

By Reggie Cantù

The Many Dimensions of B. Chrisse Harwanko's Art

To be chosen for Okiten, a venerable institution in the Okinawan art world, is to undergo scrutiny by a panel of acknowledged masters in each medium represented in the annual event held since 1946. Many apply, but few are chosen.

Those selected are honored with an award called Nyu-sen merely for making it in. It announces that the work is “worthy of exhibition.”

The show, which runs [ran] from March 19 through April 3, is housed in the Urasoe Sports Complex adjacent to the Urasoe Art Museum, and features artistic excellence in painting, sculpture, ceramics, textiles, glassware, graphic design and photography.

Standing out in the dazzling array of large, mostly abstract paintings is one entitled “Where the Earth Meets the Sea,” by B. Chrisse Harwanko, a DODEA teacher at Bob Hope Elementary School.

Even among the finely accomplished pieces, Harwanko's work seems more completely crafted, sure and adept. The organic forms, textures, flow of shapes, and minuteness of detail demand attention and close scrutiny.

But that is typical of her work. Examining a B. Chrisse Harwanko work of art is to be entranced, almost hypnotized – there is so much to see.

The longer one spends studying one of her paintings the more layers and details emerge. The reason may have to do with how Harwanko creates. She includes elements of different media in her work, happily engaged in mixing techniques of batik, the application of latex and acrylics then using icy coldness and scorching heat to bring out hidden aspects in them.

She will cover certain areas of her canvases with wax, apply pigment and then freeze the piece. Taken out, the wax is broken and veins of color will appear. She allows the random lines to reveal shapes and forms, which she enhances. Portions of the painting will be covered in heavy coats of acrylic. The textures are achieved by heating the paint to raise bubbles and hillocks, creating unique landscapes that become part of the overall work.

She is swallowed by the process, she says. “I get totally lost in it, the shapes, forms and colors, so peaceful. It's meditative – I'm on another planet.”

While Harwanko's most popular work has been representational, such as the series of kimono paintings that have been her best sellers, she claims to love the direction of her more recent efforts. “I like the mystery and the magic that happens with abstracts,” she asserts.

After twenty-one years in the DoDDS system Harwanko looks forward to retiring in a few more years to life in Panama, a country she has fallen in love with and where she owns a home. She says she will continue pursuing her adventures in abstract art there.

For now the K-3rd grade students at Bob Hope ES are lucky to have her as their art teacher. And they are another passion for her along with her art work, love of diving, and traveling.

Of the children she says, “They are so much fun. They remind you of the soul and depths of a human being. You can get them excited about just anything. Kids who don’t do so well in other areas can do well in art. It boosts their self-esteem. I am so happy for military and civilian children here that DoDDS can still support art. So many schools cannot.”

If you miss Harwanko’s work at Okiten, you can see examples of her energetic, versatile output on her website: www.harwanko.com.

CAPTIONS:

1. Some of Harwanko's art combines representational figures melding with abstract backgrounds
2. Web-like effects are created by using batik techniques, and a freezer, that become forms and shapes that Harwanko explores and enhances
3. Harwanko is known by many in Okinawa for her 'Kimono' series, made distinctive by the abstraction of the background
4. B. Chrisse Harwanko is a dynamo of an artist who enjoys being entranced by the creative process
5. Prolific in her output, Harwanko's home holds troves of her work all about
6. Harwanko admits she gets lost in the work, “like being on another planet”
7. The finishing touches are added after an elaborate series of steps to create texture, shapes and forms
8. Intense focus is evident when Harwanko works, losing herself in the creative process
9. "Where the Earth Meets the Sea", one of Harwanko's largest works, is her entry into the prestigious Okiten Juried Art Exhibition