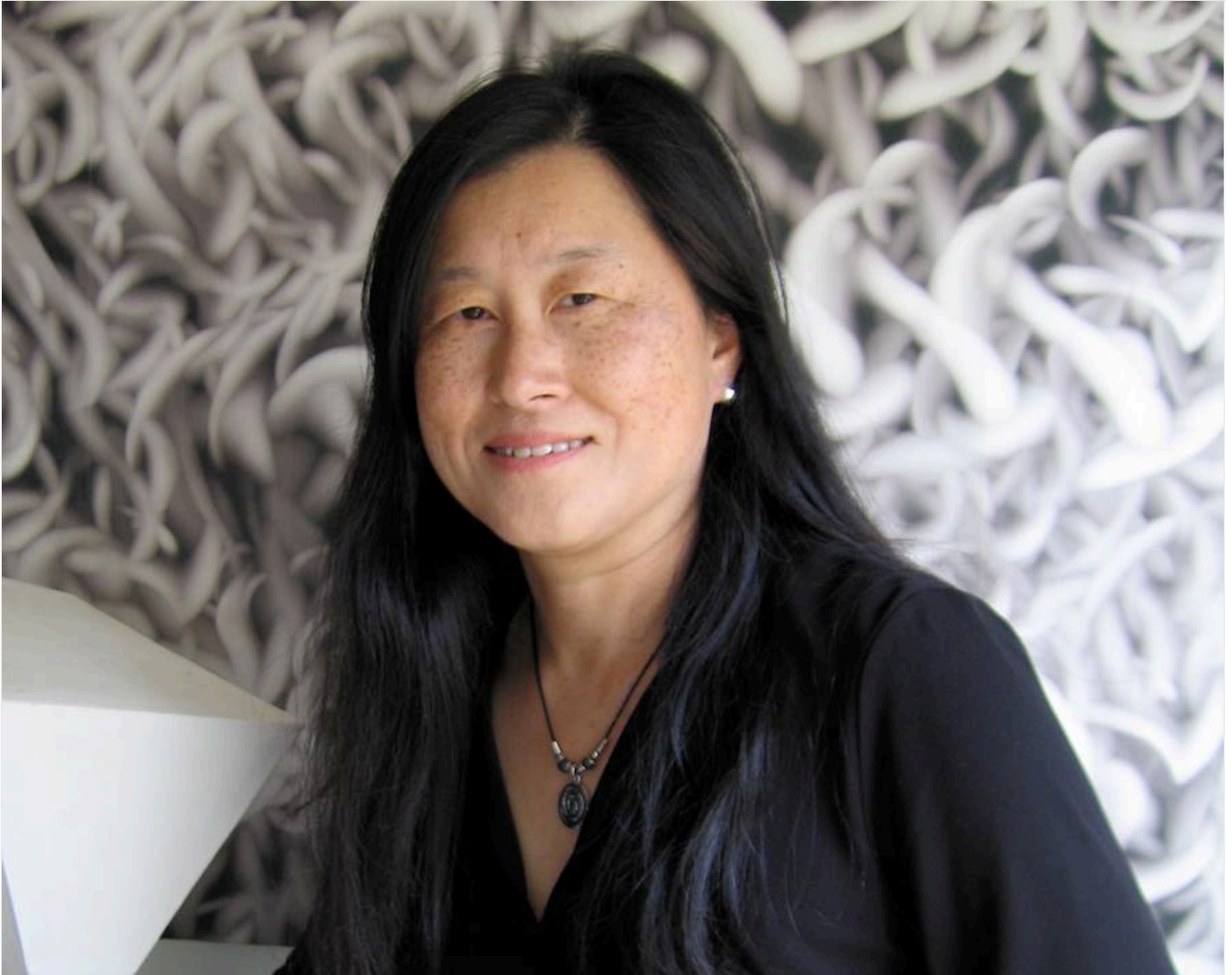# Artist Sheriann Ki Sun Burnham Blends Digital And Natural

Photos courtesy of Sheriann Ki Sun Burnham.

On Saturday and Sunday, from 11:00AM to 4:00PM, many professional artists participating in the Seventh Biennial Mid-City Open Studio Tour will share their work space with the public. They'll be available to speak about their process and materials they use for their creations. They may even cut you a deal on work they have for sale.

A number of artists don't have studio space that they can open to the public, so they have joined together with Greenly Art Space to showcase their work. One such person is graphic/web designer and fine artist Sheriann Ki Sun Burnham.

Her art will be featured outside the gallery space for the duration of the tour, in addition to *BLUE*, the current exhibition up at Greenly Art Space that features her work. Work by David and Kimberly Hocking, and Kristine Baker, will also be showcased at Greenly Art Space as part of the tour.

Burnham served as the digital design consultant for Karena Massengill's recently completed public art project at Rosie's Dog Beach, and contributed work to the recent *Art Auction XVI* at the Long Beach Museum of Art.

Long Beach Post: When did you begin to work seriously?

Sheriann Ki Sun Burnham: I started pretty young. Even in high school I was showing in exhibitions. My mom was an artist, so [I] was exposed to the art world early on. I really didn't know what else I would do but become some type of artist or designer.

What was your media of choice?

I started out mostly drawing in pencil, pen and ink and markers. I also did a lot of watercolor. I liked doing cartoons and caricatures.

Did you find that your work was appreciated by your peers?

Yes. Friends and fellow students considered me their on-call artist. I was always involved with various projects, such as silk-screening t-shirts or designing a flyer for some event. Outside of school I was gaining experience and recognition too, as I won an honorable mention in a show at the Long Beach Art Association for a pen and ink drawing of an iris while in high school.

