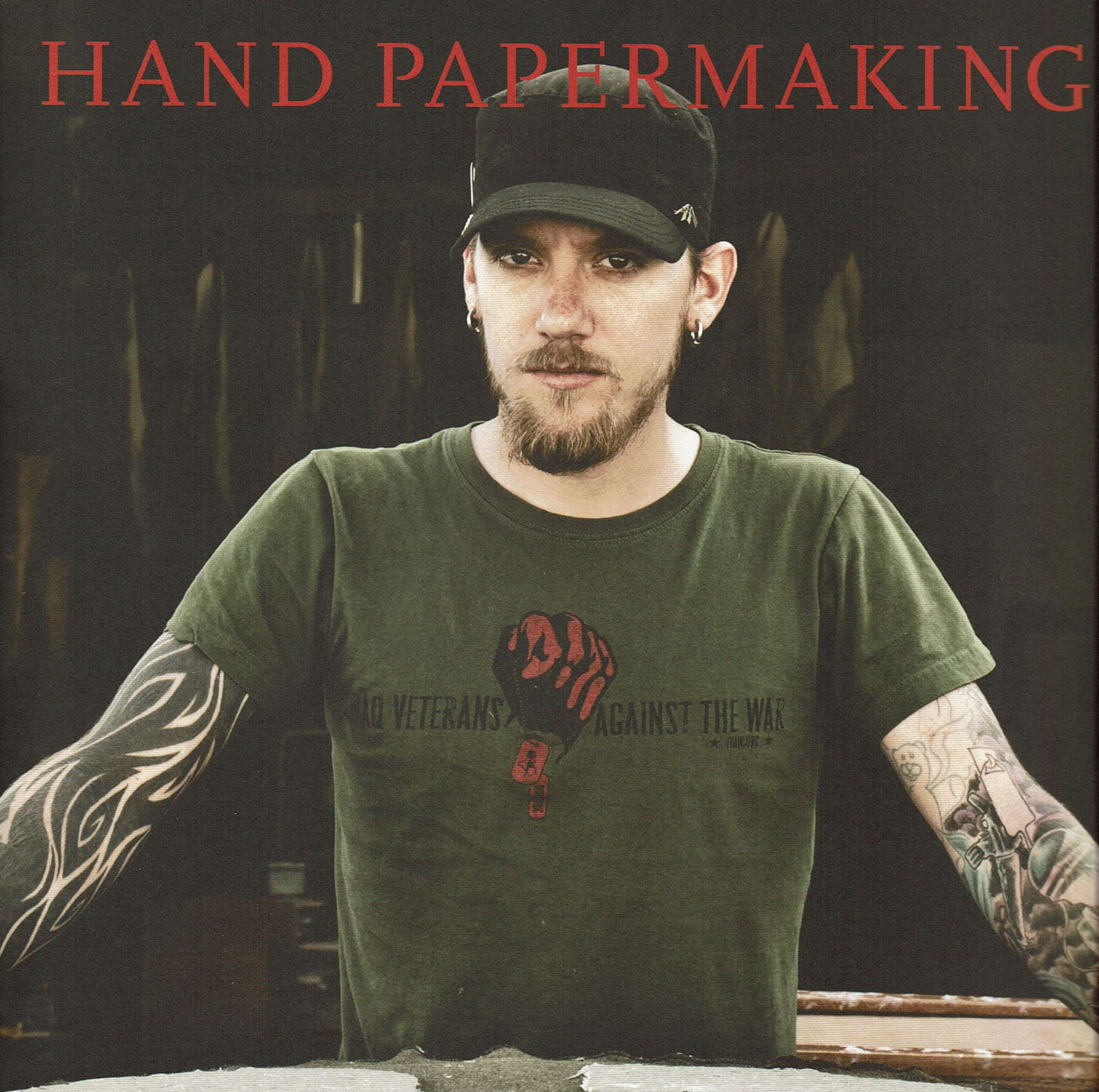
# HAND PAPERMAKING

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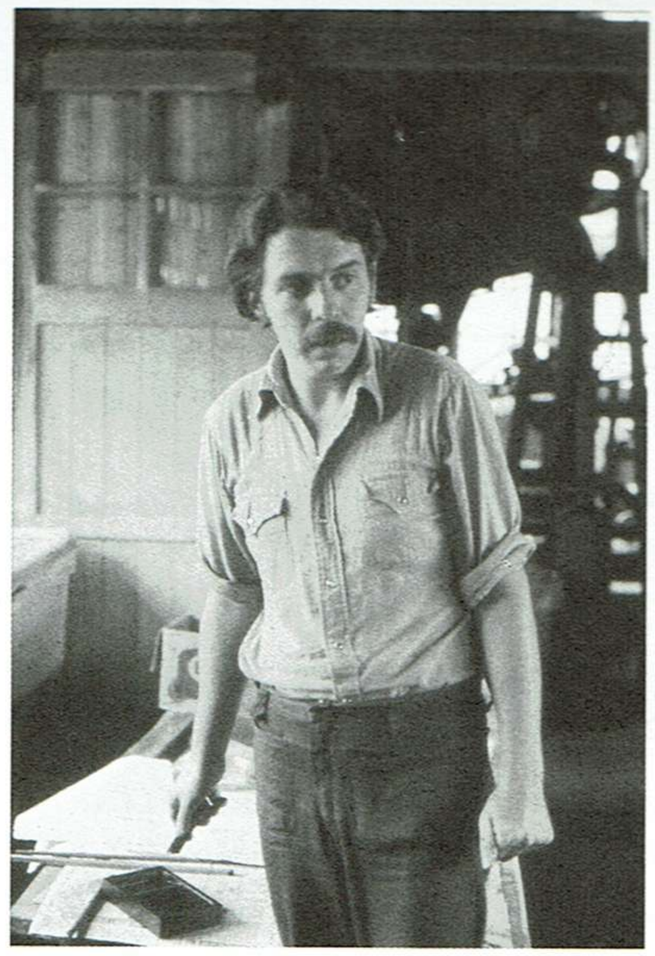
*Forming sheets on a large* sugeta *fitted with a divided deckle that produces two 60 x 90 cm [24 x 36 inch] sheets at a time. Photo by and courtesy of Timothy Barrett, ca. 1976–77.*



*Richard Flavin uses an inkstick to grind thick black ink while doing* suminagashi *(Japanese-style marbling). Photo by and courtesy of Timothy Barrett, ca. 1976–77.*

# ON *Richard Flavin: A Conversation*

PAUL DENHOED

*The following excerpt is from a conversation between myself and Richard Flavin which took place on October 30, 2008, over a cup of tea, in the apartment he shares in Tokyo with his wife, Ryouko Haraguchi. Flavin has been living in Japan, involved in print, paper, and book arts, for nearly forty years, and was instrumental in the first wave of transmission abroad of those Japanese arts, especially through his classes at Paper & Book Intensive (PBI). His illustrations grace Tim Barrett's* Japanese Papermaking, *and he co-translated the text for* Heisei no Shifu *(a bilingual record of modern Japanese handmade paper). In 1980, with Asao Shimura, he led an extensive tour of Japanese papermaking sites, facilitating further international exchange. It is likely that most of those interested in Japanese papermaking know his name. However, due in part to his modest nature, outside a small circle, his contributions and his work remain vastly under-recognized. In this interview, alas too brief to even scratch the surface of his achievements, we touch on his beginnings in Japanese papermaking, his innovative approach to making paper art, and his current work with new papermaking fibers.*

**Paul Denhoed** (PD): How did you find yourself making paper in Japan?

**Richard Flavin** (RF): Well, papermaking came later. I came here in 1970. I was hoping to get into art school to learn printmaking. In '72, I entered the print department in Geidai [Tokyo National University of Fine Arts & Music], to study there for two years in the graduate department, but not as a degree student. And that in turn got me interested in paper, because naturally I was using good paper, believing that it was a fundamental part of a good print. I tried different papers, and my teacher recommended Iwano Ichibei's Echizen Hosho paper. Eventually, I went to Fukui [prefecture], to see Iwano-san making paper. And it was the country atmosphere there, and the life of the papermaker that just seemed appealing. I like to make things, and ultimately became interested in the idea of making my own paper for my prints. And I did want to live in the countryside. Getting into a traditional craft like this in Japan is really difficult, especially so at that time, in the 70s, and even more so for a *gaijin* [foreigner]. But, eventually I found this opportunity in the town of Ogawa, at the Saitama Prefectural Testing Station which was a facility to train people in papermaking. I needed a recommendation letter, and my woodblock teacher said "You don't *make* paper, you *buy* it and use it for your prints." I said "Yeah, but I wanna try."

