



## Hanging Out

Chicago artist draws from ancient religious ritual and paints on water.

By Robert Cross

Artist Amy Lee Segami breaks the ice at parties by mentioning that she paints on water. Immediately, the questions start pouring her way.

No, Segami always must explain, she is not a watercolorist. She does not do marbling, which employs a sort of gel. "My medium is water," she insists.

Segami, 38, uses techniques of the ancient Japanese religious ritual *suminagashi* (flowing ink) to create contemporary art. In the 12th Century, priests dripped inks onto the surface of a still pond and captured the resulting random patterns on rice paper that ultimately bore messages written to the Shinto gods. So far as Segami knows, she is the only artist who has pushed the form beyond that tradition.

When she paints on water, instead of letting pure chance form the patterns, she imposes her will and forces the medium to hold the images she designs.

### The dynamics of art

Segami's knowledge of fluid dynamics—she holds bachelor's and master's degrees from the Illinois Institute of Technology—permits her to influence the outcome. By mixing a seaweed powder into the water and applying pigments of varying densities, she forms a delicate balance of maneuverable ingredients.

Colored liquids dripping from above meet the slight viscosity of the water. The surface tensions let the artist form shapes with a feather, brush, chopstick or gentle puffs of her own breath before the paints and inks can drift.



When she achieves the desired results, Segami (with even greater delicacy) spreads paper on the surface and lifts off the image. The paintings that emerge—from abstract patterns to quite literal landscapes, birds, flowers and animals—most often have a swirling quality.

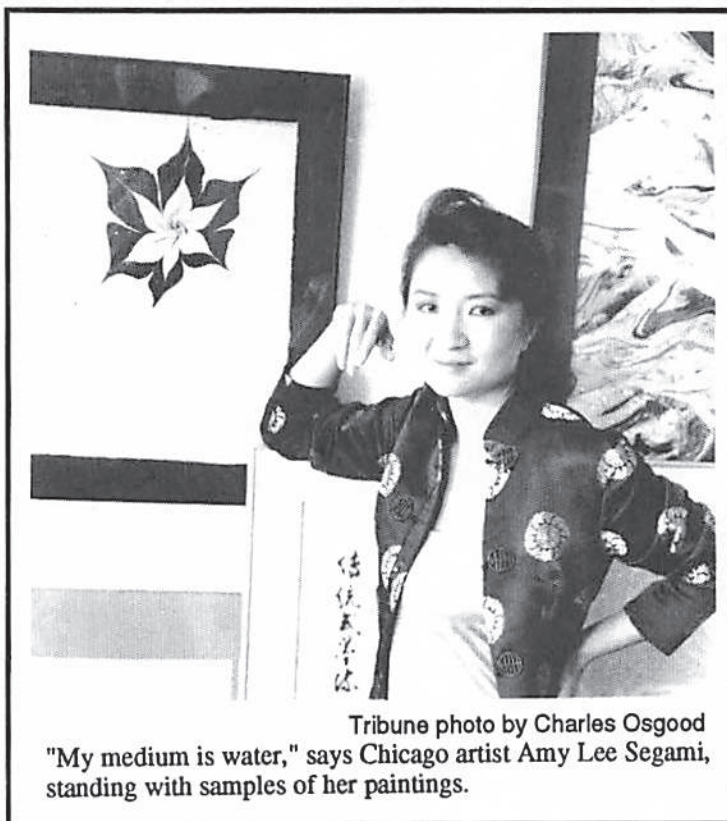
But Segami also can mold her shimmering materials into amazingly precise straight lines and geometric forms. Some of the paintings, particularly those involving textures and three-dimensional effects, require considerable trial and error. A few imperfections creep in, but Segami refuses to do touch-ups.

"There are things I can control and things I cannot," she says. "It's what I would call cooperation with nature. I've learned a lot about life doing this. I want my work to achieve things in certain ways, and also I want to let go in certain ways."

### From engineer to artist

In 1985, Segami, the engineer, let go of a promising career at a pharmaceuticals company and began practicing *suminagashi* full time. A native of Swatow in northern mainland China, Segami grew up in Hong Kong, where her father worked in the import-export trade. She came to the United States in 1976, studied at IIT and landed the pharmaceuticals job. But in time, she grew frustrated with industrial bureaucracy.

On the back porch of her Andersonville apartment she presides over a 4-foot-square shallow plywood box fitted with garden hoses for filling and draining. In winter, a space heater and several layers of



Tribune photo by Charles Osgood  
"My medium is water," says Chicago artist Amy Lee Segami, standing with samples of her paintings.

coats barely keep water and artist from freezing.

The dimensions of her work surface match the petite artist's arm spread and the interior of her car trunk. She frequently hauls her finished pieces to galleries and the homes of patrons.

"I have clients who are very secure people," she says. "They see what they like and they go ahead and make a decision without waiting for the art critics to say this is good stuff."

Segami's paintings are on display at Art Gallery Inc. in Morton Grove, and starting this month, collections of her work will be installed in the lobbies of Northwest suburban corporations as part of the Northwest Cultural Council's Corporate Galleries program.

### What's in a name?

Segami says she came upon *suminagashi* while searching for her own cultural/artistic roots. Although the Japanese elevated *suminagashi* to the level of religion, she is certain that it originated in China some

2,000 years ago.

"There's really not a whole lot of information to substantiate that. But it really wouldn't surprise me if *suminagashi* started out of China. They had the paper, they had the ink back then."

Her own name reflects the elusive nature of her art. She went through most of her life as Amy Ameina Hsuan Lee. When she became a U.S. citizen, she officially added Segami to her name.

Chinese people often incorporate title into their name to signify their profession. On one of her trips back to Asia, Amy learned that Segami is a river in northern Japan, as well as a common family name (although usually spelled Sagami). Best of all, for artist's purpose, the river has always been known for the purity of its water.

Segami can be reached at (312) 275-5121 or write to Segami Studios 1340 W. Irving Park Road, Suite 227, Chicago, Illinois 60613-1907