

## Jen Luck Hale



Jen Hale separated the delicate sheets of hand cut origami paper and spread them out on the table in her centuries old farmhouse in Shelburne. I was amazed by the intricate and colorful designs and the sheer variety she managed to produce using only one tool— scissors — paper and her imagination. The thin paper sheets were 6 by 6 inches square and 3 inch square and came in cheerful color combinations of orange, yellow, blue, green, pink— bright birthday colors.

Jen unwrapped a new pair of scissors that just arrived in the mail that morning. Tiny and biting sharp, the new pair joined a flock of similar little scissors that showed definite signs of age.

Jen described her learning process as “flying by the seat of her pants” and is not of a traditional school of paper cutting, a craft which has deep roots in the traditions of many cultures. Fellow Coop member Edith Bingham creates paper cut pictures in the Swedish tradition.

The images are joyful, the colors bright, and Jen definitely comes across as an optimistic and creatively competent master of her own fate. The batch that Jen spread out on the table was part of a vast and obsessive paper cut cache that she created during a post-divorce period of her life. Interestingly, she found out later that her mother had also made a lot of paper cutouts after her divorce from Jen’s father when Jen was 6 months old. Paper cutting may have been a post-divorce urge, but it is something that has stayed in her life after remarriage and the birth of her daughter Emma, now three.

There has been an evolution towards realism in her work; her first forays into the craft resulted in geometrical snowflake type designs. The first creatures to evolve under her scissors were frogs, salamanders, fish and flowers. It has advanced from there, but as she approaches realism she also likes to “back off a little—I want the art to be something, not just a



depiction.”

One series shows a table with four place settings and four chairs, as viewed from above. “There are usually themes that relate to something in my life,” Jen explains. Recently, she has been making designs with bees in them, in honor of the honey hives in her yard.

Jen does not draw the images on the back of the paper, but makes radial folds from the center and works her way in with the scissors. She may refine a design or an idea over the course of many sheets of paper, but drawing is not a big part of her idea formulation. It is hard to see, but if you pick one up, you may notice that the negative spaces are connected, a path that is invisible when the design is laid flat. This is how she works her way in from the edge to the middle.

Jen comes from an artistic background and studied painting and weaving when she was an art major in college. She is a trained landscape designer and draftsman. As a teenager, she wanted to be an architect, but someone made a discouraging remark about the math being too hard and she dropped the idea in favor of podiatry, though her second choice career never materialized.

“I am a closet architect,” she admits. She currently works for an architectural firm in Amherst where she has her hand in the design and drafting of the energy efficient houses they build.



Jen grew up in Greenfield and parts of Pelham and Leverett. She considers herself lucky to have had “two normals” all her life: being part of each parent’s new families enriched her with five sets of grandparents and many half siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles. She had a great variety of experience within the separate realms of her parent’s lives, camping with her mom, and cross country truck journeys with her dad.

When she applied to join the cooperative more than twelve years ago, she had just started doing paper cutting, and the members were interested in her work but had just accepted the paper cut art of Edith Bingham and declined to accept it at that point. Now a member, she has taken on the job of calling prospective members to tell them if they “made the cut” after the monthly jurying sessions. A difficult role, but one she has empathy for.