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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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EXPLORATIONS IN SILK PAINTING

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JULY 4 1999

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EXPLORATION IN SILK PAINTING

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By KAORI TAJIMA

INTRODUCTION

Their late twenties is a time when young people are trying to find themselves. The time full of hope when they believe that they can do everything if they want to from the bottom of their hearts. By their late twenties, people are old enough to know that every dream may or may not come true. At the same time, they also know that they are still too young to give up all of their hopes and dreams. If they were in their thirties or forties, they could see their future to some extent, and they might have more confidence because of the accumulation of their experiences and some motivation to try something new. However, people in their late twenties don't have enough confidence yet and are still struggling to find a better life through trial and error. They still have over 50 years ahead of them if everybody is supposed to live for 80 years. Even though they feel somewhat uneasy about their future, they are moving forward step by step, with occasional hesitancy, looking back, shrinking back, and even stepping back sometimes, but then moving on again.

Some of them are getting their life partners, and making up their own families. Some of them are starting a course correction of their lives, such as changing jobs and companies, or going to school again to

continue their education after much consideration. Some of them are content with things as they are, even though they are not satisfied with their present situation, and are waiting for a perfect chance to step up to a better life. All of them are at some kind of age-related crossroads of life.

Kaori Tajima who made this silk painting series is also one of those people in their late twenties. Her own life and her friends' lives, are in the same generation, which influenced this work a lot. These pieces were drawn to encourage these people through paintings with color, form, design, and the experience of life in a natural settings with frogs. Frogs were felt to very closely express people's lives for her because frogs are sometimes used for describing people in proverbs in her country, Japan. *A frog's child is also a frog.* It is the same meaning as *like father (mother), like son (daughter)* in the US. *A frog under a willow.* It means people who are making efforts for their dreams which may not come true.

Silk painting incorporates different processes and techniques, including salt solutions, alcohol, bleach, resistant, batik, stenciling, etc.

Moreover, every silk painting needs to be steamed for finishing, and to make the permanent colors.

It was not until approximately 1920 that silk painting started to develop as we know it today using these techniques. Originally, some Russians who had fled to Paris started to make men's silk handkerchiefs to make their living. Then, famous French fashion houses, such as Hermes, took over the techniques and developed them after World War II. Because of the popularity of French manufactured scarves, hand-painted scarves became popular. In 1965, Litza Bain, a Parisian artist, researched silk painting on silk as an art form and started to teach it. Now, silk painting has become available for everyone to experience and enjoy.



The first painting in this series has a frog which seems to be sleeping comfortably and willingly. It might be dreaming. Rest and dreams are necessary for people to live because they give great vitality to people for their dreams of tomorrow. People are tired out from their daily lives. They forget tenderness during the days that don't act the way they want them to. Then, they convince themselves that they are still on the path to their dreams even though they are filled with self-hatred; then, they sleep to have yet another dream. Even though people know that every dream may or may not come true in the real world, they can cherish any kind of dream and become anything they want, while they are sleeping. After waking from dreams, they make a fresh resolution to keep on fighting against the unhappiness in their lives, with refreshed feelings and bodies recovering from fatigue.

In this first painting, three kinds of silk painting techniques can be found: water-soluble resist, salt solution, and the technique called line building.

The resist is used to contain the flow of color within the space created on the fabric. There are two types of resist; one is called water-soluble and another is rubber-based resist called gutta, which is the traditional silk painting resist. Historically, gutta replaced wax in modern

silk painting; then, the water-soluble resists were developed. Gutta is very effective for silk painting and will give a sharp, crisp line, but it can only be removed by dry cleaning. On the other hand, water-soluble resist is clear, contain no solvents, and is easy to apply. As the name implies, the product is simply washed out with water following the manufacturers' directions. Some resists wash out in cold water and others in warm water, and some can also be removed by dry cleaning. However, it doesn't give as crisp a line as the gutta, simply because the resists are water-soluble; the liquid in the dyes tends to dissolve the resist if it is applied too close to the line.

In this first painting of this series, water-soluble resist was used for drawing a frog. If the resist were applied on new pure-white silk and then removed, the lines would be also pure-white. For some designs, the pure white lines are very effective, but for other designs, white lines give unnatural impressions. Therefore, before the resist was applied in this piece, a very light color dye was painted on the silk as a base color, and the lines looks natural and yet noticeable here.

