

WHAT DARKNESS IS FOR: MASABAN BY THE MOKUHANGA SISTERS

Natasha Norman

The MASABAN project comprises nine prints, each an edition of five, by the members of the artist collective, Mokuhanga Sisters. Each artwork was created on sheets of washi paper using black sumi ink using the woodblock printing technique mokuhanga. The project was linked by medium and material rather than by subject, and this paper endeavours to explicate the themes that this material-led approach to art making has yielded by unpacking the material qualities of the printing process, the paper, ink and final display of the works at the Udatsu Paper and Craft Museum in Echizen in April 2024. The colour black is a particular unifying characteristic of the project, and much discussion was held among the Mokuhanga Sisters as to the thematic resonances of this colour.

THE COLOUR BLACK

The earliest recorded use of black as a colour is in cave paintings. Made from the soot of burnt animal bones scraped across rock surfaces, black is the intended mark of the earliest painters. Soot is the basis of blackness, the dust of fire. Bone Black, Vine Black, Ivory Black, Date Stone Black, Cherry Stone Black, and Lamp Black are all black pigments created from burning, conflating black's symbolic meaning with the enduring sacredness of fire and the interplay of light and darkness.

"I have been forty years discovering that the queen of all colours was black," claimed Pierre-Auguste Renoir, the influential French Impressionist painter living from 1841 to 1919. Such an assertion may seem strange, but for many years in the Western canon, black (and its sister colour, white) was considered apart from the realm of colour. Pastoureau's tome *Black: The History of a Colour* (2008), gives many insights into the shifting perception of black as a colour through Western culture. He observes that with the proliferation of text in black on white pages when mechanised printing emerged during the 1450s, black was removed from the colour canon in the West. Later scientific advancements by

Newton, who split white light into its spectrum, further cemented black's fate as a colour "apart." (Pistoureau, 2008 p.14). Black and its companion, white, became commanding sensibilities in the Western imagination, being polar symbols of the spiritual forces of good and evil and, within the colonial mind, a convenient sensibility to assert the superiority of the Caucasian race.

With the advent of the Modern era, black was once again embraced without embarrassment as a truly modern colour. It is the colour of sexy dresses, anarchist flags, and bikers' leather jackets. All the historical nuance of the colour that Pistoureau charts, from Medieval heraldry to the 16th-century garb of princes, the Benedictine Monk's Habit to

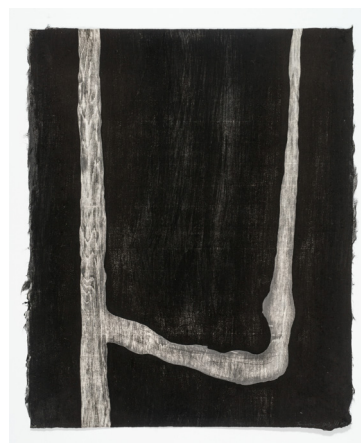


Figure 1

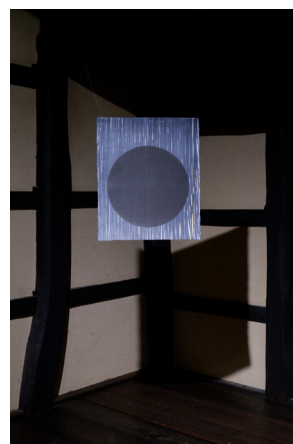


Figure 2

Figure Titles and Information

Figure 1. Tenacity (2024) by Lucy May Schofield
 Figure 2. Dark Light (2024) by Kate MacDonagh

the first motor cars by Henry Ford, continue to bear on its use and reception in the contemporary era.

Contemporary interests in material awareness have seen the revival of historical traditions of colour-making. Dr David Cranswick and Daniel Docherty have revived the Medieval Quadrivium approach to the liberal arts and offer immersive workshops that foreground sacred harmony with natural materials. Insights from their workshop were discussed in Mokuhanga Sister meetings after Lucy May Schofield attended one of their courses in East Sussex. In the Quadrivium approach, black is placed at the centre of the colour spectrum, heralded as the creation colour or timelessness itself. Black represents the feminine, the container of everything - not just a colour but a doorway into the world, the void where black lies at the beginning of life, of creation itself.

