

Topophilia · Verse



Keiko Hara
Prints 1981-2013

To my parents for giving me life.

*To my daughter,
who gives my life vitality and meaning,*

and to Phillis Luff for her thoughtful support and friendship.

Topophilia·Verse

“It is our individual topophilia that unites us as human beings.”

– Keiko Hara

The Infinite Surface · *Prints and Installations by Keiko Hara*

As a very young girl, Keiko Hara got up early one day and went down to the stream to pick out several stones of different colors. She came back home and began to draw with the stones on the broad asphalt of the street in front of her house. She drew all day without ceasing, well into the late afternoon when her mother came home from work. She had created a huge drawing.

Ingenuity, determination, and ambition have characterized Keiko Hara's life and work as an artist ever since. These attributes apply to her activity as a painter but perhaps most especially to her long preoccupation with printmaking. Yet these two paths of artistic expression are anything but distinct or separate: not only do they inform and echo each other, they are often indistinguishable one from another. Hara's prints may have elements that are hand-drawn or painted, while her paintings often contain collages of printed paper or fabric. And certainly both share a characteristic imagery and similarity of purpose.

The most striking aspect of Hara's art is its lyrical strength. Glorious colors, exquisite patterns, dancing calligraphic lines, and haunting shapes abound. The work is non-representational, but, above all, it represents a deep connection with nature. The fluttering of leaves, the striations of rain, the shapes of clouds, of waves, of the wind . . . these are some of the associations that Hara's abstract imagery evokes. There is no denying the Japanese sensibility that the artist brings to her work. The art and culture of the homeland of her youth are tied deeply to the expressive forms she chooses. Yet a long and successful career spent in the USA has shown her other paths, too. And, in the end, Hara has forged her own individual way, beyond the confines or expectations of either nation.

Consider, for example, one of Hara's early, major print works, *Topophilia 1* (1981), a set of 24 lithographs on Japanese Gampi paper. Its arrangement is radical: individual prints are intended to be displayed, not on a wall, but visible from both sides. They are hung back to back, suspended in rows one above the other. The effect is stunning: the work creates a shimmering wall of images. The semitransparent paper allows the shapes and colors of one print to permeate its neighbor, so that images show

through in mysterious, shifting ways. In natural light especially, the richly colored surfaces and floating shapes and patterns change gradually with the day, never fixed, always fluid. What may be invisible one moment becomes crystal clear as the light moves. There are overlays of patterns—grids, lines, stipples, dapples, swirls—made possible by successive printings, and this layering is further extended by imagery borrowed from the print behind. The tooth of the paper gives the work an inherently tactile surface which is enhanced by collaged

rice-paper elements and lines of precise stitching from a sewing machine. At this early stage it is clear that Hara's inventive and unorthodox artistic solutions are propelling her work in innovative directions.

The predominant shape that floats on the rich surfaces of these lithographs is that of a shell. Hara says she is less interested in its being a shell and more interested in the internal space it creates. However, she also tells a personal story

(she is a consummate storyteller!) of her earliest memories of nature as a child living on the shores of Japan's Inland Sea. Every day she would get up and go down to the beach to investigate the seaweed, fish, and shells, laid out "as if on a canvas." She collected shells, amassing over two hundred varieties. She studied them closely, and often dreamed of shells at night, her unconscious mind creating new colors, patterns, and shapes.

Other personal memories infuse this work. Hara's father, while working in North Korea during WWII, was taken prisoner by the Chinese. Only after eight years was he able to return to his family. Hara grew up in a household of women: two sisters, mother, grandmother, and aunt. Her aunt had kimonos, beautifully adorned garments with symbolic patterns,

images, and motifs designed for special occasions and ceremonies. Echoes of these patterns resonate throughout Hara's work. A repository for these many memories, *Topophilia 1* was also created as a tribute to Hara's beloved mother who had died in 1976.

Meaning "a strong love of place," the word "topophilia" represents an idea that is a dominant concern for Hara and the title of many of her works. She understands it as a longing for a place of beauty and meaning, remembered or imagined . . .

and unreachable. This is less a place in the physical sense, but somewhere that resides within the human spirit. Each of us, she believes, has such a place. And this is what she strives to manifest in her art. In *Topophilia 1*, this yearning has a very personal meaning. In later works, the implications are more universal. As she explains: "It is our individual topophilia that unites us as human beings. What keeps us apart are our cultural prejudices and political boundaries."

