

## A fluid career

### *Segami applies engineering knowledge to ancient art form*

BY CATHY ANDERSON

When Amy Lee Segami was studying fluid mechanics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, she put dye in running water to analyze such natural phenomena as flow, turbulence, streamlining and vortex and photographed the results.

Some years later, while attempting to duplicate the ancient Japanese art of suminagashi, or painting on water, Segami suddenly realized that all of her engineering training had led her to that moment. "When I first discovered that I could create and control images on water in this way, the room brightened, and I actually cried out 'aha,'" says Segami.

Three years ago, she had her first public showing, at the Chicago Botanic garden in Glencoe. Since then, her work has been seen in public and corporate galleries. She has appeared on television and the "40 under 40" standouts by Crain's Chicago Business. Critics have called her the foremost practitioner of suminagashi today.

Although she thinks of her work as "art with history behind it," she merges aspects of both Eastern and Western cultures, both traditional and contemporary. Many in the art world with the ancient technique that have never been made before.

"Because my paintings are about nature, everyone can relate to them" she explains. And because her medium is water, her images flow, tumble, rush,

drip and swirl. Contemplating her paintings, one feels that life has already raced on, leaving just a quick impression on paper, more real than the instant itself. "My art is not about producing what life is," she says, "but about appreciating the flavor of the moment. Suminagashi has taught me so much about life. Life doesn't



Amy Lee Segami with one of her paintings. "Eddies Everywhere."

always go the way you want it."

Born in mainland China, she grew up in Hong Kong, where her father was in the import-export business. "My father always stressed the value of education," she says, "encourage me in math and science—unusual for a girl in that culture."

In 1976 she arrived in Chicago, going on to earn both a bachelor's and a master's degree in mechanical engineering at IIT. She taught at IIT, then joined Baxter international, where she led a team that developed an innovative way of separating plasma from whole blood. Her future in pharmaceuticals was promising.

In her free time she took a course in brush painting at the Botanic Garden, where her teacher, Kay Thomas,

mentioned suminagashi. "I found one text on the subject at Aiko's, the Japanese book-store in Chicago, and discovered that it had been in front of me all the time but in a different way," Segami says.

Suminagashi, which translates to "flowing ink," originated in China 2,000 years ago and was practiced by Japanese Shinto priests in the 12th century. By dripping ink onto the surface of a pond, they created random patterns. The designs were then lifted off the water onto rice paper and burned as prayers to their gods.

Traditional suminagashi is monochrome, but Segami adds acrylic color in many shades and subtleties to bring new dimensions and images to the form. Her scientific training helps her control the viscosity and surface tension of the water.

She manipulates the ink and paint using feathers, brushes or chopsticks, then deftly lays down a sheet of textured onion skin or handmade rice paper into the 4-by-4 foot tank she built herself and quickly pulls off the image. Once completed, she never touches up her paintings. "It's the way of life, do it once," she says.

"It's the emotion that draws people," she says of her paintings that seem as profound as nature and as pleasant to live with. Prices range from \$2,250 for the matched set of "Apres Avant," two small pictures that complement each other, to \$12,000 (for "Enchantment"), with most at \$6,000 and \$7,000. Reproductions of "Snow Fantasia" and "Pond of Passion" are available in limited editions of 175 for \$350 unframed and \$625 framed.

What is she dreaming about today? "More space. A larger tank. And especially I'd like my work to be seen by many, many people, perhaps through traveling exhibits. Like the stone thrown in the center of the pool, I'd like my images to ripple out, further and further."

*Segami is also a professional speaker on the integration of arts and science. For more information please contact:*