While bone black may have prevailed in the West, in the Eastern traditions, black ink was made from charcoal. The history of Japanese sumi ink is said to have originated in 610AD when a Korean Monk named Damjing, or Doncho in Japanese, introduced the production of Shoen Zumi to Nara (Takashi, n.d.). Shoen Zumi is made from pine soot. From 600 AD, Nara was established as a significant seat in Buddhist religious temples. As a religious centre, lots of black ink was needed to transcribe important sutras. With abundant forest near Nara, the city emerged as a sustainable site for high-quality ink production (Takashi, n.d.).

Because of the extensive use of black ink in Japanese culture for administration and cultural development, ink production was common throughout Japan. Nara ink production became more valuable with the introduction of Yuen Zumi (Lamp Soot Ink), which produces deep and superior black ink. At the beginning of the Muromachi period, a monk at the Kofuku-ji Temple experimented with making ink from the soot of votive candles (Takashi, n.d.). The deep blue-black lamp soot ink produced quickly became a prized commodity throughout Japan. Interestingly, in a linguistic analysis of the Japanese language (Ichiro Kuriki et al., 2017), kuon (dark blue) emerged as one of the oldest colour terms, not kon, the more commonly used contemporary term for black. The conflation of very dark blue within a Japanese lexicon with the notion of black in a Western context may have its overlap with the blue-black of sumi ink. While Western sensibilities sought to separate black from the colour palette, Japanese image makers have consistently considered it a distinct colour, preferring to print the keyblock image in a Mokuhanga woodblock in light gray with black reserved for the brocade on tunics and the fine hair of the geisha or kabuki actor.

MOKUHANGA, A BRIEF HISTORY

The term moku-han-ga (wood-impression-picture) has gained international recognition as a fine-art relief print method that is characterised by techniques that are ancient to Japan. The technique's evolution from a consumer cultural interest in colour images during



Figure 3



Figure 4

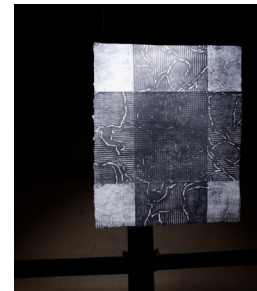


Figure 5

the Edo period to the term's more recent linguistic shift or branding as a contemporary artistic practice is, according to Claire Cuccio's (2018) investigation of the term, a means of establishing the print medium as part of the lexicon of fine art practices. Within Japan, the shift from an industry or craft to one of artistic value was mainly due to the influence of Western trade and technology in the 1880s. Initially, Western technologies elicited a denigration of the woodblock workshops and print houses as an outdated printing process. When Japanese artists travelled to Europe and discovered the historic artistic value attributed to Japanese woodblock prints and, indeed, woodblock printing in general, they attempted to shift the language of the medium from the casual Edo term *-e* (picture) as in *ukiyo-e* or *nishiki-e* to the more refined term *-ga* (picture) associated with *Nihonga* (Japanese style painting) and *suibokuga* (ink painting) (Cuccio, 2018). Various artistic movements emerged in Japan after adopting the term *hanga*, which subsequently, signifies a particular style or practice of *mokuhanga*, namely *sosaku hanga* and *shin hanga*. Claire Cuccio attributes the 20th-century establishment of the term *mokuhanga* to artists and professors at the Tokyo University of the Arts (Geidai) who institutionalised the expression to combat historical bias against woodblock courses in university printmaking programs. The growth of international interest in *mokuhanga* has been primarily due to Keiko Kadota, who, responding to the decline in support for centuries-old workshops and skilled crafts people making paper, carving tools, baren and brushes, began an artist-in-residence program in 1997 with its existing program established in 2011. The program sought to introduce international artists to *mokuhanga*, and its success has seen a renewed interest and economy for living treasure artisans in Japan. After establishing the International Mokuhanga Conference in 2011, Kadota released the term *mokuhanga* into the art world through the conference's English title. The term is less cumbersome than the explanatory 'Japanese-style water-based woodblock printing' but is also now freed from the socio-political burdens of its Chinese characters, promoting an inventive and evolving adaptation of the medium across international borders.

