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APPROACHING NOISE
by David Kassan



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Susan Rostow and William Jung Inventors of Akua Inks™ (recently acquired by Speedball)

Printmakers Susan Rostow and William Jung first met in 1986, when Jung applied for a project grant to work at the Lower East Side Printshop in New York City. Rostow was the artistic director and master printer there. They soon began collaborating on projects using traditional acid-etched plates and printing with oil-based inks. Their relationship grew, and when they married in 1991, it wasn't long before they thought about having a child. Unfortunately, they knew their traditional printmaking processes wouldn't create a safe studio environment in their home.

"Many fears and questions arose while making the decision of having a baby,"

Rostow and Jung wrote in their online article, *Formulating Safer Inks*. "Is it possible to make prints without breathing in toxic fumes from oil-based inks, solvents, acids and photographic chemicals? Are these fumes doing damage to our reproduction systems? Is it possible to print while pregnant? Will it be safe for the baby to come into the studio? Will we live a long and healthy life? Questions, questions, questions ..."

Recognizing the potential hazards of traditional printmaking processes and not wanting to give up on printmaking, Rostow and Jung began experimenting with the existing water-based inks on the market, but found they lacked quality, were loaded



William Jung with his monotype *T'ao T'ieh Man*, 22" x 30".

with fillers or dried too quickly. So, they set out to make inks that would be safe, be of high quality and behave in exactly the ways they wanted them to.

"We experimented with a variety of formulas after reading books on how to make watercolors," they wrote. "Our goal was to make water-based ink for reductive monotype that had a greasy working consistency similar to that of oil-based ink. It needed to roll-up smoothly and stay wet on the plate for a long period of time."

After several years of experimentation, the

1 *Untitled* by Susan Rostow. Monotype printed with Akua inks, 30" x 40".
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eventual answer was to keep the formula simple: Remove the additives and fillers, and, since the pigments were no longer suspended in the same way, shake the bottle before use. They named the product Akua, which was one letter different from “aqua” but also translated as “spirit” and “honor the land” in Hawaiian — very appropriate for nontoxic ink. Since they had aimed for quality as well as safety, Rostow and Jung found that the final inks allowed for a much more enjoyable process and even higher quality art.

“Before Akua, I very rarely used a product right from the jar,” explains Rostow, who launched and ran the business while Jung continued his career as an art teacher in New York. “My earlier mixed-media sculptural and one-of-a-kind printed books were made with Speedball inks that I altered with the addition of more pigment, mud, sand and seaweed. My collectors and other artists were always fascinated with the highly textural surfaces of my work, and it was obvious to everyone that I had altered art materials.

“Once we developed Akua inks, I fell in love with the printmaking process by itself. I was seduced by Akua’s smooth consistency and the many modifiers that we developed to change the viscosity and transparency of the ink. This led me to produce prints that were no longer physically textural but had the illusion of texture. By using the two lines of inks, Akua Kolor (thin ink), Akua Intaglio (thick ink) and Akua modifiers, I was able to accomplish more depth to my prints with the sense of texture and space. Akua modifiers offered me the possibility for customizing the ink according to my technique, image and personal style. No other inks offered that much flexibility.”

In 1996, Rostow and Jung welcomed their son, Jarrett. The couple continued to use Akua inks themselves, but soon found that others were interested as well. That meant seeking out additional help to figure out how to mass-produce the inks.

William Jung with wife Susan Rostow



“In the beginning, I approached making ink in the same manner as making art — appreciating the process with no concerns for who will buy,” Rostow explains. “I used and sold our homemade inks in workshops that I taught. It didn’t cross my mind that we would be distributing Akua inks to so many artists until we received inquiries from art supply resellers who had requests from their customers.

“The major hurdle we faced was to figure out where and how we could manufacture large quantities and maintain quality control. This was just before Google existed so research was more difficult, but it was easy to call a company and speak to someone immediately on the phone. I called various companies in the industry and asked if I could speak to their chemist. In some cases, after the chemist would answer my questions, he would pass me on to their shipping departments, eventually connecting to business managers. I guess I could say I received my education in chemistry, logistics and business over the phone. There were times when it was very trying, but after making so many friends on the phone, I always knew who to call for advice and encouragement when needed. Plus, we eventually found a company to make it and a warehouse to pack and ship.”

After many years of success and self-distribution, the Akua company was acquired by Speedball in 2012. Rostow has agreed to stay on as a consultant, and Jung

will continue his teaching career.

“Akua users will benefit from Speedball’s more extensive distribution channels, and I will be able to focus on artist relations, demos and the creative side of producing art materials,” Rostow explains. “Speedball has an excellent facility and team of highly qualified professionals who will ensure the quality of Akua remains through the transition in manufacturing, and the Akua name will still be used.

“I am proud of all the instructors and printmakers who have helped to contribute to the success of Akua by sharing their knowledge, comments and images of their prints, which can be found on our website (www.waterbasedinks.com/galleries and www.waterbasedinks.com/introduction/comments).

“One phone comment comes to mind. The caller said, ‘You know, I don’t use Akua inks because I care about health or safety. I smoke cigarettes, and I still use toxic acid to etch my plates. I use Akua inks because the colors are brilliant, and they offer the best results for printing my etched plates.’ This comment made me think about how we really went beyond just creating a safer ink and that there really is no other ink like Akua.”

For more information about Akua products, visit www.waterbasedinks.com or www.speedballart.com.