My mom knew how hard it is to make a living being an artist, so she said I could only major in art if I learned paste-up commercial production. Then, I could always work at a newspaper, if nothing else, laying out pages. I didn't know what else I'd major in, anyway.

When I had to put down an alternate major on the forms, it took a long time to figure out, and I ultimately put Recreation. Apart from my art, I was mainly into sports. In other words, I liked to play! Recreation seemed pretty good if I couldn't be an art major.

How did the study of art in college influence you?

I was able to learn about and experiment with more materials. I took lithography for a year and many of the processes in printmaking influenced how I put imagery together. Also I became interested in computers in college.

It was very early stages of personal computing, so not much in terms of individual artists using them. Much later, I learned there was a whole history of artists using computers, from the very beginning of computers. But I wasn't aware of them at all when I started.

One of the things that got me excited was in the early 1980's JPL was sending the Voyager space craft to Jupiter and Saturn. David Em was an early influence of mine. He was an artist working with the computers at JPL during off hours to create his own personal art, using the programs they had developed to make the flyby animations of the spacecraft's travels.

When I saw David Em's work, full of texture and pattern, it amazed me and made me wonder how I could someday do that too. Except for arcade games – I was playing a lot of "Asteroids" at the time – I had no idea computers could do such a thing!

Did you have some personal 'a-ha' moments about your own work in that context?

I think it was more like a string of 'a-ha' moments and timing! At the time, my best friend's boyfriend was a computer programmer and as I became more and more curious about computers I started asking him how in the world images were created on a computer. He got me started writing code in BASIC and I found I really had a knack with

computers!

Until finding computer graphics I was really all over the place in terms of what type of art I might end up doing. I wasn't sure. The more and more I learned about the computer's image-making capabilities, the more I knew I'd found my tool of choice. Having said that, I never thought I'd give up using traditional art materials and making things with my hands, and that remains true today.

Were you developing an artistic aesthetic, philosophy, or approach for your work?

It took some time for that to happen. I was able to use computers towards the end of college, and though I felt the key element for me was the computer's immense ability to create image complexity, I was really only learning the processes: coding, etc.

I then got a graphic design job and finally had money to purchase my own Atari 1200 XL computer. That's when I had the time and tools to really start developing my own aesthetics and processes. I'd always done more representational art, but early on was very interested in Picasso and Cubism. Also my mom had done abstract work during my youth that greatly influenced me.

Little by little, my work became more and more abstract. On the one hand I was developing my own visual artistic style and, on the other hand, I was experimenting with how I could use the computer to add to the graphic complexity of the work.

*Two Step, Computer photographs, acrylic, rice paper and resin on canvas, 16" x 20".
©1987 by Sheriann Ki Sun Burnham.*

**Can you give me a specific example, preferably from a piece on display at
Greenly, of how this process worked?**

The piece "Two Step" was the first piece accepted into the *ACM SIGGRAPH* art show in
1988. I programmed textures and patterns in BASIC, a computer language. There were
no personal computer printers at the time so I took photographs off my computer
monitor. I then created mixed media paintings in acrylic with collaged computer
photographs.

Your more recent work uses a process where you use natural materials and

prints on rice paper. Can you talk about how you came to that, and what you've discovered in that process?

I've always loved building things so, even in my early work, I started making wall sculptures. They were built out of wood and hardboard. I moved over to using paint programs on a Mac. I'd developed a process of building a sculpture, then creating digital paintings that I collaged onto the sculpture.

I wanted to create more freeform work with organic shapes rather than the hard, straight edges and flat surfaces of wood and hardboard. I started playing with using wire to build a form, then collaging paper over the wire sculpture. I also wanted to start using more found materials in my work.

Strata #16, Free standing (or wall hanging) digital painted sculpture: ink jet prints and acrylic on rice paper over branches. 24" x 22" x 12.5" ©2011.

At some point I got the idea of using branches instead of wire for the sculptural form, then collaging the rice paper on the form to create the surface on which to collage my digital painting. I've discovered not only the shapes of my work are more organic, but

the process in how I construct and apply the digital imagery is more organic. Much of my previous work was very "planned" out ahead of time to fit exactly on the sculpture. With this current work, there is no way to plan exactly how the digital print will collage onto the uneven surface. I've become much more accepting in the un-exactness of the process.

VIA: Big Sky 2006-2007 (still).

Can you tell me how you developed the idea for your Variable Image Extractor (VIA) system, the process of implementing it, and the results?

I really want to get back to VIA at some point! It no longer runs on the current Mac OS and needs to be rewritten. The initial idea for VIA came from wanting to collage bits of video together in a single frame. I did some research on this, but never pursued that path. Along the way I thought of doing something similar with still images.

With my long time interest in layering imagery and coding in BASIC, I started playing with what would happen collaging multiple photos together in a single frame, and in turn ultimately create a system to randomly and automatically read photos so the image would change over time.

The software collages the images, creating an ongoing abstracted version of the photographic database that has been provided to the system. And installing different databases can give you a wide variety of final outputs.

To learn more about Burnham's work, visit StudioKiSun.com.

To learn more about the tour, visit MidCityStudioTour.com.

Greenly Art Space is located at 2698 Junipero Ave, Signal Hill, CA 90755. To learn more about their programming, programs, and other activities, visit GreenlyArtSpace.com. You can also read an interview with Greenly founder, Kimberly Hocking.