Hara is a highly skilled printmaker, versatile in all mediums. She has been fortunate also to collaborate with master printers in residencies and workshops around the world. The lithographs for *Topophilia 1*, for example, were printed by Bernie and John Swenson in their Minneapolis workshop. Hara learned woodblock printing and etching as a student in Japan, but her first encounter with lithography came in 1973 in the art department at Mississippi State University for Women. Already a practicing artist and an art therapist in Japan, she chose this school, she admits ruefully, because of the appeal of the name "Mississippi" and the romance of its association with Mark Twain. Newly arrived in the USA and knowing no English, she signed up for 18 credits and was thrilled with the access she had to studios, equipment, and



materials. She spent every moment in the studio, surviving on four hours' sleep a night. Her first creation was a lithograph using seven colors. It felt truly extravagant.

Hara left Mississippi with a BA in painting, earned in record time. She moved North, first to the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, where she earned an MA in printmaking in 1975, and was introduced to screenprinting. Her instructor called her "a natural" at the technique. The next year, she attended Cranbrook Academy of Art, Michigan, where she gained an MFA also in printmaking. At Cranbrook, Hara discovered the largest lithographic stones she had ever seen. Knowing she would likely never work on that scale again, she employed a proven strategy—to sacrifice sleep. She would wait until everyone went home and then begin drawing on the stones and printing the whole night long in the empty studio.

After teaching art at the University of Wisconsin for five years, in 1985 Hara joined the small art department at Whitman College, a respected liberal arts college in Walla Walla, Washington. At first she was one of two faculty members. Slowly she became the major force in expanding the department and transforming its printmaking offerings. Over the years, etching, lithography, screenprinting, and woodblock presses were acquired. Papermaking as well as digital technologies and nontoxic inks were introduced. Lastly, a book arts program was established. Hara, who retired in 2008, taught and worked in all these different mediums.

"Printmaking offers a vocabulary I cannot find in painting," explains Hara. Only in very rare instances does she create works in one print medium alone. Mostly she incorporates a combination of techniques—woodblock print with stencil and collage; silkscreen, color copy, and handmade paper; mixed media monoprint with intaglio, lithography, and chine-collé. The variations are endless. Her fascination, and skill, lie in bringing together the different qualities of each technique:

intaglio pushes ink deep into the paper; water-based woodblock soaks pigments into the paper fibers; screenprint produces a flat, inked surface; and stenciling creates a pronounced raised surface. Added to this layering is the paper itself and, frequently, collaged items. These infinitesimal, layered depths are Hara's arena of focus: she strives to create a surface that is as deep, tactile, and expressive as possible. "My interest is in spatial qualities," she says. "I am a sculptor working with infinite space."

Before coming to the USA, Hara had learned intaglio and woodblock techniques as a student in Japan. However, her interest in woodblock printing was rekindled in 1995 when she was invited to Kyoto to work with master printer Tadashi Toda, a craftsman in the Japanese Ukiyo-e tradition. *Topophilia 7 · Gray, Blue, Red, Green* (1996) is the resulting series of four prints that uses 17 woodblocks with 23 colors in an edition of 20. The colors are rich and intense, with a haunting shape that floats in the center of each sheet. Hara drew inspiration from a Noh play about the Sumida River. As she recalls it, a woman searching for her son sees a bird in the mists above the river, only later realizing it is the ghost of her dead child. The metaphor of the bird, the spirituality of the tragic moment, the atmosphere of the river crossing—all these are present in the prints, each of which has been added to by the artist with stencil, collage, and calligraphic brush marks.

Topophilia 7 is one of very few of Hara's series produced in an edition. Unlike many printmakers, Japanese Ukiyo-e print artists included, Hara is not particularly interested in printmaking's ability to reproduce multiple, duplicate images. She has too many ideas to choose just one to be multiplied, nor does she want to spend precious time editioning prints when she could be exploring the next idea. The overwhelming majority of her printed works are one-off monotypes and monoprints¹. The lithographic work *Verse* (1984), for example, is a series of one-of-a-kind monoprints. Hara relishes the

Topophilia 1, 1981



fluidity and sense of exploration as she creates such a series, making changes in color and placement, adding different marks, for each successive print. Each individual work becomes a variation on the image. As the series progresses, she discovers new dimensions and new meanings, while all the time seeing the path that led there. The finished series has a coherence, which Hara describes as “a strong urge to dialogue with my own work in the process of creating.”