THE MOKUHANGA SISTERS

The Mokuhanga Sisters exemplify the freedom that *mokuhanga* enjoys on a world stage. The group was formed through a few art-in-residencies at the MI-Lab centre in Kawaguchiko before the program's recent relocation to Echizen at the end of 2023. The curious micro-culture of residencies is such that when a group of strangers joined by a common interest come together, the resulting environment can be harmonious or charged with personality clashes. The Mokuhanga Sisters found in each other a shared ethos of love for Japan, art, teaching, and caregiving for each other's interests and careers, which fostered the successful formation of the group as an artist collective. The effects of COVID-19 closely bonded the group and saw the creation of their first collective artwork, *Borderless*.

Inspired by the techniques and skills acquired on their recent MI-Lab residency, *Borderless* is presented as a traditional *maki mono*



Figure 6

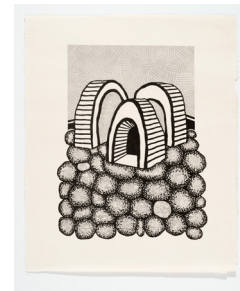


Figure 7



Figure 8

scroll that collates a single mokuhanga print from each Sister into a continuous narrative. The thinking behind each print contribution was fostered in fortnightly Zoom meetings where discussions about the global approach to COVID-19 and the need for community and connection to liberate from spaces of isolation and fear became the prevailing narrative.

Following on from the success of this project and its positive reception in subsequent exhibitions at the Kentler Drawing Centre in New York, the Vermont Arts Centre and St Lawrence University Gallery, the Mokuhanga Sisters decided to attempt a new project, MASABAN for exhibition at the International Mokuhanga Conference in Echizen (2024). The fortnightly Zoom meetings became entrenched as a working feature of the collective, enabling the members to evolve thoughts and share technical knowledge as the MASABAN project developed. The meetings are challenging given the vast range of time zones that need to be considered when scheduling online connections across various countries: Japan, the USA, England, Ireland, South Africa, Europe, and China. The Collective is truly an international artistic cell and, as this discussion of the MASABAN project attempts to share, uniquely situated to respond to Kadota's offering of the term mokuhanga as an innovative and adaptive artistic process.

MASABAN

The term masaban is a unit of measurement for washi paper in Japan. According to David Bull's online glossary of Japanese woodblock printing terminology, it is the standard size of traditional hosho paper. Bull simply defines hosho as a high-quality printing paper. The term hosho-shi refers specifically to historic papers used for official documents that would have been of the highest quality.

The Japanese tradition of making paper by hand continues to define the quality and size of Japanese washi paper. Since the skill has been little mechanised, paper sizes are determined by the bamboo mesh suspended in a frame that is dipped into the vat of slurry and, through a series of side-to-side movements, washed off the screen such that thin layers of washi fibres are woven into a resulting paper sheet. Traditionally, each paper-making family or historic industry would have defined the size of the sheet of paper they made based on the sukisu (the container from which the paper slurry is scooped) and keta tools used to strain the paper slurry. Such tools were often custom-made. Because of the preservation of these practices, there is no such thing as a standard sukisu or keta size and thus no accepted standard sizes for the continued production of washi paper (Musashino Art University, 2013;2024). Contemporary artists have requested larger and larger sheets of washi paper be produced to accommodate the growing scale of projects, but in the Edo period, nishiki-e prints were valued for their handheld size and portability.

The term masaban generally refers to a small full-sheet of paper. However, there is some confusion between defining paper by a unit

