

Essay by Mac McCloud  
THE COLLAGES OF MARGI SCHARFF

“Each time I go to a new place --each time I begin a new work --I have to begin with a trust ---a trust in the process of making art and a trust in life itself.”

Margi Scharff, 2002

Robert Rauschenberg, the well-known contemporary artist, once said that he wanted to make a work that existed “between art and life”. Margi Scharff’s work expresses an art that is her life.

For the past three years, Scharff has been traveling, first through Mexico, and then longer journeys across Southeast Asia. Her trips are aesthetic pilgrimages. She walks, rides local busses, trucks, trains, boats and sometimes rickshaws and horse carts. She travels to sacred sites and crowded cities, visits the monuments and ruins of past and present civilizations. As she travels she absorbs the world around her with a special focus on the ground. She collects trash, torn papers, discarded objects, shreds of firecrackers, used matchboxes, whatever comes to hand. These become the raw materials for her unusual and elegant collages and her meditative graphite drawings.

Starting from the island of Cozumel in southern Mexico in August, 1999, Scharff traveled by local busses, staying overnight in budget hotels, collecting materials at the great Pre-Colombian monuments that are scattered throughout the region: Coba, Palenque in Chiapas, Chichenitza, Monte Alban in Oaxaca. Everywhere along these ancient tracks as she approached the ruins she gathered her materials. She also kept a journal, both of the pieces and of her adventures on the roads and trails.

Like Kurt Schwitters, the German Dada painter and poet who was renowned for gathering scraps of handbills, invoices, thrown-away tram tickets, etc, and assembling them into original collages, Scharff uses all this found scrap material in her work. She organizes her collages on sheets of archival paper, glues them down and coats the final composition with matte varnish.

In 2001 Scharff exhibited a studio full of these works and sold enough to finance a long-dreamed-of journey to Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Traveling alone, carrying only a couple of light bags for the finished collages, a sketchbook and other items, she gave herself plenty of time on the journey. She spent several weeks in Laos, where, among other events, she floated for three days on a cargo boat up the Mekhong River from Luang Prabang to Huay Xai. There she crossed into northern Thailand. She spent Chinese New Year with several local hill tribes in the region, walking from village to village gathering shreds of crimson and yellow papers from firecrackers that had been exploded. Her stay among these hospitable villagers extended Chinese New Year for nearly two weeks.

On this first trip, Scharff spent four months in Thailand, ranging from the forested areas of the Golden Triangle, visiting shrines of Buddha, temple ruins, elephant training reserves and wild animal parks down to Bangkok in the south. She then flew to Calcutta and journeyed throughout India, winding up in Nepal. She spent time in Varanasi, the fabled sacred city on the Ganges River where her hotel room overlooked the storied Hindu burning ghats along the banks of the Ganges. At every place she stopped she worked on her collages from the local material.

On her second Asia journey she traveled overland from Bangkok by train and bus south to Malaysia, then flew to Madras, India from Kuala Lumpur. She started her second Indian experience in Kanniyakumari, the southernmost spot in India, a place where she could overlook three different seas. Her destination was New Delhi where she spent a month at the Sanskriti Kendra Art Retreat. There she was able to concentrate on composing her collection of detritus into finished collages.

At the end of March, 2002, her work was exhibited at the Sanskriti Kendra Art Gallery. Leaving Delhi she moved up to Bodghaya (where Buddha found enlightenment under a boddhi tree), on to Rishikesh and Dharmasala (the home of the Dalai Lama). Scharff is an untiring hiker, partly because of her fascination with the surfaces of the earth and the human traces left there. In the Nepal Himalayas she hiked the Jomsom Trek, a famous pilgrimage up to the peak of Muktinath where she climbed to 12,470 feet.

Scharff's collages from India and Nepal glow with the radiant colors of those dynamic cultures. They resonate with the commercial 'street' images, the flamboyance of saturated reds, oranges and blues, and the visual vibrancy of daily life. They are poetic icons of reverence to that life and the cultures in which she has explored, walked and worked.

Gathering the discarded petals of street life, she has synthesized these waste scraps into bright, compressed compositions, miniature memorials to the cultures she has encountered. She has said that "I have a need to connect with the world as a larger whole." Margi Scharff's work and her extraordinary experiences are unique to her. They glow with universality.