Hara has long desired that her art function in the round, that it occupy three-dimensional space. Early on she created free-standing, wooden screens composed of hundreds of monoprints, e.g. *Verse 8.2.8* (1983). The screens allow for the translucent and changing effects she seeks and provide a means of showing how individual works continue the dialogue with each other. In addition, the screens become part of the viewer’s environment . . . just as the Japanese Shoji screens had been part of Hara’s everyday life as a girl. She recalls looking through the paper to see what kind of day it was outside, seeing the reflection of the sun or the moon, and being free to imagine much more. A 1993 installation at the Art Gym in Portland, Oregon, occupied a room approximately 10 by 18 feet. Hara created an entire wall of 12-foot-high, folding screens that called for the viewer to imagine what lay behind, but also allowed for occasional glimpses through cracks and peepholes. What the glimpses revealed was a space where tall, scroll-like paintings hung from the ceiling, some with the collaged fragments of a quilt. This had been a well-worn quilt from a close friend, now deceased, and had deep meaning for the artist. She points out that the work symbolizes a place that is physically inaccessible: it can be seen, but can only be truly grasped at a level beyond visual reality. This sense of yearning is part of the meaning of the title, *Topophilia 3 · Quilt Work*.

In 1994, Hara again used panels of prints but turned them into seven-foot-high “gates” instead of screens. The installation *Topophilia 5 · 100 Gates* (1994) was shown at Tacoma Art

Museum. Reminiscent of the Japanese Torii, the gate found at the entrance to a Shinto shrine where it symbolizes a transition from the profane to the sacred, Hara’s gates also invited the visitor to cross a metaphorical threshold to a different state of being . . . a place where memory, emotion, and imagination reside. Hara repeated the gate form, but this time in translucent glass, in a permanent sculpture for the Whitman College campus. Three gates stand in a small stream, their imagery and colors changing dramatically not only as the sun moves or clouds gather but also as the flowing water reflects and illuminates. It is a lyrical piece, an ultimate collaboration with the environment and with light.

Glass may well be the most surprising of Hara’s graphic mediums, in her already extensive range. For the panels in these gates, imagery was screenprinted and stenciled onto five sheets of glass using glass frit² as pigment. The separate sheets were then fused together in a firing process. The undertaking proved a challenging one, and Hara found herself having to invent a new medium to suspend the frit. (She now holds the patent for it.) Such inventive solutions to problems that Hara has posed herself are an integral part of her work. She modifies established techniques, revitalizes ancient processes, and develops new mediums—for example, a combination of oil, wax, and other ingredients that enables her to apply stencils to lithographs. Frequently, she goes where no one has gone before. She confesses to running several 10-foot-long sheets of handmade paper through the college’s new digital printer as an experiment. Understanding that something might be technically impossible is outside Hara’s realm of acceptance.

Hara is prolific and invariably works on myriad projects at once, pursuing parallel ideas in print and paint. Installations, substantial undertakings in themselves, are in many ways the summation of these ideas, and they have grown ever more ambitious in concept and scale. They increasingly involve the viewer as an active participant. “The work should not end with

my ideas,” says Hara. “The viewer can take the experience to another level.” While remaining essentially poetic, her installations have also become more overtly symbolic of Hara’s concern with universal human experience. Thus *Topophilia · Departing* (1998) implies that leaving and separation are not only part of the immigrant life, but inherent to the human condition. Using multi-media effects such as video, video projection, sound, and specialized lighting, Hara creates a theatrical environment in a small room. Video footage shows airplanes leaving and arriving, the noise of their engines alternating with the gentler refrains of a flute playing a traditional Japanese song about departure. Every surface of the room is papered with prints and with calligraphic writings in many different hands, as if representing the mass of humanity. A solitary suitcase sits on the threshold. Yearning, regret, and hope hang in the air.

In *Topophilia · Imbuing Seasons* (2004) Hara has constructed four rooms characterized as “Hot,” “Wet,” “Dry,” or “Cold”—elemental conditions shared and understood by every human being. The outside walls of each room are made from fragments of paper. There are scripts from countless languages, pages of old books, and printed or drawn calligraphic marks by the artist herself. The words for these four conditions are translated into many tongues. Inside each room, the walls, floor, and ceiling are covered with colors, patterns, textures, and some mirrors. Viewers listen and look. They hear sounds associated with each season: dry grasses, rain, birds, a broom sweeping. They see themselves in the mirrors. Then they notice that words and images are being projected onto their own bodies. They have become part of *Imbuing Seasons*. But more important yet, they have been made aware that they are part of this basic, shared humanity.

