

MAKING THE OPAQUE TRANSPARENT:

A review of **Julie Schoenecker**, the artist and teacher,
and the nature of her work.

by Sue Nash, Ph.D.

I had just returned from a visit in Washington State with Julie Schoenecker, a teacher of printmaking and master artist whose work is passionate, full of detail and based on careful direct observation of nature. On this June day, as I walked on the edge of the Pacific Ocean at my home near Moonstone Beach in Cambria, California, I noticed seedpods ready to burst among the vegetation. Grass seeds contained within hair-like bunches of fibers riffed and bobbed above wild radishes and teasels, those just-stiffening thistles now in flower. I thought of Julie's print, *Bursting* (page 6), which she once had given to me and my husband as a present. It is one of our most treasured pieces of art. It was a favorite of hers because in it, in one tonal variation on the color red, she caught the life of wildflowers bursting with seeds just as they were hit by the wind ready to spread them afar. Her teaching was like that: strong, full of life and spirited. The patch of earth next to me and the weave of lacelike water in the sands below me reminded me of Julie's many art series (seen on her website at www.julies-art.com.) I thought of how her art ably communicates without words the intensity and spiritual content of nature.

Julie Schoenecker was my teacher. As a teacher of art-making she excelled in allowing her students to seek what they wanted to express within the constraints of the medium of printmaking. Her art-making was founded on tremendous knowledge of printmaking techniques and procedure. She knew her tools and materials intimately after studying them in the classical manner for years. I began studying under her at Hui No'eau Visual Arts Center in 1987. At the time, the Hui No'eau www.huinoeau.com/ was transforming from plantation club once directed by the imaginative force of Ethel Baldwin into a community of working artists. Julie initiated the process of setting up the old carriage house as a printmaking studio. Twenty years later, her vision of that space is now realized. Hui Press is a flourishing, inspiring print studio where some of the world's most innovative artists come to create their work. One example is Sandow Birk whose Prisonnation woodcut series about California's prisons is recognized as important new work in printmaking. He recently published and created a three volume work translating Dante's Divine Comedy into modern text and visuals. He is presently working on a new series at the Hui Press, www.huipress.com/home.php.

In those early days at the Hui things were different. Julie and I were newcomers to Maui. Her commitment to printmaking caused her to see the potential for the old carriage house to become a printmaking workshop. It had long been abandoned and was a dust-covered, cobwebbed space which still held the old gas pump from the days when Ethel Baldwin would be driven to pick up her friends for a day of outdoor painting and sketching. Julie could

feel the vibes... art making was important and needed to have a space. So of course it happened. Her very gentle and humor-filled nature made it come true in no time. Another quality of a great artist is persistence and an inability to understand the constraints of time on any project

How did she inspire people to give up their time and freedom to commit to such a goal? She was an artist! She could SEE the thriving studio. We had to wash the walls with STP, paint them, and clear the space. We measured for tables and constructed them. Cleaning the windows took literally years. We even measured and glued the linoleum tops to our tables. We began to have meetings and formed a studio. Eventually, I became one of the print techs. Maui artists David Graves, Diana Dorenzo, Joelle Chicheportiche, John Shoemaker and the late Eric Sato were some of the others. Today Nancy Skrimstad and her father Bjorn still grace the print studio with their fun work. We swept, cleaned and gathered donations for the space. Of course, on Maui, we were soon blossoming. Julie invited many artists, notably Big Island artist Hiroke Mironoe and Marcia Morse from Oahu, to conduct workshops and teach there. We laid out the entire studio under Julie's direction and guidance. Julie was quiet but firm about requirements and proper conditions for making art. Soon, with the support of the Hui Board of Directors, the space was in use. Under the giant Norfolk pines on top of the rolling hills of sugar cane with hidden groves of ginger and kukui trees, the carriage house looks out on a sweeping view of Maui's upcountry. The vistas and the space were inspiring. Julie's vision had become a reality.

