

SECRET CITY SHODO CLASSES



PICTURE: SIMON SCHLUTER

In a studio behind an Elwood shop, Miho Araki imparts the love her mother passed on for the refined art of Japanese calligraphy.

GROWING up in Kuwana city, Japan, Miho Araki became used to high standards — and to being reminded she wasn't meeting them.

She was tutored in shodo, or Japanese calligraphy, by her accomplished mother, and never dreamed that she'd be good enough to do the same.

"My mother is still telling me I can't do it, even now I'm an exhibiting artist," she says.

Araki set up shop in Elwood with partner Dean Leitch a decade ago, originally to establish a haven of art and objects of beauty.

But this year, she succumbed to pressure from those who knew of her talents and introduced shodo classes.

"I've had people asking me to do this for a long time," says Araki, "but I just wasn't ready."

She holds two classes every Sunday morning and each term runs for a month. Classes of typically six are held in a glass-walled studio at the back of the shop, beyond a Zen garden.

Participants take their shoes off at the entrance before settling down on Japanese mats for 90 minutes of brush and ink work. Some students bring items, an old coil perhaps, that they want to use as inspiration, others seek the basics or perhaps the meditative effects that shodo is known to produce.

Araki teaches how to make ink (grind an ink stick and mix it with water in an ink stone) and how to use the distinctive brushes with force and decisiveness. You only have one chance to make a stroke, so it has to be confidently executed, she tells the class.

"I'm here to teach technique, not to teach people the characters or the language," says Araki as she encourages new students to create the character or symbol that represents harmony, courage or the like. "I've actually found that it's fun to teach. Western students are like the white paper we use, they absorb everything. Because they have no preconceived notions about calligraphy, they have no training and they don't know the rules, they're a lot freer. I learn a lot from them."

As the final class of the day ends, kimono-clad Japanese women mill around, waiting to occupy the studio for sado, a traditional Japanese tea ceremony. Five hours can pass for these Melbourne-based Japanese women seeking to keep their tea "skills" in tiptop condition.

Like the calligraphy classes — Araki says she has never advertised and has a waiting list — the tea ceremonies have garnered much interest. So much so that in the not-too-distant future she wants to open them up to visitors.

JACQUIE BYRON

Calligraphy classes cost \$110 for four lessons, and include materials.

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