Hara’s work is a call for us to celebrate the individual self and to understand our connection with all humanity. “I want to create a place where the political issues of the world do not

separate us from our individualism,” she says. The place she creates is one of beauty infused with the natural world. She believes deeply in the power of art: ever since her early days as an art therapist she has known that art can expand individual potential. Having experienced two distinct cultures, she believes in a place beyond culture, that is not merely an amalgam of both, but something universal.

This is a place she has already attained in her own work. After a lifetime of perfecting innumerable techniques and experimenting with a wide range of mediums, “It is,” she says, “all becoming one.” Medium, format, concept, painting, sculpture, drawing . . . and printmaking . . . they are now one vocabulary, one language. Constraints of tradition, of artistic conventions, of cultural expectations, of academic duty, of time itself, these all have been left far behind. “I have finally gained a new freedom. Now is a time of limitless possibilities,” says Hara as she begins her seventh decade of making art³.

Patricia Grieve Watkinson
Seattle, 2013

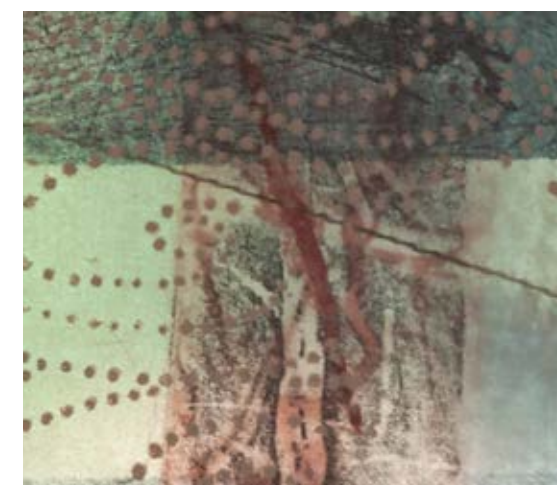
¹ Keiko Hara explains that a *monotype* uses an image painted on a flat, featureless surface. The image is transferred to paper when it is run through a printing press. Sometimes the image can be printed a second time, but it is much fainter. A *monoprint* is created from a plate with a feature, e.g. etched lines. The plate is inked differently with each printing, so that the image varies.

² Small granules of glass used for coloring glass.

³ All quotations are from conversations with Keiko Hara in May, 2013.



Verse 8.2.8, 1983





“Fifty pairs of gates fill the exhibition space; viewers can walk through them in whatever direction and route they choose. On each ladder-like structure, thirty-six monoprints are mounted. Light sources for this installation are a natural light, video and slide projector.”