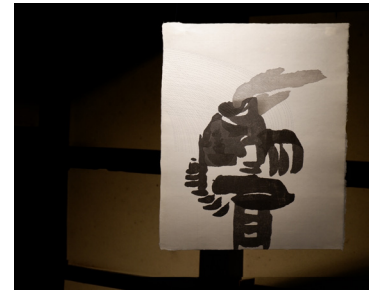


Figure 9

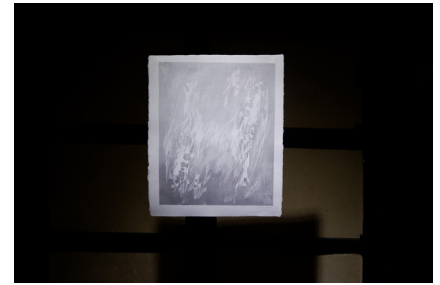


Figure 10

Figure 9. House Fire (2024) by Katie Baldwin

Figure 10. Reflection (2024) by Natasha Norman

of measure (in the Western sensibility, paper is described by its size as in the standardised A4, A5, B6, etc) and defining paper in terms of its dimensions within the paper maker's keto. Among Japanese paper makers, the term 'full-sheet' refers to a strained, undressed sheet of paper instead of a hanshi (literally 'half paper') produced by cutting sheets of washi in half during the paper-making process. Koban refers to paper sizes smaller than the full-sheet base paper (Musashino Art University 2013;2024). From what I can glean from written sources and my experience of working with washi paper, a full-sheet base is generally characterised by the 'ear' or deckle edge with koban sizes having this edge cut off during the making of the paper. To bring some unit of measure to the term masaban, the International Mokuhanga Conference defined the size as 55 x 44 cm in a recent call for entries but the act of defining paper by a unit of size belies a Western sensibility in defining the term.

My research on paper terms has yielded conflicting assertions due, in part, to misunderstandings in translation as well as the lack of any standardised paper terms because of the nature of hand-made paper in Japan that remains largely determined by the papermaker and the area in which the paper is produced. For this paper, I will limit my comments to the paper produced at Echizen, a historic centre of paper making since the 6th century (Echizen Washi Village, 2010), as that is where the paper for the Mokuhanga Sister's MASABAN project originated.

After the clear-out of an old paper storeroom in Echizen, 100 forgotten sheets of paper were revealed on a back shelf. This discovery coincided with a request for paper made by the Mokuhanga Sisters to Yasuyuki Sato (Chairman of MI-Lab), and eleven sheets of Echizen washi paper were generously donated to each Mokuhanga Sister for the project. The reason for the paper's abandonment has been lost to memory. It was clear to the Mokuhanga Sisters that the paper was of very high quality, unsized and in dimensions described to them as masaban by the artisans at the mill, possibly because of a deckle edge that runs along each edge of a sheet. The paper has been estimated to be over ten years old, and no record of its particular paper maker is noted. However, it is believed to have been produced within the Echizen Paper Village precinct.

MAKING THE PRINTS

Despite being titled by the paper used in the project, discussions among the Mokuhanga Sisters that initiated MASABAN began with a fascination with sumi ink. The Fourth International Mokuhanga Conference had recently taken place at Nara, a historic centre for the production of sumi ink. It was titled 'Sumi-Fusion', and the conference aimed to celebrate the versatility of sumi ink in woodblock printing. COVID-19 restrictions on travel made it nearly impossible for foreign visitors to attend the conference held at the end of 2021, so much of the event's content was available online. Seduced by the accounts of Mokuhanga Sisters, Mariko Jesse and Mia O'Pen, who attended the conference in person and

intrigued by the discussions and papers presented on sumi as a printing medium, the Mokuhanga Sisters decided to limit the MASABAN project to the primary use of sumi ink from Nara itself.

Much was discussed and discovered in using sumi ink for mokuhanga printing. Due to the hydrophobic nature of lamp black ink, various means of exploiting its material nature were experimented. A dark sumi sludge was created by soaking a sumi stick in water with pure alcohol. Some Mokuhanga Sisters ground the ink stick in the way a calligrapher or painter might do to create a potent black pool of ink that, in warmer climates, needed constant attention as the water used to activate the ink stick evaporated in the heat.

Another unanticipated technical challenge to the project was the need to 'size' the paper donated by the Echizen Mill. Much knowledge sharing and encouragement was fostered over this task as each artist attempted this feat in their studios across the globe, challenged by weather and access to materials.

EXHIBITING THE PROJECT

The nine prints of the MASABAN project were presented for the first time at the Udatsu Paper and Craft Museum in the Echizen Washi Village in April 2024. The museum is housed in a historic papermaker's home from the mid-Edo era, believed to have been built in 1748. The exhibition space requires the visitor to ascend a staircase to the attic room characterised by ancient wooden beams and little natural light. The reverence and peace of the space were exploited by the Mokuhanga Sisters, who curated the nine prints around the room, some suspended from clear gut along the low ceiling, others mimicking the floating of these works by being placed on low plinths covered in black velvet cloth. Along one wall of the exhibition was a series of pages with texts by each artist about their contribution to the project, presented in English and translated into Japanese for local visitors.

