GYOTAKU: The Japanese Art of Printing with Fish

with Sue Fierston

Hi everyone!

Over the three-hour class I'll show you how to set up your space and how to prepare your fish. Then I'll demonstrate the printing process, and set you free to make your first gyotaku. Along the way, I can help you troubleshoot your prints, choose papers, and draw a realistic fish eye, one that will bring your prints to life. Please plan to keep your Zoom camera on for the first hour of class when I will be demonstrating and taking your questions. Next, we will spend the next hour to hour and a half practicing, and I will keep my camera on and be ready for your individual questions.

Around 12:15, I'll demonstrate drawing a fish eye, and we will have a class gallery of work and collect class advice for making more prints at home.

Looking forward to meeting you!
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Please see the fish preparation instructions on Page 2-3

MATERIALS

From an H-Mart, Whole Foods, Wegman's or any store that sells very fresh whole fish: A whole fish weighing between 1 and 2 lbs. including tail, all fins, all scales. Don't let the fish merchant gut the fish, simply buy it whole one or two days ahead of class, bring it home, and keep it cold in the back of the refrigerator. The flatter the fish, the easier it will be to print!

These fresh fish print well: rockfish / sea bass, carp, spot, croaker, trout, red snapper. Pompano and butterfish are difficult to print because they have very small scales and don't pick up ink well.

Art supplies to purchase, available online at Dickblick.com, Jerrysartarama.com or at your own art supply store:

- 3 Speedball brand water-soluble printing ink, 1.25 oz.
- 1 each of black, blue and silver
- 1 Speedball brand ink retarder, 1.25 oz
- 1 watercolor round paintbrush size 10 or 12, an inexpensive brush, not a sable
- 1 pad Aitoh brand sumi-e calligraphy paper, 12 x 18, 50 sheets. You will use between 5 and 10 sheets of this paper, so feel free to share a pad if it is logistically possible. It makes beautiful, lasting prints. Yasumoto brand is more common, but the paper is not as good for our purposes. You can use Aitoh brand paper for all other printmaking projects, including leaf printing, gelli plate printing an monotypes.
- 1 white paper plate or 8 x 11 inch piece of freezer paper

Optional supplies

- 1 sheet unryu paper, 24 x 39 inches; you can fold or cut it smaller, depending on the size of your fish
- 3 colored pencils, Prismacolor or similar: Warm gray 90%, Gingerroot, Celadon Green (neutral colors for drawing the fish eye, if you have similar colors, use them)
- Watercolor paintbrush size 0 or 1 for painting the fish eye on the print

You likely have at home

- Pencil
- Paper towels
- Salt and dish soap to wash the fish
- Newspaper or an old tablecloth to cover your work table
- Trash bag

HOW TO PREPARE THE FISH

1. Four hours before class or even the night before, take your fish out of the refrigerator. Remember you won't be eating this fish, so it does not need to be kept cold. With the Speedball inks we are using, a warm and dry fish makes the best print. Lay out newspaper or newsprint in a spot next to the place you will be washing your fish.

2. Unwrap your fish and wash it gently in the kitchen sink using your hands, not the sprayer. If you want to wear gloves, go ahead. You may find there is a quiet magic in peacefully rinsing your fish under cool water and getting to know the shape of its fins and the color of its scales. Many fish have spines in their dorsal fins. For this reason, take care as you wash the fins.

3. You can use a few drops of Dawn dish soap, a sprinkling of baking soda, or a sprinkling of salt to help you remove the slime from the body of the fish. Your aim is to remove all slime so the printing ink will stick to the fish.

4. Transfer the clean fish to the newspaper. Leave it out to dry, uncovered, until class begins. The fish will come to room temperature in this time, and the combination of dry, clean skin and a room-temperature fish with help you make the best prints.