**Rowland Ricketts Field Trip December 2017**

On a beautiful, late fall day, several LAFTA members drove to Rowland Ricketts’ home and new studio in Indiana. He and his wife Chinami Ricketts, along with their 3 sons, live outside of Bloomington, IN. Ricketts teaches classes at Indiana University in Bloomington and is nationally known as a natural dyer specializing in Indigo. I am familiar with Ricketts when he was a visiting professor at the University of Louisville several years ago. Another member on the fieldtrip, Kristen Davis, was able to use one of Ricketts’ indigo vats a few years ago, when she did a dyeing class at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts and Ricketts had taught there the week before. LAFTA treasurer, Linda Theede, also participated in this field trip. She has known Ricketts for years, after helping to harvest and prepare one of his indigo crops, along with some of his students. Linda also grows a small crop of indigo yearly for her own use. Everyone present learned great information about his new indigo studio, growing and preparing the crop, and examples of his work with indigo. Ricketts met his wife Chinami when he was studying the traditional methods of using indigo in Japan. Chinami is a skilled spinner and weaver, as we would see when we were able to tour her separate studio at their home.

From the outside, the indigo studio appears pretty large, but when entering the main portion of the studio, it is very neatly organized, spare looking and full of light. When I entered the room, I was told to feel free to take off my shoes as the cement floor is heated. We were to find out that this was not a luxury for the artist, but a necessary element to keep his four indigo vats viable. The water and plant material in the vats requires a particular temperature for the fermentation and bacterial activity to finalize the production of the rich dark blue dye. This occurs in four square shaped vats in the center of the room, only raised above the floor a short distance. Ricketts opened the vats and explained their depth into the ground under the floor and the reasons for the unusual shape of the vats. We were also exposed to the unique “aroma” of a dead and spent vat! All I can say is Woah! There is a noticeable difference between a living vat and the expired vat! (It smells bad.)

Ricketts went on to explain that his studio is so new, that it was just recently discovered that the heated floor was not correctly functioning due to an instillation error. This resulted in some ruined dye. Off the main room is a small closet that contains the control center of the studio. And I chose this wording, as it is indeed, a space full of pipes, gauges, and dials. I think someone described it as resembling the controls of a space ship.

I remember noticing Ricketts’ indigo blue finger nails, when we first arrived. He later demonstrated how that happens, when he nonchalantly plunged his bare hands into the currently working vat and pulled them out stained blue. Debby Levine had purposely stuffed a wad of clean wool in her pocket- and at the perfect moment- pulled it out for Rowland to use as a demonstration of the vat’s dye. Our discussion included some of the properties of indigo. It is not water soluble, once it is processed into the dye. This means that the dye on Rowland’s hands and forearms will wash off and not stain his skin. It also means that fibers dyed with indigo, will not easily loose the rich blue color when used and washed over years.

Rowland’s studio and dyeing practice is set up to be as economical and “green” as possible. The slant of the roof was designed to feed rain water into a cistern buried in the yard beside the studio, as many older farms always had, in addition to a well for drinking water. Due to the size of the building, only one side of the roof feeds the cistern. It has also been equipped with a filtering system for use in the studio and for irrigating their vegetable garden and the nearby indigo field. The matter at the bottom of the dead vats is reused as compost on the indigo field. He devotes several rows of the garden for providing seeds for the next crop. Remaining water from expired vats is also reused.

We were also led into town to visit the area where Ricketts has a compost shed for the second step of the indigo preparation. The shed containing the composting indigo leaves has a special floor to help absorb and drain the moisture generated by the process. The pile in the middle of the floor is covered by several layers of burlap to assist in maintaining warm temperatures. When a small portion of the bags was pulled back to show us the consistency of the leaves, an extremely strong vapor of ammonia was released into the room!!!! It was extremely potent- but a normal part of the complex, traditional process of creating indigo dye.

Before we left for the tour of the compost shed, Chimani returned home. Chimani made time to show us her studio, equipment, and some finished weavings. Chimani studied indigo production and dyeing in Tokushima, in her native Japan. She followed that by learning spinning, weaving and the traditional kasuri (ikat) techniques. There is a very good photo essay of the steps used in her weaving on the Ricketts’ website [www.rickettsindigo.com](http://www.rickettsindigo.com) . She was using an antique Japanese loom until it needed to be replaced. During a return trip to Japan, Chimani was able to draw the type of loom that she needed and a local craftsman made her a custom loom entirely by hand. It is a beautiful wooden object that was designed to make the traditional cloth for Japanese kimonos. What a surprise for us, since we had just finished studying and working with antique kimono fabrics.

We did not know before this, that Chimani Ricketts focuses on creating the traditional 14 inch by 13-14 yard cotton yardage, which she ships to Japan for sales in kimono shops. Many of the fabrics she creates use traditional patterns infused with meanings. She uses special techniques to hand dye the one-ply cotton yarn. While kneeling on the floor, Chimani has spun the yarn with an antique Japanese loom, that appeared to be constructed of rattan, mostly. The dye is carefully applied to sections of the skein, in anticipation of its planned position in the woven fabric creating the ikat pattern she is using. To create a lighter, softer fabric of smaller dimensions, she will eliminate select threads in the loom, so that she produces a fabric with some translucency. Usually this method is used when she is creating scarves. It was very interesting to not only see her materials and equipment, but also be able to discuss the construction of kimono and the contemporary fabric used to construct them.

\*You may enjoy going back to the Ricketts’ website ([www.rowlandricketts.com](http://www.rowlandricketts.com) ) to find the images of the indigo being raised from seed to harvest. There are also images of Rowland’s indigo work, as well as installation shots from selected venues.