*Flavin (right), Atsushi Saito (center), and Kouichi Tabata (left) atop the ridgepole during the dedication ceremony for Flavin's new studio in Ogose, Saitama. Photo: Kazumi Sekiguchi, 2005.*

*Flavin (right) sings and plays banjo at the opening party for his new studio. Accompanying are Hibi Yumenari (center) and Morio Okamoto (left). Photo: Paul Denhoed, 2005.*

I wanted to find out about woodblock-printmaking paper. But in Ogawa they told me the sheet-formation time is too long to make the type of paper that Iwano-san makes. Nobody there made thick paper. Their specialty was Hosokawashi [a thinner-weight kozo paper]. Then one of the people in the office of the place said "Why don't you try it yourself?" It's basically thicker kozo paper. And somebody gave me a little fiber, and I prepared it at home. I got a little screen up in Ogawa, and I got started! They said I could come up for a number of weeks or so. It was quite a commute [from Tokyo], so I occasionally stayed overnight in this thatched-roof farmhouse up on the hillside, and woke up in the morning, looking over the countryside, just totally the kind of place that Haruko [Richard's first wife] and I wanted to find, so after about six months we decided to move to Saitama, to Ogawa town.

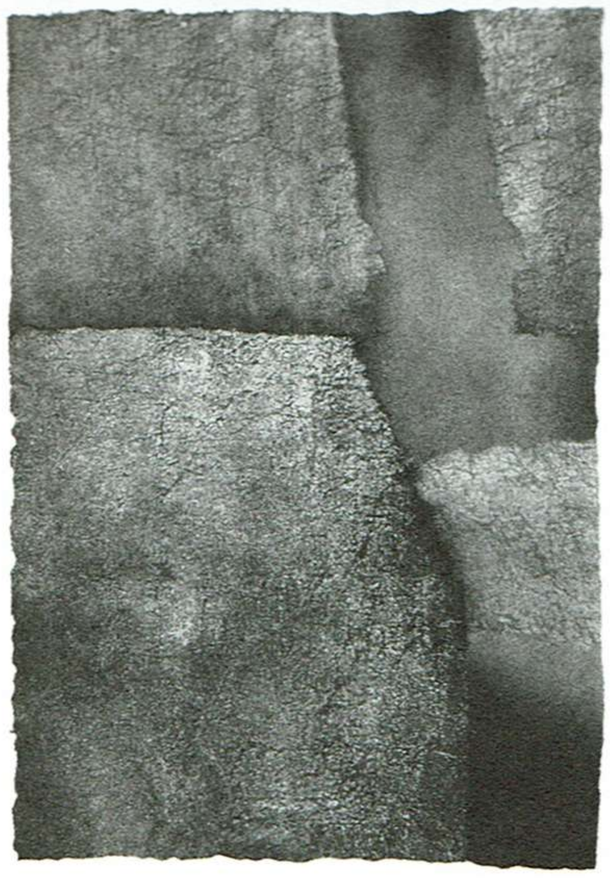
**PD** Are papermaking and Japan intertwined for you? Can you imagine your life with one and not the other?

**RF** Well, it would be very difficult, for example, to live in Tokyo and make paper. I mean, you *could* do it on a simple or smaller scale. But having the chance to live up in a very nice location in Ogawa, it sort of fused everything, my whole life, together. So that papermaking was part of it as well. I also did rice farming, organic farming, and baked my own bread—it just seemed to fit into a good life, and it turned out to be like an art of living. And I suppose if I had lived in America, I probably would have searched out a similar kind of situation, but it just sort of fell together here.

**PD** What kind of things are you currently working on in the studio?

**RF** Well, I've been making collages, which I haven't been doing for a while. The work on these starts with preparing the different papers, by treating them in various ways. For example, I found this piece of wood that was probably a worktable that had been used in textiles or something, and it was grooved all over in random places. I start with a colored base paper which I often color with a brush using a binder. I don't usually like coloring the fibers before papermaking. So I have a colored base paper, and I re-wet it, very wet, and then with a woodblock-printing brush, which resembles a shoe brush, I pound that paper into the grooves of the worn-out piece of wood, and then I roll over that piece of paper with acrylic paint on a sponge roller, hitting the raised areas. It doesn't look like a piece of paper anymore, it looks like stone, somehow. Then for parts of those collages I will take a piece of uncarved, fine basswood plywood, and with the same style brush, I lay down a gradation wash on the block. Then I take white paper, put it down, and with the baren print those tones. Then I tear up those gradation prints, so I get these atmospheric expanses. And when those are juxtaposed with papers using the previous technique, you get this sharp contrast. It almost looks like granite blocks floating in space. I'm really happy with the results. If I get it right, there's a spatial balance in the final work. And when you look at it, you somehow think this looks like something, but you don't know what it is. This mysteriousness I like a lot.