The special effects using salt could be seen in the inside part of the stuff which looks like floating clouds in this work. When salt is combined with silk dyes or paints, the effect is unquestionably spectacular, dramatic, fascinating. Salt has to be applied while the colors are still wet. The most interesting point of salt solution is in giving unpredictable

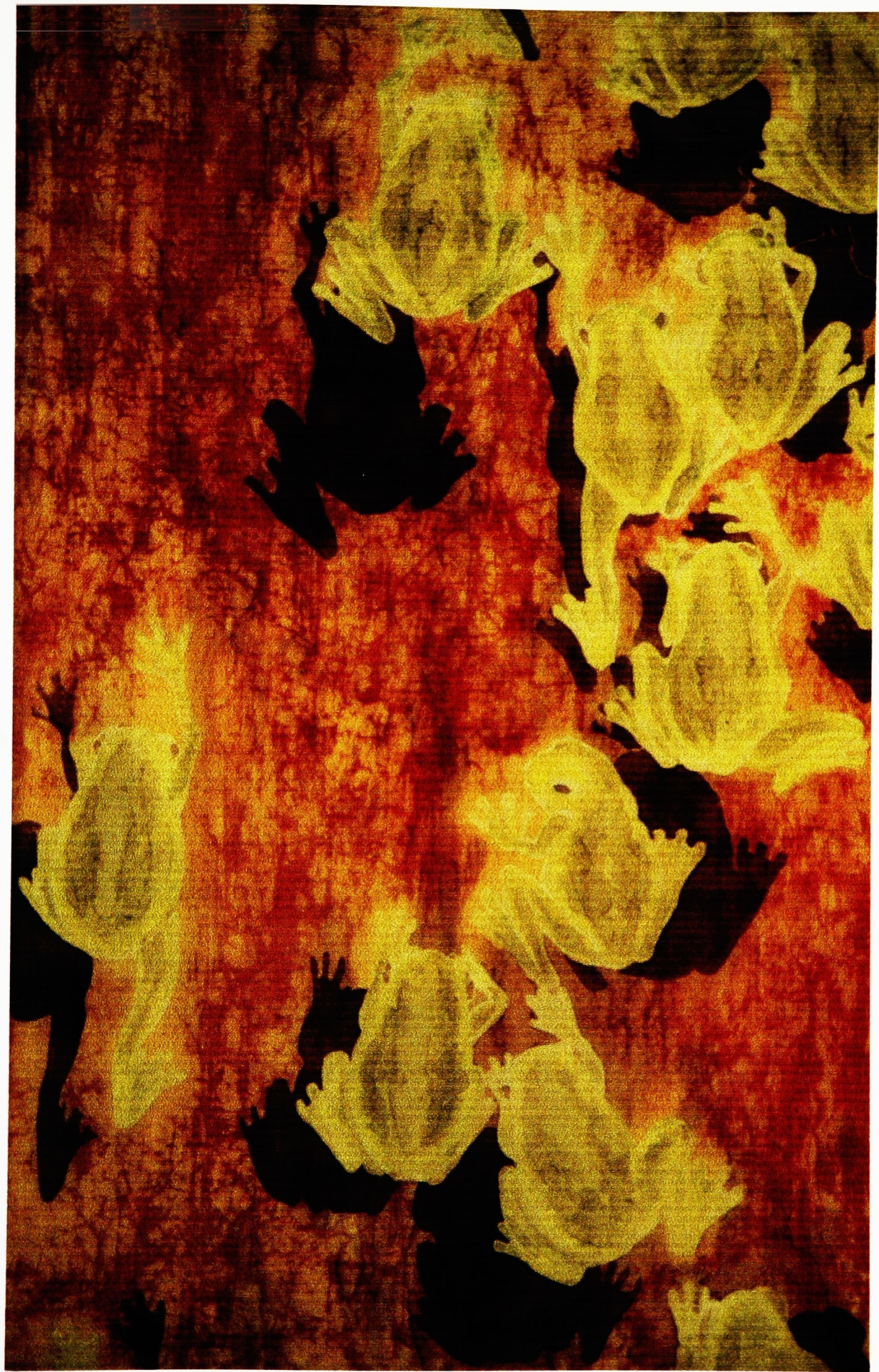
effects. Salt pulls color to it, unpredictably creating dark spots where the crystal is, and lighter areas around it. Salt works like this because it breaks down the components of the colors. For example, when salt touches violet, it may turn red in some areas and blue in others. It also discolors and lightens areas of the fabric, pulling the darker part of the color toward the salt crystals.