The show was well received. One comment in the visitor's book remarked that the person felt 'healed' by the experience. After the show's reception, discussions amongst the Mokuhanga Sisters observed the incredible effect of dramatic lighting afforded by the dark attic space and selected gallery lights. A wabi sabi sensibility of the kind extolled by the Japanese author Jun'ichirō Tanizaki in his influential 1933 text 'In Praise of Shadows' was perhaps at work here as the show demonstrated a respect for the lighting and shadows of a historical past with only a select use of the brilliance of electric lighting.

Other contemporary artists seem to share this sentiment, as Jori Finkel recently reviewed in *The New York Times*. Finkel observed that "artists are finding ways to evoke darkness with a range of symbolic, psychological and spiritual overtones." The artist Dawoud Bey described this as a means of creating "emotional weight," heightening the dramatic reception of the work and encouraging a contemplative experience (Bey in Finkel 2024:6).

Mokuhanga Sister, Lucy May Schofield shared these observations of the opening night:

"I was in the space when the first visitor entered on our preview night. She was followed by other people one by one and you could hear a pin drop in the space. It really encouraged a silent and slow contemplation of the work, with people spending significant time with each print, almost like each one was a kind of altar.

The other element that invited quietude was that everyone was in their socks, having left their shoes downstairs. The polished wooden floorboards that creaked under foot meant people felt an immediate connection to the space through the soles of their feet. Because each step could be heard, people also moved slowly and carefully so as not to disturb the peace that emanated from the work. I suppose the darkness or low light allowed the sense of touch and sound to come to the fore."

THEMES

It is tempting, within a Christian Western lexicon, to discuss the darkened exhibition spaces of the MASABAN project and, indeed, other projects highlighted by Jori Finkel in terms of a comment on 'living in dark times', but this would negate an entirely alternative history of darkness and its connections to scaredness, and healing that Japanese and alternative Western narratives are currently embodying. Beyond the glare of artificial lighting and the pollution of the night sky, MASABAN foregrounds the subtle and harmonious as a place of quiet strength. This journey into darkness is one of creating harmony between the artist as a maker and her materials.

In her most recent publication titled *The Vast Extent*, the contemporary British writer Lavinia Greenlaw notes, 'Darkness is precious, but it is also disarming in a way we are no longer used to.' She observes that society, particularly Western society, is used to thinking of light as a 'tool for knowledge' (to be enlightened), but that darkness is just as much as tool for knowledge too (Greenlaw 2024: 19).

MASABAN exploits the full spectrum of darkness in activating the subconscious both through the intuitive mark-making in each print, a mark-making embedded with memory, place and each artist's unique cultural heritage, and in the prints' final display where the kuon of sumi ink finds its resonance in the shadows of the Edo papermaker's home. Darkness is accepted as a tool for finding thematic links and understanding in the MASABAN project in a way that returns us to the black pigment used by the first painters in caves who animated their images by firelight with no conception of a future in which darkness would become endangered by electric luminance.

I could write pages more on how these themes are applied to each print in the MASABAN project, but I encourage the reader to discover the links for themselves as the project reaches further iterations in an

online presence and in other exhibition spaces in the near future.

REFERENCES

Bull, David. N.d. Encyclopedia of Woodblock Printmaking. Available from: <http://woodblock.com/encyclopedia/index.html> [Accessed 6 May 2024].

Cranswick, David and Docherty, Daniel. 2015;2024. The Sacred Art of Geometry Studios Website. Available from <https://www.sacredartofgeometry.com/> [Accessed 6 May 2024].

Cuccio, Claire (2018) 'Mokuhanga: What's in a name?' Printmaking Today. Summer. pp. 26-27. UK: Cello Press.

Echizen Washi Village 2010. Echizen Washi: History of Echizen & its Paper. Available from: <https://www.echizenwashi.jp/english/> [Accessed 6 May 2024]

Finkel, Jori. 2024. 'Dark Awakening'. The New York Times. 24 April. Section F, pp 6.

Greenlaw, Lavinia. 2024. The Vast Extent: on seeing and not seeing further. London: Faber and Faber.

