

"Rolling in the Dirt"
Alan Lau gets down and dirty with art.

Judith van Praag

That most everybody who does anything in the arts in the Pacific Northwest knows the International Examiner's art editor, Alan Lau, was clear at the opening reception for his show at Francine Seders Gallery. What may not be clear is how he manages to do all the things he does. Well, let's put it this way, Alan Lau doesn't waste any time.

From Thursday through Sunday, when he heads from Woodland Park to the produce department at Uwajimaya in the International District, his alarm is set for 5:30 a.m. Sorting, cleaning and arranging fruits, roots and vegetables provides Lau, the artist, inspiration. During his lunch break he pops over to his studio (across the street, in the old Uwajimaya building). Over the years he has eternalized quite a few discarded items from the store. There's "Notes", an abstract impression of a lotus root. And a melon modeled for a 1995 series called "Rotting Bitter Melon"

Born in Oroville, CA. in 1948, Alan Lau was raised in Paradise. Around 1968 students and teachers at San Francisco State University went on strike demanding an Ethnic Studies department. Eventually their wishes were met. Alan was among the first to take Jeffrey Paul Chan's Asian American Studies class.

Encouraged to explore his roots, Lau left for Japan (China's borders were still closed). He traveled around the country for six months, then returned to the Bay Area to study English and poetry. After one semester he took leave of absence, this time heading for Denmark, for his sister's wedding. Crossing Eastern Europe by train and hitching rides, he made his way back to Japan, where he wound up staying for five years, teaching English and studying sumi-e painting.

As an Asian American, he wasn't considered to be "the real thing", meaning he didn't get teaching jobs at Sony. But he did meet his wife Kazuko Nakane at the 7:00 A.M. English class he taught.

Inspired by rock music and light shows Lau created his early, California paintings with acrylic paint straight from the tube, "cake frosting", he calls it. Sumi-e of course was a totally different thing. No wonder that the reserved style of his first teacher didn't appeal to him. His next mentor, Nirakushi Toriumi taught a more traditional style, Nanga, also known as Literati or Chinese School.

While Lau's grandmother had made him and his sister trace Chinese characters, he knew that he –as an American– had too much catching up to do. Largely educated in Western Art, not raised on Asian Art or brushstrokes, he made a conscious decision, to take what he had learned about sumi-e painting as a foundation, and to find his own style and approach.

"I'm interested in the interaction between ink and water, and how each reacts to the white of the paper; the gradation from black, to gray, to white, in sophisticated layers. And how a subtle underplay in color detonates," he says.

Lau considers his work after 9/11 more moody. Areas saturated with intense black ink offset against pristine white or the midway gray, creating –a still– an image momentarily caught without motion.

"The more saturated, or overtly dark a painting is from the start, the harder it is to draw out what I want to see."

But it is exactly in those paintings where he struggles with the darkness of the beginning, that he manages to bring in the

light. In many of the pieces exhibited at Francine Seders', soft oil pastel brings color to the black or gray tones, while waxy China markers provide certain outlines.

Considering the number of hats Alan Lau wears (he also publishes Pacific Reader), you just know this man's every hour is filled, not in the last place when preparing the Arts Etc. section for the I.E., promoting other people's endeavors.

"I had this moral obligation drummed into me as a college student. You shouldn't just do things for yourself; you have to give something back to the community. Covering the arts and providing arts coverage for the community at large is one way I can do that, I guess."

Being "off" for Lau means working his way through a six-inch pile of press releases and invitations. Off means he discusses story ideas with his writers.

For Alan Lau all creative processes are connected. In his poetry as well as in his paintings, he suggests rather than tells. As Arts Editor he does the same. Alan Lau lives the creative life, 24/7, year round.

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