Many silk painting artists use this salt technique for creating flowers. When painting flower petal shapes, immediately place another color in the center, and sprinkle salt over that, the dark spots where the crystal was, with lighter areas around, look like a real pistil and stamens at the center of flower.

Overlapped lines, which look like waves, were based on the technique called line building. This technique creates the unpredictable formation of hard, dark edged lines when a wet color is placed over a dry color or when a wet color is allowed to migrate toward a dry color. Sometimes, a hair dryer is used for this technique to speed up the process, but it is not necessary. The horizontal lines in this picture were made by using this technique over and over with many different colors.

Some landscapes which silk painting artists drew were achieved by a wet-in-wet, wet-on-dry, overpainting and line building technique because the dark edge lines by this technique are very suitable for creating the mountain ranges, horizons, or silhouettes of the forest in the

distance. However, controlling this technique is very difficult because of taking care of time, amount of color, or tone needed to make shape as desired especially for landscapes. Therefore, it could be said that it is a kind of advanced technique.



The next painting of this series has many frogs which are climbing the orange rifted wall. For the frogs, which have changed from tadpoles, the first ordeal they have to go through is to climb to the edge of the pond. If the tadpoles were growing up in the man-made pond made of concrete, it is going to be the hardest trial because they have to climb the scorching concrete wall in early summer. Some frogs can reach the shore safely, and the others are going to dry up and die in the middle of the wall. In order to survive, they cannot care about the other frogs which were growing up in the same pond. The survival game between young frogs is just like a competition between young people. They are always competing. They start having competitive spirits very early in their life time, probably while they are in the kindergarten. Nevertheless, while they are in school, the competitions are not as serious as struggles for existence. However, for the people in their late twenties who graduated from school and spent time as working members of society for a while, the competitions are getting very serious. Anybody around them can be their rivals. Some of them are heading straight toward their goal without looking around. Some of them win promotion at the expense of their friends. Some of them are somewhat put off by driving somebody into a corner, but they don't want to be at the bottom either. After

working as hard as they can, they think that they have to accomplish catching up and overtaking their rivals finally. However, right after the moment, they are going to see their rivals running far ahead. They cannot afford to worry about the other people, just like frogs climbing the edge of the pond cannot afford to.

One of the techniques, which was used here is the alcohol technique. The light brown texture which could be peeped at through gaps of the orange cracked patterns in this painting, is based on this alcohol technique. Like most techniques, alcohol is used for textural effects. Alcohol lightens the colors in a delicate way and adds a darker edge line at the perimeter where it stops because it dries very quickly. Water is used in a similar manner with slightly different results. Water lightens the color, more like a bleaching effect with a soft outline, while alcohol discolors the dyes within a smaller area are because it dries so quickly. The alcohol technique works best on rich, deep colors. Alcohol is also good for hiding problems by overpainting the area with bold strokes or by dipping the entire fabric in the alcohol to remove most of the color for a pastel look.

Another technique which can be seen on this work is wax. Wax is also a kind of excellent resist. It gives crisp, sharp lines and holds the dyes back very well. Wax is primarily used for batik and batik variations. Indonesia is the birthplace of batik. People in Java and other small

islands have been handing down this traditional technique for a long time. The Java word, *bathik*, became the international specialized dyeing term, *batik*, at the end of the twentieth century. Wax is melted and applied hot to the fabric with a brush or a tool called *tjanta*. No color reaches the area that is covered with wax. Therefore, if the area has some cracks because the fabric was crumpled up and some colors get into the gaps, the result is the distinctive "crackle" effect which is the biggest characteristic of batik. The crackle patterns can be found as orange background in this silk painting.

Wax can be removed by using ironing; put the fabric between newspapers and do the ironing over the newspaper, and only wax is absorbed by newspaper, and beautiful crackle patterns show up.

Recently, wax substitutes called *Inko resist* or *Presist* were presented for silk painting. They have almost the same effect on fabric as wax does, including the crackle, but wax does not necessarily have to be warm. They are natural, pasty substances that are painted onto the fabric and allowed to dry. They are simply washed out with water.

The other techniques which are used here are water-soluble resist and marker. The water-soluble resist was applied to draw the frogs and their shadows the same way as the sleeping frog in the first painting was drawn. In addition, to making the frogs clearly, the line which was made by water-soluble resist was traced with a silver permanent marker.



