

Nishiki Sugawara-Beda: *Pot of Soot at the End of the Rainbow*, installation view at Cris Worley Fine Arts. Photograph by Kevin Todara.



IN GLORIOUS BLACK AND WHITE

Nishiki Sugawara-Beda's practice utilizes traditional ancient materials to explore and imagine, captivating viewers today.

BY STEVE CARTER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY VICTORIA GOMEZ

Nishiki Sugawara-Beda in her studio. Photograph by Victoria Gomez.



There was an ineffable, but unmistakable, *awab* in the main gallery of Cris Worley Fine Arts on my recent visit. As I communed with Nishiki Sugawara-Beda: *Pot of Soot at the End of The Rainbow*, the Japanese American artist's sumi ink paintings seemed to whisper a language beyond the need for words, evoking a reverential catch-your-breath quiet that's typically the province of cathedrals, temples, and shrines. *Take this all in. Slow down. This moment, now this moment, and now this one...*

The exhibition, which ran from July 9 through August 20, marked the artist's first show with Cris Worley, and, indeed, her first in Dallas. It was an auspicious local debut, with Sugawara-Beda's black-and-white abstract paintings spiritualizing the temperament of the room as the room embraced the work—it felt like an inevitable, symbiotic homecoming. "She's been able to get, in a black-and-white show, a lot of color in just the black," gallerist Cris Worley comments with a laugh. "There are so many variables of gray." And Worley adds that while the artist's materials are centuries old and unmistakably representative of her culture, this is something new: "She's using sumi in ways that are nontraditional; she's turning it into a different kind of art form, a contemporary art form."

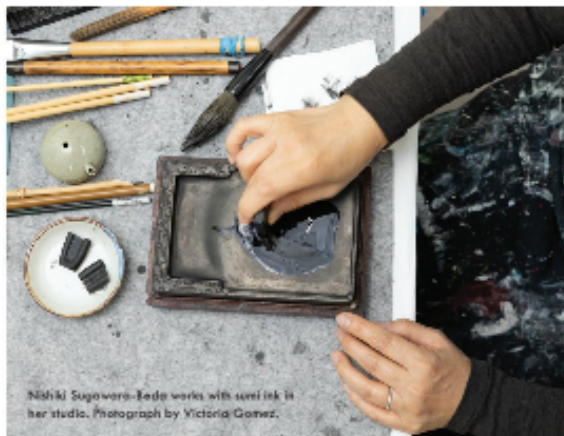
Leaving the sanctuary of the gallery behind, I'm off to visit Sugawara-Beda at her SMU studio; she's just begun her fifth year teaching painting and drawing at SMU's Meadows School of the Arts following a hiatus year of research leave. The studio is a new one for her, and she's only been in it for about a month. And while

STUDIO

the space is minimal, spartan, evincing a Zen-like asceticism, it's nonetheless conducive to creativity. She's especially happy with the depth of the room, the way it allows her to get a long perspective on her developing paintings. On this occasion her first-grader is in the studio as well, hard at work; she tells me she's just finished her own first painting, and she's decided to do 99 more—stay tuned. The studio's walls are festooned with recent work, some completed, some in progress, and the myriad tools of the artist's trade are close at hand: a variety of sumi ink sticks, brushes, paper, panels, mortar and pestle, and mixing vessels, imbuing the work space with a meditative sense of ritual and discovery.

Earlier this year, Nishiki Sugawara-Beda was one of three artists awarded the DMA's annual Otis and Velma Davis Dozier Travel Grant. Established in 1990, the grant is designed to fund travel for questing Texas-based professional artists, and Sugawara-Beda has already put the award to good use with a two-week trip to Poland last spring; it's her husband's country of origin. "I was searching about some sort of origins, conceptual origins, or technical origins, or cultural, or materials' origins," she explains. "I just happen to come from Japan, so my way of tracing back was naturally a path through Japanese culture. But my hope, my ultimate goal, my aim is the core of humanity—we all share something. That's something I'm thinking about." With her husband, artist Bartosz Beda, being Polish American, and Nishiki being Japanese American, their daughter is Japanese Polish American, and Sugawara-Beda's decision to visit Poland was partly a nod to her triple-hyphenate identity; Sugawara-Beda is very interested in bringing some of that Eastern European DNA to her work.

"The Japanese sumi ink I usually use is made of soot and animal glue—those are the main ingredients," she continues. "But going to a different place, for example Poland, I found wood or other materials to burn and collect the soot as my pigment. So in a way I



Nishiki Sugawara-Beda works with sumi ink in her studio. Photograph by Victoria Gomez.



Myriad tools of the artist's trade. Studio view. Photograph by Victoria Gomez.



Studio view of completed work by Nishiki Sugawara-Beda. Photograph by Victoria Gomez.

could paint about the Polish landscape, the Polish people, and my experience using its materials." She returned to Dallas with a lot of Poland-sourced soot, and it's destined to become pigment for future works exploring her Polish travels.

Her paintings, whether large or small-scale, command a room, and the artist's command of her materials is absolute. Her varied brushstrokes can range from near-microscopic precision to bold, exclamatory huzzahs, a testament not only to her expertise but also to sumi's versatility as a timeless, and timely, expressive medium. The artist's reverence for sumi is boundless, as evidenced by her obsession to understand her materials and their origins. The vast majority of Japanese sumi comes from the city of Nara, and Sugawara-Beda has visited on several occasions, meeting makers and merchants, forging spiritual connections that ultimately inform the work. "Understanding the materials is partly me going back to the origin, to *really* understand it," she says. "I've gotten really interested in who made the materials I'm dealing with. And this tradition has its own culture—sumi, by itself, doesn't do anything...but with water it becomes ink..." And in the hands of sumi alchemist Nishiki Sugawara-Beda, black-and-white becomes gold. **P**