International Mokuhanga Association, 2024. Fifth International Mokuhanga Conference. Available from: <https://2024.mokuhanga.org/> [Accessed 6 May 2024]

Kuriki, Ichiro; Lange, Ryan; Muto, Yumiko; Brown, Angela M; Fukuda, Kazuho; Tokunaga, Rumi; Lindsey, Delwin T; Uchikawa, Keiji; Shioiri, Satoshi. (2017) 'The Modern Japanese Colour Lexicon' Journal of Vision [online], 17 (1). [Accessed 6 May 2024].

Musashino Art University. 2013;2024. Art & Design Glossary: Washi Sizes. Available from: <https://art-design-glossary.musabi.ac.jp/washi-sizes/> [Accessed 6 May 2024]

Nara seiboku kumai, 2003;2024. History of Sumi. Available from: <http://www.sumi-nara.or.jp/index.html>. [Accessed 6 May 2024].

Pastoureau, Michel. 2008. Black: The History of a Colour. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Takashi, Murata. N.d. Nara Ink: Japan's oldest and largest sumi ink production area. [online]. Ritsumeikan University: Osaka International University/ Arts Research Centre. [Accessed 6 May 2024].

Tanizaki, Jun'ichirō. 1933. In Praise of Shadows. Translated by Harper, Thomas and Seidensticker, Edward (1977). USA: Leete's Island Books.

AUTHOR

Natasha Norman
Email: tasha.norman@gmail.com
Website: www.natashanorman.co.za
Phone: +27 83 508 4431
Institution: University of Cape Town

Natasha completed her Honours (2005) and Masters (2011) degree in Fine Art at the University of Cape Town. She currently works as a part-time lecturer, arts writer and practicing artist. She trained in traditional Western print methods at the University of Cape Town and subsequently attended residencies in Japan to study the Japanese relief print method, mokuhanga. She is a member of The Mokuhanga Sisters artist collective and co-founder of Mokuhanga Kai, a society for the promotion of Japanese woodblock printing in South Africa.

IMAGE GALLERY

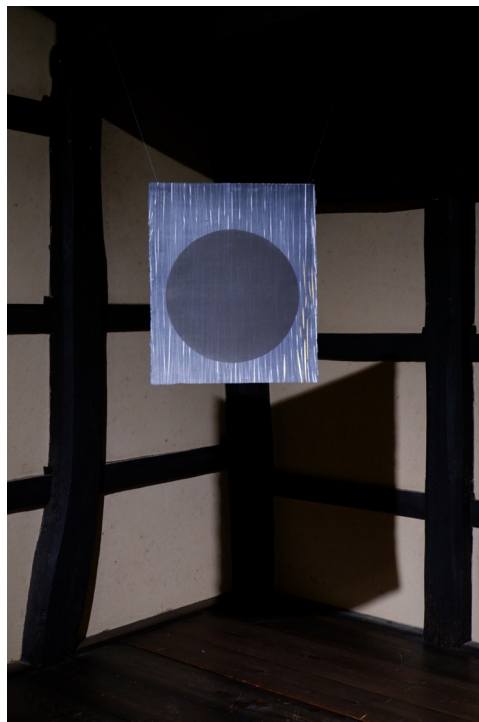


Figure 1. Tenacity (2024) by Lucy May Schofield
Figure 2. Dark Light (2024) by Kate MacDonagh



Figure 3. Bamboo (2024) by Yoonmi Nam
Figure 4. Camellia Bowl (2024) by Mariko Jesse

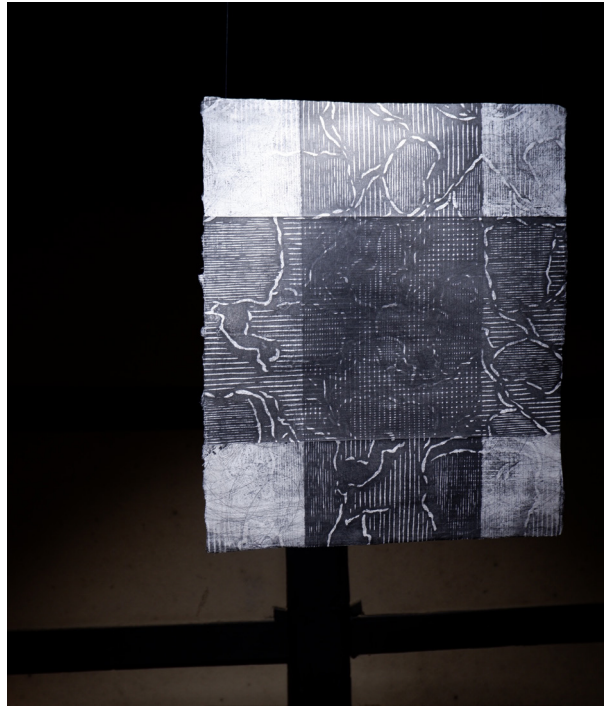


Figure 5. Love and Mortality (2024) by Patty Hudak
Figure 6. Untitled (2024) by Mia O

