

Ritchie Sensei
By Izumi Kuroiwa

“Sensei” is an honorable title in Japan for a teacher. Personally speaking, the title is only given to deserving people, and Bill Ritchie deserves it, as he was the best art teacher I had in my life.

There were so many things Ritchie Sensei taught me, or more accurately speaking, inspired me to learn, I will share a couple of those things that matter even to this day in my creative life.

Back in 1979, I was Ritchie Sensei’s research assistant. He assigned me to study Onchi Koshiro who was one of the pioneers of Sosaku Hanga (creative printmaking). At that time, I was too young and immature to realize the importance of Sosaku Hanga and what it meant to me.

I now fully embrace Sosaku Hanga as my way of creative expression, thanks to Ritchie Sensei who led me to learn about it. Printmaking uses media that were developed for reproduction, mainly woodcut, etching, lithograph and screen printing. I was never really interested in making editions of my art. I found it boring and it had nothing to do with creativity while it did teach me craftsmanship. Instead, I was very interested in those media as tools of my creative process, just like oil, watercolor, pastels and pencils for painting. Printmaking media offered a very different visual impact than painting. Straight prints from a block, plate or screen are not fully developed art to me. I was more interested in developing my art with prints as the base. While a simple print can be a complete artwork in itself, I am not afraid of adding color and texture with paper, fabric, strings, pastes or pencils, whatever it takes to improve the piece is certainly in the realm of Sosaku Hanga.

Recently, I added photographic prints in my tools of printmaking. Photographs offer the beauty of detail that may be hard to achieve with the traditional printmaking process or painting media, while digitally enhanced photo prints on glossy photo paper is not very interesting to me. I now include photographic images combined with other media to give a richness of color and texture, whether it is a naturalistic image or abstract image. I struggled to come terms with this method for a while, but now I fully embrace it as Sosaku Hanga.

Another aspect of what impressed me when Ritchie Sensei was teaching at the University of Washington was something so mundane that most students didn’t fully appreciate it. He taught us how to clean our own mess after we were done printing. He used a minimum quantity of paint thinner and newsprint to clean oil-based inks, a healthy and environmentally sound approach. One day I came to a classroom after a class and found ink all over the table. A student from another teacher must have poured a vast amount of paint thinner over the ink and used tons of paper trying to clean it up, which didn’t work. I now only use water-base inks, but I still use the discipline Ritchie Sensei taught me in using a minimum quantity of water and paper.

It is so amazing that a great teacher can influence so many students’ lives. I hope that the Ritchie Sensei has had, and continues to have, a rewarding good life as well.