The third painting of this series is with two frogs facing each other. They can be recognized as a boyfriend and girlfriend or as rivals meeting each other for the first time.

The fateful encounter affects their lives after that. Moreover, the life is influenced by relationships. Some people in their late twenties have already found their partners for their life time, and the others are still looking for someone. If they find someone, nobody knows if he or she is the right one or not. They just believe he or she is the right one, and are having a relationship with him or her. Believing may be the only way to have a right partner. Either their rival, or the one who they are in love with, the people were able to find someone and are very lucky because they can make each other higher.

The green delicate texture for the background occurs because of the wet-in -wet technique, which is in contrast with the wet-on- dry technique which is called line building. While the green color was still wet, another green color was overpainted and the subtle patterns showed up instead of hard, dark edges from line building.

The line building technique is used for patterns which surround two frogs like fireworks. On first impression they seem to be tie-dye, but actually they are not. These patterns are created by using the line

building technique with many different colors, alcohol also was used for some areas, over and over. Moreover, this technique is also used for giving a three-dimensional effect on the frogs.

The strong dark edges of frogs are from water-soluble resist, the same used for the drawings of frog in the other paintings. Because of the strong contrast between the frogs and background, it looks like the frog pictures, which are on the other pieces of silk, are placed over this painting, but all of them are painted on one piece of silk.

In addition, for giving sparkles in the frogs' eyes, the metallic permanent marker was applied.



ILLUSTRATION 4

The next of this series is the painting with a frog caught in the rain. The frog looks very lonely, holding back its tears in the dark. It might be disciplining itself. Sometimes, people have to feel some loneliness to reflect on themselves or to realize the value of the ties between people. People who know what loneliness is able to be strong-minded, kind, and thoughtful. Loneliness is one of the trials that let people's minds grow.

The water-soluble resist is used for drawing various motifs for this work; the frog, the blades, and the rain drops. Moreover, the silver permanent marker was applied over the line of rain drops made of resist to make the contrast stronger between the rain drops and the dark; the blue colors were painted over and over to making it darker for representation of darkness, and the liquid in the dyes tended to dissolve the resist, and the lines of rain were getting unclear because it was the water-soluble.

The great patterns in the bottom of this painting were created by the use of salt. The salt technique gives a larger effect for the areas with darker color. Therefore, it is obvious that this painting has greater effects than the first painting with a sleeping frog.