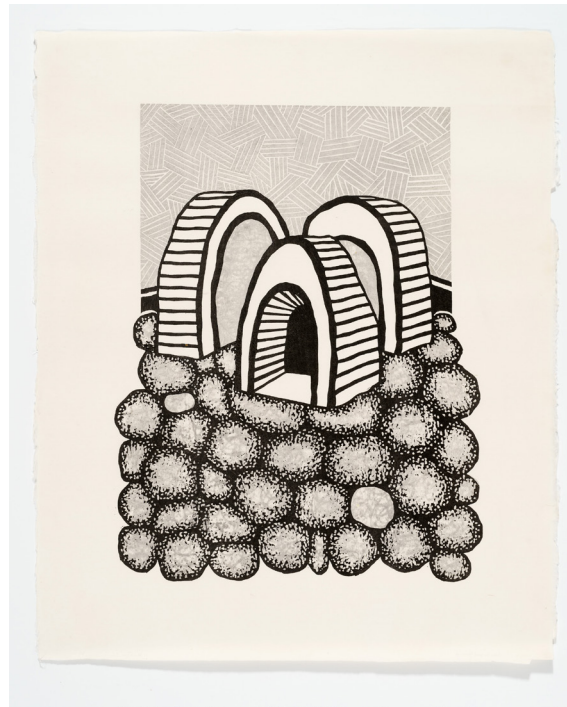


Figure 7. Door to Good Fortune (2024) by Melissa Schulenberg

Figure 8. Gallery view of the MASABAN exhibition at the Udatu Paper and Craft Museum

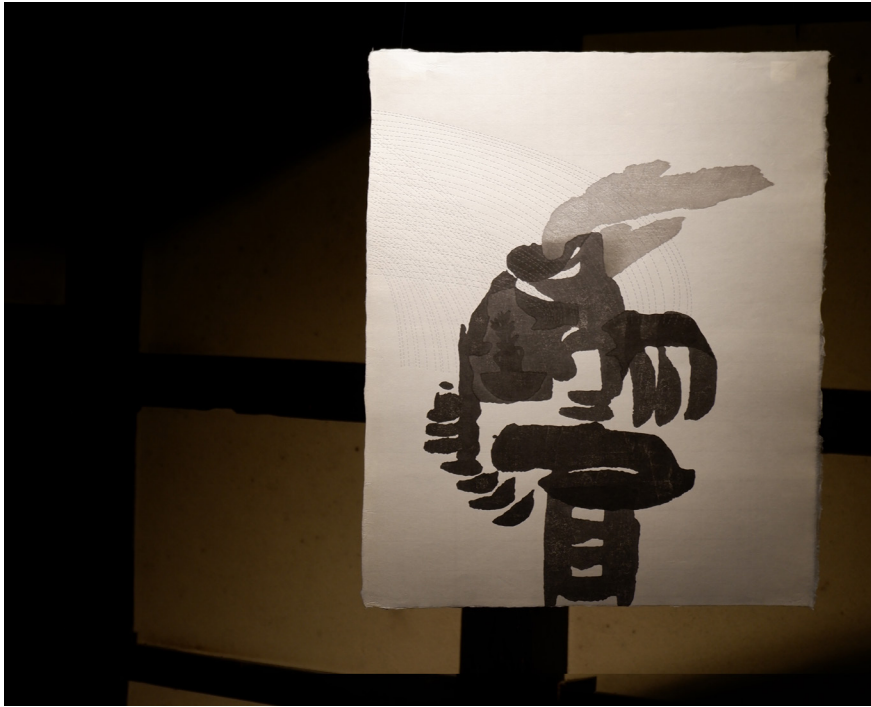


Figure 9. House Fire (2024) by Katie Baldwin
Figure 10. Reflection (2024) by Natasha Norman