



Cynthia Fusillo



by Riccë Freeman-Zachery

Looking at the mono-prints and mixed-media work of internationally-known artist Cynthia Fusillo, viewers might understandably assume she had studied art since childhood, always knowing where her talents would lead. In fact, the opposite is true: although she loved to make things as a child, no one in her family was particularly artistic; and she received very little encouragement to study art. →



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"In elementary school, I loved the holidays because we did arts and crafts and made centerpieces, etc.," she remembers. But there were no lessons or childhood art training. After high school, she attended New York State University, majoring in biology. There she indulged in a variety of art courses, but it wasn't until an opportunity to travel abroad came up that she began to re-think her career path.

"The overseas program required an art major, so I changed my major," she says simply. For Cynthia, this seemed perfectly logical, travel having always been hugely important to her and well worth such a major shift in plans.

"A lot of my art education was traveling to other cultures, seeing different ways of living. It has always been very inspirational in my work. I'm interested in craft work and textile design, the everyday art other cultures and tribes make, how beauty was just a part of their everyday life." In conjunction with the university program, Cynthia traveled to Pisa, Italy, to study art history and then to Tours, France, to study painting and drawing. The combination of art and travel was intoxicating to her, as it would be to any young artist. Unlike many, however, Cynthia found a way to make it her life. Today, she lives in an apartment in Barcelona, Spain, not far from her studio and not much farther from destinations all over Europe.

"Recently I've been taking weekend trips to Paris," she says, explaining that the inexpensive chartered flights make the hour-and-a-half trip irresistible. Barcelona itself is no slouch, however, with a mild Mediterranean climate and a dazzling array of cultural activities, including Garnelo Galeria and Gallery Denovo, which feature Cynthia's work.

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Her journey to Barcelona from her hometown in White Plains, New York, was a circuitous one, from the University and its overseas program to a master's degree in Venice and an apprenticeship to a group of feminist artists in New York City.

"It started out as part of a program from New York University," she says of the apprenticeship, "but afterward, Joyce Kozloff hired me, and I worked for her for two years. It was a great opportunity to see how artists live and work — many well-known artists visited her, and it was a hands-on experiential opportunity." Then there was a stint working in a hotel in Switzerland, where she met and befriended a girl from Spain.

"I met her friends, who were artists, and we began to visit each other's homes," she remembers. If it sounds like a fairy tale, Cynthia will point out that she had plenty of "regular" jobs: waitress, bartender, telephone operator, secretary, social worker, window designer.

"My worst job was waitressing, working for a crazy man who ended up burning down the restaurant for insurance money," she laughs. Her best job — before becoming a self-supporting artist six years ago — was the apprentice work. She did everything from running errands and cleaning to glazing ceramics and helping install shows. It was a wonderful way to learn the basics of an art career, and Cynthia began to make contacts and started getting her work in galleries around the City.

Then, in 1999, she moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and things really began to take off for her.

"My big break was when Gallery Denovo contacted me. They literally supported me and my art so I could dedicate all my time to painting and creating." Even though she's spent many years in Spain, she's still considered an American artist, which makes her work very attractive to the European art market. To take advantage of this interest in her work, Cynthia has converted one room of her studio into a space for showing finished pieces. →





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"I recently had a group of two dozen 17 year olds come for a talk, and soon the American Society of Barcelona will make a visit." That interaction nicely balances the time she spends painting, when she prefers complete quiet and solitude. Although she shares studio space with another painter, their hours seldom overlap; and she most often has the space to herself. Just outside is a beautiful terrace, perfect for taking a break or eating lunch and ideal for setting up photo shoots of finished pieces. It's also one of Cynthia's favorite places to write the poetry that has become more and more important in her work. Many of her current pieces begin with a word or an image, often sparked by something she noted in one of the notebooks she carries with her.

"I always like blank white unlined paper, even when it's for poetry, because I still consider words as drawings," she says of those journals. She uses them to corral bits of things that would otherwise be lost in the disarray of scattered papers, although she admits that it's the act of writing down the idea on paper that does the trick. Once she's done that, the paper itself isn't really important. She chooses not to make detailed notes or preparatory sketches, relying instead on intuition. →

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"Most of what I do is automatic or spontaneous. I kind of feel what has to happen next." She'll be working on a piece, and words and phrases will just appear out of the blue, demanding attention. "When I started to write poetry, it just seemed a natural progression to slowly come out in the pieces. Everything I do is connected. I will be painting and will have a word or phrase come to me. I write it down. Or I'm working on a poem and want it to have a physical or visual presence and put it into my work."

To create the actual mixed-media pieces, Cynthia begins with nothing more than an idea and a piece of wood. She covers the wood with layers of paint and plaster to create a surface that can then be incised with a variety of tools. The word forms are not always legible, often appearing as mark-making. They can be felt as well as read and lend meaning as much through how they appear as by what they mean. When she incises these into the surfaces, they further integrate her words and the images inspired by the natural forms of plants and water. She thinks of the resultant pieces as "visual poems." It's a heady process, with endless possibilities for adding and subtracting layers and marks.

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As a balance to the enforced solitude of painting and mono-printing, Cynthia relishes working with other artists and people in the community to create elaborate, evocative installations. In addition to the interaction with other artists, she really enjoys getting to work in a "real" space — a three-dimensional space — as opposed to the imagined space of a painting. Sometimes it's a really *big* three-dimensional space, at least by the standards of paintings and monoprints.

"*A Love Poem for My Mother* started with me seeing a thin piece of copper in an arts and crafts store. I started to play with it, making drawings." She was already working on a poem about her mother, and then she had an idea for creating a body, or a garment, to complement her words. The resulting dress, 12' by 12', is constructed of fabric, sand and scales and is covered with poetry. The way the piece came into being still delights her.



"I was in a women's poetry group and decided to include them in my installation. It just slowly evolved as if I were following a thread of some kind," she marvels. The actual construction of the dress took several months, with 13 local women writers contributing their words. For another installation, *Women Becoming Poems*, Cynthia involved 22 other women from the community.

"There were women from all walks of life, with all of us writing about some aspect of love." The love poems — 118 in all — were tucked into envelope-type pockets sewn of sheer fabric that covered an antique bed. The participating women did a reading at the opening of the installation, which eventually evolved into a book. The entire process is always immensely gratifying to Cynthia, who sees these public pieces as a wonderful juxtaposition to her other work.

"I enjoy the fact that I must collaborate with others and the community to accomplish the pieces. I like them to be unusual, to have an impact and to shake people up and make them think." †

Cynthia Fusillo currently resides in Barcelona, Spain. To learn more about her work, visit www.cynthiafusillo.com or www.gallerydenovo.com.

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