The first class I took with her was paper-making. Her sure hands and skilled mind led the class through the process. I realized then her art was all about process. She enjoyed the endless variations on the theme of making paper. For her, as in all her work, this process began with observing the material... including eating it. Yes, the first hand made piece of paper I made was created from the artichoke leaves and chokes she had collected over the last few months, having saved them in her freezer just for this purpose. That is when I was first introduced to Julie's first quality: her generosity. For Julie it was natural to carefully save up and freeze the discarded chokes because she knew she could make great paper from it in her next class. When we made paper we learned Julie's second characteristic: freedom within the constraints of the material and the medium. My first piece of paper was not rectangular, but round. That was much more fun! She was always telling us to have fun and explore. And we did, because she did. She was never one to tell what to do; she brilliantly led us to art-making through example. She has had many students and I am among a lucky few who became professional artists because of her teaching.

Julie always inspires her students, but none has excelled her mastery of printmaking. If we lived in Japan, Julie would have been nominated to become a National Treasure long ago. Her expertise in printmaking has been honored many times by purchases made by Hawaii's State Foundation for Culture & the Arts, by knowledgeable collectors around the world and

through earning prizes collected at Art Maui and other venues. Her work has been recognized by other printmakers and artists. She was a vital force in the group of artists who founded Viewpoints Gallery; a Makawao gallery which has been a major part of creating the art world Maui now takes for granted. Julie is powerful in a quiet, stubborn way. She is stubborn for artistic freedom and expression. She is stubborn for quality and time spent on projects. She is stubborn in defense of artists' rights. But she is also as gentle as the slightest breeze stirring in the trees at her home in Pi'iholo and as quiet as the misty rain at her home on Whidbey Island.

My purpose is to explain Julie's work as an artist with emphasis on her printmaking because her work in the medium is unique. As a painter, however, she also excels. One of her great influences seems to be Cezanne. Her use of paint reminds one of Cezanne. One can see in her modulated brush strokes, use of complementary colors and natural subject matter the same intensity of vision Cezanne's work explored. In printmaking, Julie is an innovator of the rank of Cezanne. He famously wrote that "in paint there is no light" but spent his life time trying to capture light in flux.¹ Julie's paintings are among her most powerful works, especially those in her *Veil* series (page 7), but her body of work as a printmaker is perhaps a bit more difficult to understand. This is because printmaking is a difficult medium to explain and to use.

Julie is reticent in verbalizing her artistic aims in art. She always asks me to write what I see in her work. She says that I can express what she tries to do with the perfect words. Of course, this is another example of her generosity. She urged me during our visit to try to explain what she was doing. I am happy to try. As an artist and teacher, I always try to let the work speak directly to me. One of the reasons for this approach is Julie's influence on my development as an artist. She lets her work say everything-- as art should. Art making is successful if it performs the act of communication through visual means. Because I grew up as an artist under Julie's eye, I learned this communication first hand from her. She knows nature through direct observation and handling. She may apprehend her subject matter slowly over time or in an instant.

She also has gravitated away from the rigid rules of lithography, etchings, and other intaglio processes toward the increased freedom she found in the monotype, monoprint and collograph. For printmakers this sentence will indicate Julie's commitment to experimentation. To a lay observer of art it might be a mystery. Let me try to explain. Etching and drypoint (and Julie is a master of both), ultimately became too constrictive for her. Though she cuts woodcuts and creates intaglios with mastery, taking weeks or months to complete a series, she eventually came to appreciate the immediacy and delicacy available in the monotype. Monotypes contain no repeatable matrix on the plate; that is, they are created by painting, dabbing or staining with inks directly on the plate. Monotypes can be made in one sitting or in several. She taught a rather unique approach to the monotype. She printed

in layers, letting the inks dry on the sheet of paper after each printing and then re-dampening the paper with the incomplete image under blotters and weight overnight, and then continued to layer color in the same manner over a period of days. Her resulting prints have an immediacy and depth unique in the history of printmaking.

Another process she came to value was the collograph because it allowed direct use of materials from nature. Julie liked texture and movement and she could get them from monotypes and collographs. A great artist uses the correct medium for expressing truth. Her truth was the immediacy and delicate strength of nature. She lives with movement, music, rhythm, harmony. Direct observation of nature inspires her to learn the language of plant life. In her studio last week, she opened drawers, showing me drying and dried specimens of grasses, leaves, and bark she would be using in her *Water* series. In this work, Julie freezes the motion of growing things to relate a spiritual truth. Nature does not die; it transforms. Change in the natural world around us is Julie's study. Plant swirls will become ripples in a brook. She captures that movement in one element and makes it live again in another.

