his inspiration eventually influenced my choice of marine biology as a career. I spent 25 years as a research scientist at Oregon State University, studying Octopus oxygen binding proteins. I now realize I was always an artist as well, and my choice of career was made at least in part because of the beauty of the animals. I worked while raising three children but I always made time for art. My mother was a painter, and a good one, but I was genuinely drawn to textiles as my medium, first embroidery, then quilting and finally, my real artistic home, *katazome*, Japanese stencil dyeing. I had adored traditional Japanese stencil designs for nearly 30 years. Carving my first stencil in a class taught by a Japanese indigo dyer was a turning point in my artistic life and I have never looked back. Although I studied briefly with American katazome expert John Marshall, most of my work over the last twenty-five years has been independent, carving hundreds of stencils and using them to make traditional and experimental textiles for art quilts, garments and interiors.

Katazome allows me to separate the production of the image from the application of color, a process more akin to printmaking than to painting. The stencil itself is made from several layers of thin mulberry fiber paper, which have been laminated with persimmon juice and smoked, yielding an aromatic brown paper. It is brittle and easy to cut when dry, but leathery and tough when wet. A layer of silk mesh lacquered on the top surface protects even the most intricate stencil from damage when the rice paste resist is spread through it onto the fabric. Then the fabric is either dipped into the indigo vat, or stretched like a hammock and dye painted. The pattern emerges when the resist is soaked off. I began carving stencils using mostly traditional Japanese patterns and they taught me much about cutting techniques and the layout of the design. This "apprenticeship" ultimately enabled me to design my own stencils, inspired by the images which speak most deeply to me.

Combining art and science in my work, I care deeply that what I depict is biologically accurate as well as beautiful. My work ranges from realistic to abstract. Pattern is my passion, pattern found in natural forms, detailed biological images like tree branches, leaf skeletons, or marine animals and especially the abstractions nature produces when you move in close or zoom way out. Why invent when nature supplies such a wealth of beauty to use in my art?