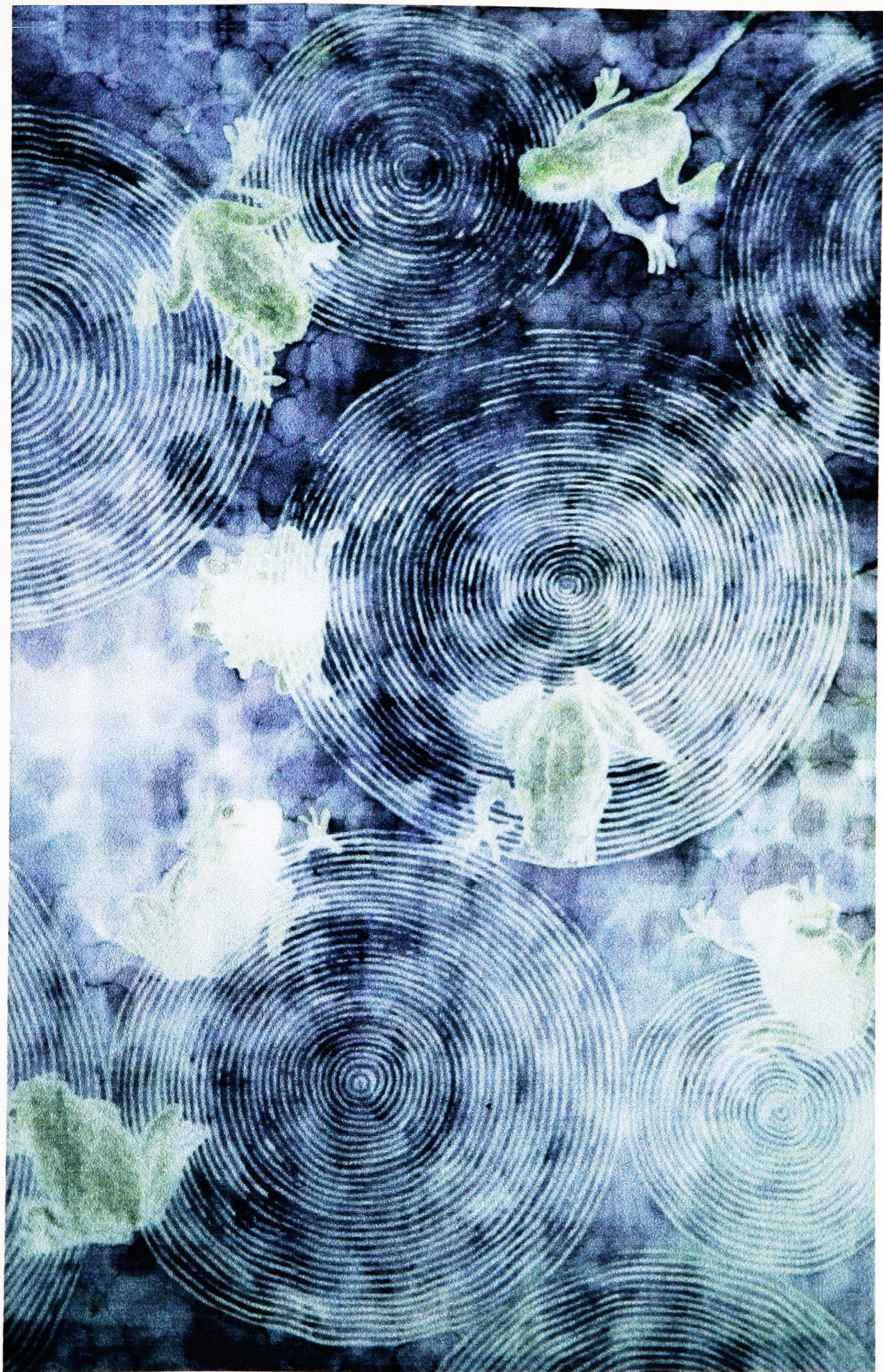


ILLUSTRATION 5

The next painting shows seven frogs scattered asymmetrically over the piece against a light blue background. Each of the frogs is different, although all are portrayed in various swimming poses. Some of them have legs extended, some show their back or belly, and one peeks out directly at the viewer, eye-to-eye. Every frog seems to be enjoying swimming. People also should enjoy their life. For some of them, their business is the greatest pleasure of their life. It would be spending time with their family for some people. Hobbies such as gardening or listening to music could be the greatest fun for the others. Everyone has a right to enjoy his or her life and it also can be said that people can live better because they have something fun or happy in their life.

For this piece also, the water-soluble resist was used to represent frogs and the metallic permanent marker was used to make the details of frogs clear as same as for the other paintings. When the viewer is keeping a distance from this piece to see, the lines with the marker are unclear because these lines are very fine. However, when the viewer approaches this piece, the details are closed up. This difference makes this painting more tasteful.

The line building technique and alcohol technique are used here to draw a watery ripple effect on the background by using many small

blotches in different tones of blue; slightly different color such as light blue, light violet, lavender, and light pink. Parts of the piece features tonal concentrations of some stain, watery ripples, that appear as a darker color. Those parts with only a few stains result in a very pale blue overlying the original white of the silk. Then, the gathering of all of them is creating the illusion of a clean sun-lit pond where frogs swim peacefully.



ILLUSTRATION 6

The last painting of this series is the one which shows several frogs getting together. They might be a family. It is difficult to realize the value of family when people are young. However, people in their late twenties already know how much they owe their parents or family through experiences such as living alone, because of independence or having their own babies. Even though they realized the value of family, it is difficult to keep family ties. In fact they have many kinds of family problems; child bearing, aging parents, breaking family because of divorce, etc. Family is one of the identifications in their life. Therefore, losing family could mean an identity crisis. Having a new understanding of the value of family would be a very important issue from now on.

The techniques used here are line building and water-soluble resist. Some areas have very hard and dark edges, and the other areas don't. These differences give some movement to this work also.

CONCLUSION

This series of silk paintings is showing the part of people's lives who are in their late twenties through the frogs as motifs. Some audiences would just enjoy seeing these colors, designs, etc. However, the others would see these silk paintings and how they overlap with their lives, even if they are people who are not in their late twenties. If even someone were encouraged by thinking he or she is not the only one who has some stress and problems, but also enjoys his or her life, these works would have achieved their goals.

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