Topophilia 5 · 100 Gates, 1994





Topophilia 5 · 100 Gates, 1994



Topophilia 7 · Grey, Blue, Red, Green, 1996



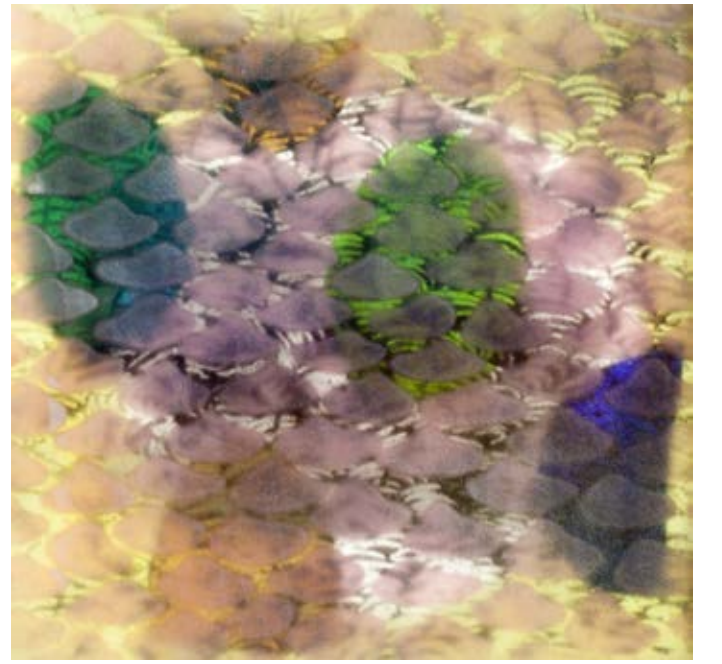
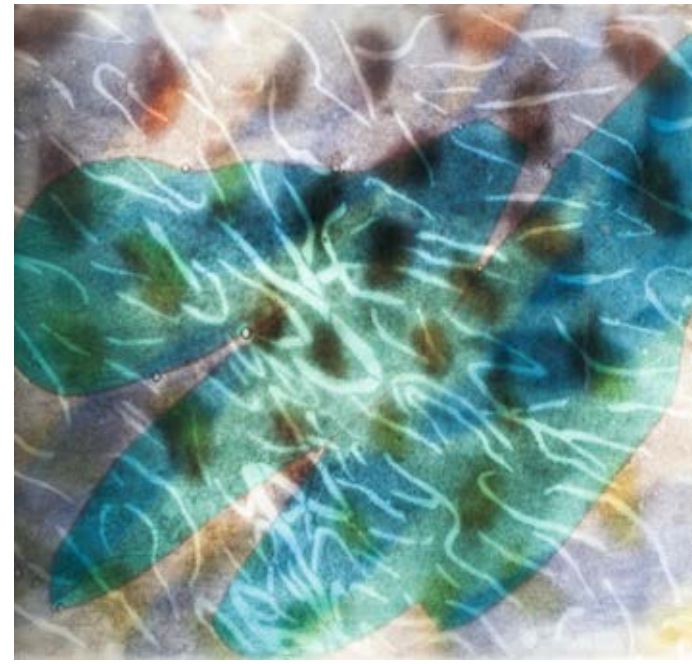
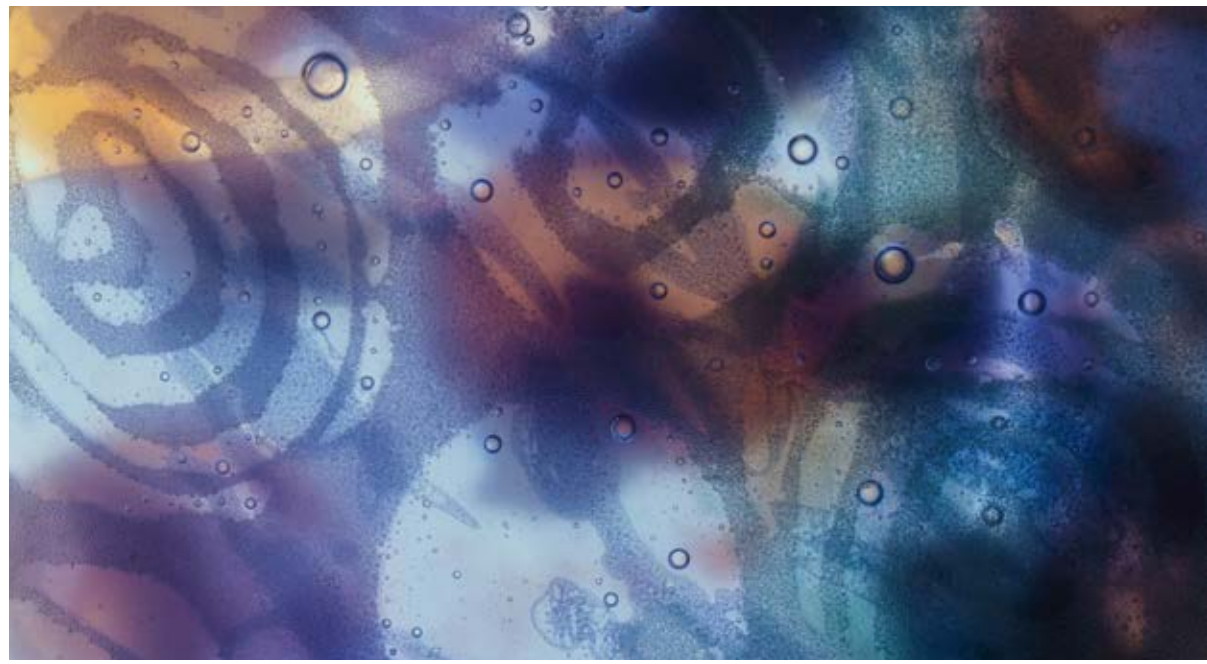
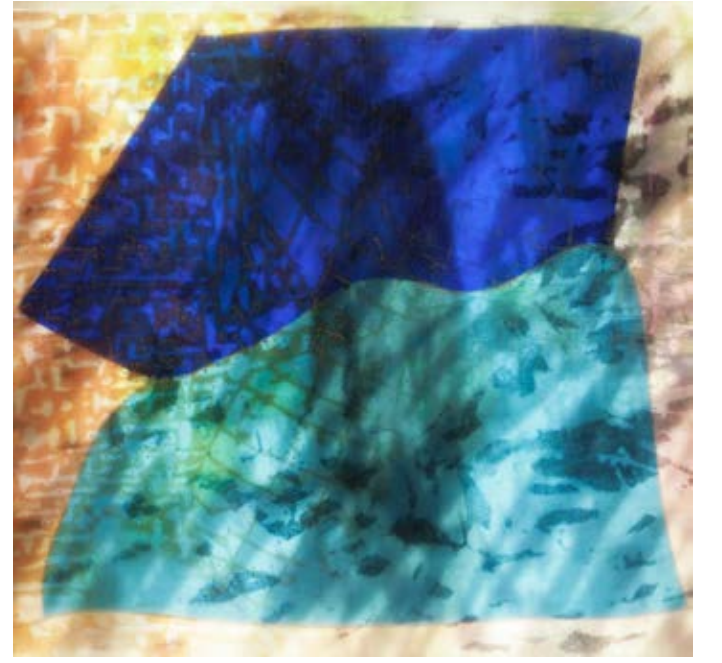
Hagoromo, 1996



