

Christobel Ishmael is no ordinary artist. She is a master at her craft, and has found innovative ways to use natural fibres found right here in Barbados to create intriguing works of art.

She has no regrets about her decision to leave 24 years in corporate America behind, in favour of concentrating on freelancing as a graphic artist and paper-maker.

"I feel good here. I love Barbados. My family's here. I'm comfortable and it's working well," she says of her father's homeland, a place that has given her access to all sorts of materials for her craft.

Christobel, who has over 40 years experience as an artist, uses her own handmade paper as the base for her drawings in pastels and ink and to create low relief sculpture, formed from the molds she makes herself.

That's not all. "I also have clients who use my paper to package their products. That paper is made from banana leaves, with cane bagasse to give it texture," she says.

For her artwork, she often uses Barbados' high quality sea island cotton, supplied by Exclusive Cotton of the Caribbean Inc. She prepares this material using a cotton-beater and sometimes collaborates with fellow paper maker, Wayne Smith, to do this.

Christobel is self-taught, mainly from books, the Internet and like-minded people, like Wayne, who are kind enough to share what they have learnt.

"I only took a short course when I was in Boston to learn the basic techniques," she adds.

"I'm a painter and I wanted to add a three-dimensional texture. I started with papier mache and then moved on to making my own paper. The main difference is that papier mache is essentially recycled paper with glue or some kind of stiffener, while I now use natural materials to make paper from scratch," Christobel explains.

She notes that the process of paper-making involves a lot of trial and error. "Each project is different. What works for one thing won't necessarily work for the other. Sometimes you get a really nice surprise."

The challenge for Christobel is not rushing the process. "Shortcuts don't work when you want to make sure both the artwork and the process are right." She points out it is rewarding, though, when you produce a piece that you're really proud of. "It's great when it comes out exactly as you conceived it and someone appreciates it enough to want to purchase it."

What's next for Christobel Ishmael? "I'm trying to see if I can do something in home décor. I'm aiming for functional pieces that you can use but they look good." She's also working on making unconventional frames to complete her pieces. "Why try to fit into the box when you can create the box?" A poignant question from an unassuming innovator.

Christobel can be contacted at Tel: 434-0225, or she may be found at the Barbados Museum & Historical Society's Fine Craft

Mistress of her own game



CHRISTOBEL ISHMAEL with one of her pieces entitled Discovery.
(UR)

Festival on Saturday, December 6 from 10 a.m to 6 p.m. Over 60 other exhibitors will join her in this popular annual showcase of some of the island's best authentic art and craft. How about giving unique gifts this year, while supporting the island's talented artisans and its natural and cultural heritage? Don't miss this rare opportunity.