As for other techniques...well, normally when you brush color onto paper, you do it on the front side. But I often color the back of the paper, usually with a dark color, and if the paper's not too thick, the color bleeds through and creates another interesting effect. Also, sometimes I'll take a finished piece, such as an abstract sumi painting done on super-thin kozo paper, and I'll embed that into another wet sheet. I put it in the middle of a papermaking screen and pour kozo pulp around the edges. You cannot distinguish the paper you originally drew on, it's so thin that you wind up with the work *in* the paper, rather than on it. Right now those are the



*Richard Flavin,* Messages from Somewhere, *2008, 18 x 12 inches, frottage and woodblock on kozo paper. Photo: Paul Denhoed.*

*Flavin (second from right) demonstrates for volunteer participants in his annual mulberry bark removal gathering (a day of work followed by a grand feast and party), or as he likes to call it, the barkoff. Photo: Paul Denhoed, 2009.*

techniques that I'm working on—next week, I don't know [*laughs*].

**PD** Do you have a favorite technique, paper, or fiber that you would like to champion?

**RF** Yes. Kozo is great, but also, something I think not many people know about, is pineapple fiber. It doesn't look like kozo at all. It's very fine, white-colored fiber, and it can be processed the same way as kozo, except I cut the dry fiber into about three-centimeter lengths before I boil it to make it easier to process in the *naginata* beater. For the cook I've used both caustic soda and soda ash. Soda ash works fine at about 20% [of the dry weight of the fiber]. I've found that if you keep it at a rolling boil, it's ready within an hour and a half. And it's washed out the same, then hand beaten first, and then put into the *naginata* beater. I beat it the same way as kozo, and for about the same amount of time. I form it *nagashizuki* style using *tororo aoi*. I've found that the best method is to press it very hard and even sometimes leave it until the whole post is almost dry, and then re-wet it. And when you do that you don't have separation problems. At first I did have some trouble getting the sheets to part. But then I saw other papermakers re-wetting the post; it gave me the hint to do that with any short fiber. With pineapple, the final result is very different from kozo sheets. Very dense. No gaps between the fibers. There doesn't seem to be any variation in the length of individual fibers throughout the fiber strand, so the result is very homogeneous and extremely strong, even though *I think* the fiber length is shorter than kozo. Pineapple paper has a beautiful luster; not quite as lustrous as gampi—closer to mitsumata. But mitsumata's not nearly as strong. Mitsumata and gampi both will wrinkle if they get wet. But the pineapple takes sumi ink or watercolor beautifully. I think it must come back to the uniformity of fibers and the adhesion between the fibers.

**PD** How do you feel you fit into the landscape of traditional and/or contemporary papermaking in Japan, and internationally?

**RF** Well, I'm not a production papermaker. Because I work alone, I can't handle production work. I really can't compete because of the amount of labor and more expensive equipment that's required. But, fortunately, I make interesting decorative papers as well. And if people like them, they're willing to pay a little more for them, and I do manage to sell in the urban areas. But I don't put papers in stores. I don't get commissions from people. I just make things that I like. Not only paper for calligraphers, but also decorative papers useful for bookwork, as well as some cards and stationery, and of course collages and woodblock prints. And I display those things at craft shows. I also do many two-person and solo shows as well.

**PD** And how do you feel about your role as a disseminator of this craft and this culture through teaching at PBI and other places?

**RF** I think it makes anybody feel great. When you teach something to someone, you can see the pleasure that they get from it and then you in turn get pleasure as well.

**PD** Is there anything else that you would like to communicate to the readers of *Hand Papermaking*?

**RF** Well, Japan is a great place for anyone interested in paper, because with Japanese papermaking there's so much variety. So I would encourage people, if they have the chance, to come here and actually see it, visit the papermaking workshops, because I was inspired so much by just visiting the first time, never thinking I was going to make paper. But, of course, now I do. It's really satisfying, particularly with bast fiber. We have a kozo field, and you can see the results in the paper and in your artwork, from the ground up, in a sense, and this is really appealing to me. The combination of the *nagashizuki* process and bast fibers just lends itself to so many interesting possibilities. And *through* the process you find things that give you *hints* about visual things that can be used in your artwork. It's the papermaking process that taught me these things to utilize in the finished work. Without being able to make paper, these techniques, these ideas would never come to me. It has enhanced my artistic view, or overview, tremendously. That's, to me, the exciting thing about it.