“There are 18 total images for each gate. Each image pane is multi-layered fused glass consisting of five layers of screen and stencil printed patterns and colors. The images change by responding to and reflecting light, water, wind, tree branches and other environmental elements.”

Topophilia · Gates, 1999





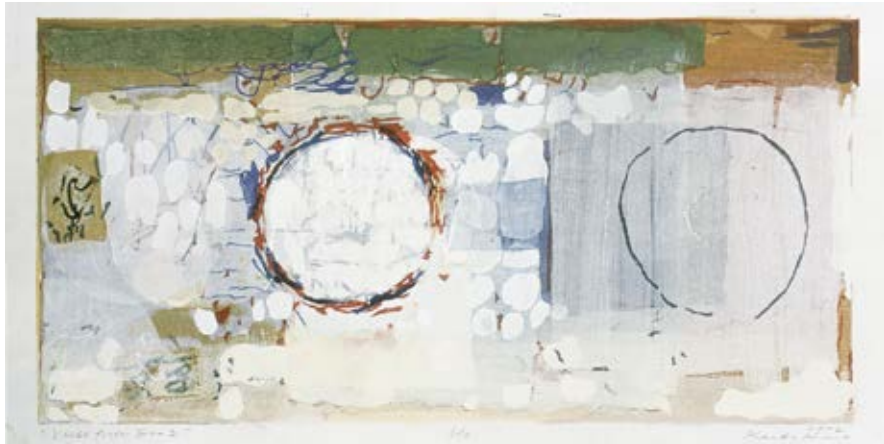


“This series of 12 printed images are based on my childhood memory by the sea. Every morning, when I used to take walks on the beach, the strange and mysterious seaweed, shells, fish and objects were laid on the sand just like a new painting. The sunlight wove through the waves and played a new song. On the stormy days, enormous waves swept the ocean floor and ran up the beach and looked like monstrous creatures. It was the place where my imagination and inspiration grew in my early age. The printmaking techniques used are a combination of water-based woodblock and stencil print. In the woodblock printing, the marks are impressed into the paper fiber. In the stencil printing, the marks are printed as a raised surface on the paper. The combined marks give a sense of sculptural dimension and depth.”

Verse from Sea, 2002



Verse from Sea, 2002
Print case unfolded



Verse from Sea, 2002

Credits

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Patricia is an art and museum consultant. She is the former director of the Museum of Art at Washington State University, the Fort Wayne Museum of Art in Indiana, and Pilchuck Glass School in Washington State. She is an occasional essayist on the art and artists of the Pacific Northwest.

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