

Obituary

Margi Scharff (1955–2007)

Margi Scharff, a visual artist and teacher who made art from what other people considered trash which she collected in her travels throughout the U.S., Mexico and the Far East, died on July 2 of ovarian cancer at her cousin's house in Tiburon, California. She was 52.

In a review of her last show at Overtones Gallery in Los Angeles earlier this year, *Los Angeles Times* critic Holly Myers called Scharff's most recent collages "jewel-like. The pleasure of the work lies in the tremendous care with which it was made ... Scharff has a marvelous eye."

Scharff was born in Memphis on February 11, 1955, and as a youth spent a lot of time at her family's vacation home on Pickwick Lake in Tennessee. That contact with nature, and her awareness of social and racial inequities, strongly influenced her lifelong outlook.

After graduating from high school she traveled alone for six months in South America. She returned to study art at the University of Arizona in Phoenix, then did graduate work in art at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

Always interested in how things worked mechanically, as a young adult Scharff worked as a bus driver, carburetor repairperson and car mechanic. In 1985 she moved to downtown Los Angeles where she began working in technical support services at the Otis Art Institute, which was then located near MacArthur Park. Later, she taught classes at both Otis and Art Center in Pasadena.

In the late 1980s Scharff made room-sized installation pieces, including *The Night Room*, which featured gray-pink walls with vents through which she imagined spirits would circle the room full of tumbleweeds. According to her long-time friend and fellow artist, Anne Green, *The Night Room* was part of Scharff's working through of grief for her mother, Theresa Scharff, who had died of breast cancer in her early 50s.

In 1992 Scharff moved to a cottage on a bluff overlooking the ocean in Playas de Tijuana, where she could live cheaply and have more time for her art. She continued to teach at the renamed and relocated Otis College of Art and Design.

During the 1990s, Scharff focused on installation projects with both aesthetic and social aspects. These included *Pillar of Warmth* (1994) which interwove more than 700 donated blankets, and *A Show of Heart* (1996) which consisted of donated clothes, toys, bedding, soaps and other materials arranged in ingenious patterns in the glass cases of the Los Angeles Fine Arts Building's lobby. At the end of each show, the collected materials were distributed to those in need.

In Baja, Scharff also continued a process of collecting bits of metal she found in the road, juxtaposing what others considered trash into new arrangements. From these, she made drawings and assemblage. Fluent in Spanish, she also traveled extensively throughout Mexico, collecting materials and relishing encounters with people she met in villages. By 2000, she had decided to continue her travels by going to the Far East.

Scharff continued to divide her time between Asia, California and Tennessee, selling her work in public and private shows to fund her travels. She also worked on a book of stories about the people and places she encountered on her journeys. In February 2006, while visiting New Delhi, she learned that she had ovarian cancer.

The artist is survived by her father, Jack Scharff, and her brothers Jack and Thomas Scharff, all of Memphis; and her sister Mary Ellen Creech of Garner, North Carolina.



Margi Scharff, 2001. (Photo: Tom Lambert.)