



Batik artist uses her work to tell stories

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HARTFORD

Carol Conklin's batik paintings are like novels on fabric.

Structured technique and spontaneous creativity interplay to form compelling stories. Starting with a white sheet of fabric, Conklin manipulates wax and dye to develop intricately layered works.

"It's got a magic to it," Conklin said. "The wax has a mind of its own, and you have to work with it."

Conklin is one of many area artists featured in the current LARAC Holiday Shop at the Lower Adirondack Regional Arts Council's Lapham Gallery in downtown Glens Falls. In addition to selling her batik wall hangings, the artists' showcase also includes her silk painted scarves, purses and jewelry pouches.

For Conklin, batik is a fitting form of self expression.

"There's a simplicity to it I like. It's folk art in a way. You can't get the detail," she said.

But the primitive - almost tribal - look of the finished paintings belies the labor-intensive process. Conklin estimates an average piece requires more than 20 hours of meticulous work.

She starts with a basic idea in her head, but she likes to keep an open-mind about the design as she works. For more elaborate pieces, she may sketch ahead, but most of her work is done freehand and involves reacting to the sometimes unpredictable medium.

Brushing melted wax onto the cotton surface creates a foundation for her designs. The wax, which she melts in an old electric skillet, works like a shield, preventing dye from soaking into the fabric.

"Where I am putting wax is where I want to keep this color," she said.

The medium, a mixture of bees wax and paraffin, is imperfect and often cracks as it dries. Conklin likes the uneven effect that results.

"The fascinating thing is the way the wax crackles. It adds this magical dimension," she said as she worked on a design in the upstairs studio in her home in Hartford.

A tjanting tool, a device that looks similar to a small pipe, helps the artist with detail work. The wax applicator with Asian origins has been used by batik artists for centuries.

"You have to work fairly quickly. The wax is cooling all the time," Conklin said.

Working with the tjanting requires practice because the wax flows from it continuously like a tiny funnel.

Conklin said she thinks of each drip of wax as a permanent part of the design. Any errors or accidents have to be worked into the piece.

"Getting wax out of fabric is a difficult thing. I have to do it right. It's either work with what I did or throw the whole thing away," she said.

Most pieces go through several dye baths. Conklin applies wax before each bath to block out certain colors. The process creates a play of positive and negative space.

Along the way, she can extract color with bleach for added impact. She calls the step discharge dyeing.

Conklin usually works on several pieces at once. She switches projects for practical reasons, like waiting for the fabric to dry after dyeing.

"You can't hurry it. It just takes so much time," she said.

The subject of her work ranges from local landscapes to unicorns and dragons.

"My favorite subject is the horse. I love doing horses," she said.

Conklin works in several color palettes, depending on the subject matter.

"Lately I have been using a lot of bright colors. I like to achieve what I would call a mixed flower garden," she said.

The final step in the batik process involves one of most people's most hated chores - ironing. Conklin sandwiches the wax-soaked and dyed fabric between layers of newspaper and paper towels, then runs a hot iron across it. The wax slowly melts and lifts from the fabric into the paper.

"It brightens when the wax comes out," Conklin said about the finished pieces.

After around 36 years of working with the art form, Conklin said the medium still offers some surprises.

"Each one is a new, fascinating process," she said.