One of her first series to explore the monotype is the *Ti Dance* series (page 7). She added 50% transparent base to primary colored etching inks (slightly modified) in painting the plates. Thus, she achieved a layering of transparent colors to suggest the *ti* plant (*(cordyline terminalus)*) spiraling and swirling in the wind on a warm Maui day. Most artists might try to capture the movement, but Julie captured the movement *along with* the play of light on the edges of the leaves as Maui's sun made the opaque transparent. This series was an important turning point in her work. That work would become increasingly exploratory and revelatory. One reason she does not often talk about the meaning of her work is that it speaks for itself. The *Ti* series does not come from application of plant material on the plate but comes from Julie's own hand. Her drawings created the flux of light in nature. One of the most important elements of her work is a concept understood and defined in Hawaiian culture. Directly and deeply observing nature results in greater appreciation of nature.

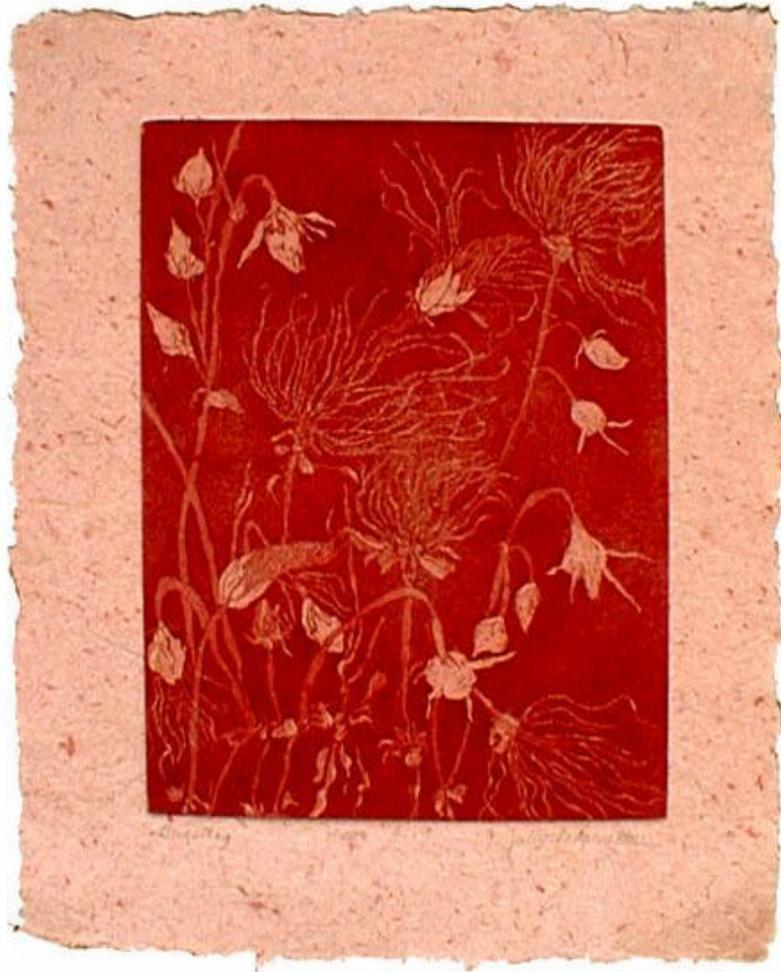
She has explored nature's elements thoroughly over forty years of creating art. In a ten-color woodcut, *Teasel Tapestry* (page 6), Julie used a reductive process on several of the blocks, printing one color and carving more away and then printing another color. The teasel is a thistle-like plant important in the history of textiles as it was used in carding wool and in pulling up the nap in a piece of cloth. She was interested in the complex role of the freely growing, weed-like plant which had been one of the first tools used in carding wool and other fibers. To create a work of art about this humble but useful plant was natural for Julie. The medium was perfect for expressing the tedious and satisfying work of weaving cloth. She was successful in creating a multi-layered, shimmering print which perfectly depicts the sturdy teasel in its greatest glory. She teased the teasel into being.

Teasing is a quality she relishes. She appreciates humor and has a strong visual humor. One of her most impressive prints is a monoprint of a silent, dignified cat facing away from the viewer, standing about eighteen inches tall with ears raised and pointed. How did Julie capture this Tabby (page 8)? A great risk-taker in her art, Julie constantly works on the edge of failure, pushing her medium to its greatest potential expression. Julie had collected some palm tree wrappings in her studio and one day an innocent piece caught her eye. It lay there patiently and was quite pretty, too. Though it was just a plain brown piece of refuse to most people, Julie saw something special in it. The elegant piece entered Julie's imagination, teasing itself indelibly into her perception. Julie accepted the gift and eased it into permanence through gluing gently here and there as the fiber lay on the plate. She inked one color, a grey brown, onto the slightly raised surface which she had carefully prepared with acrylic medium, allowing it to dry thoroughly so that the roller would remain clean from the fuzziness of the palm fibers. This took a few days. She then inked it and pulled the print from her etching press—a prize cat in all her dignity. Tabby was patiently looking at something, just waiting to pounce on an unsuspecting little dust mote perhaps. Gentle coaxing was the nature of the patiently prepared print. The result was worth all the time and trouble she took. It is one of the parts of her *oeuvre* which is most approachable and memorable. It is light, humorous and perfect.

Julie's art is the world of trees, plants and vegetation around her. Through direct study of these subjects she opens the understanding of her collectors to nature's wonder, diversity and complexity. Julie's strength as an artist lies in her sharing of the imprints of nature's shapes and textures and giving them new meaning. Her printmaking captures the complexity of nature's grasses, seeds, trees, and stones with their endless patterns and repetitions. Julie is a treasure. Her passionate spiritual love of the world around her has led her to make art that communicates a spirit of love, growth and change. To make a humble, useful art medium like printmaking express great truths requires a master. Julie Schoenecker's work achieves this greatness.

Sue Nash is an artist whose work is seen at the prestigious Hana Coast Gallery. She teaches art appreciation at Cuesta College in Paso Robles and San Luis Obispo, California.

Footnote 1. Denis Coutagne, Cezanne in Provence, translated and edited by Daniel Wheeler, New York, Universe, a division of Rizzoli, 1995, p.18.



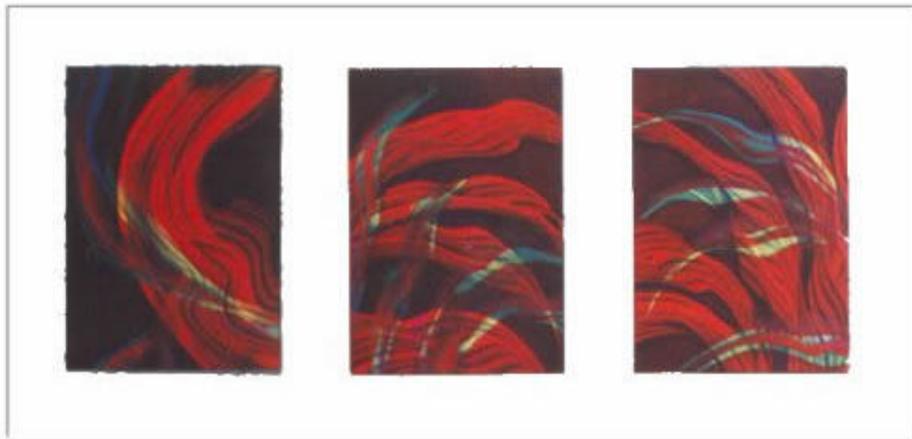
Bursting (edition)
Intaglio Etching on Julie's Paper
15" x 13"



Teasel Tapestry (edition)
10-Color Woodblock
17" x 32"



Floating Veil
Oil on Canvas (Sold)
36" x 36"



SOLD

Windy Day
Triptych from ***Ti Dance*** Series
Monotype
15" x 25"



Tabby
Collograph (edition)
38" x 32"