

A Life Well Traveled

Margi Scharff,
1955-2007

BY HOLLY MYERS



Margi Scharff, who died on July 2 from ovarian cancer, was an itinerant artist in an all-but-forgotten tradition: not the

sort who jets from fair to fair, commission to commission, chalking up an international network of curators and collectors, but one who actually travels the countryside, surrendering herself to the landscape, drawing inspiration from the people she meets and the objects that pass through her hands. I am sorry to say I discovered her work myself only a few months before her death — in her last exhibition at Overtones — but I was moved by the patient, heartfelt nature of the work, and the effusive admiration of Elizabeta Betinski, the gallery's director. The pieces — intricate, colorful, lovingly crafted collages — were all small enough to fit in a suitcase and spoke, it seemed to me, of a life lived with passion, curiosity and integrity.

Born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1955, Scharff embarked on her first major journey — a six-month tour of Europe — at the tender age of 18. She studied art at the universities of Arizona and New Mexico before moving to Los Angeles in 1985. She worked as a bus driver and a car mechanic while establishing herself as an artist, and later taught at Otis and Art Center.

Throughout the 1990s, she spent most of her time in a cottage on the ocean in Playas de Tijuana, commuting to L.A. periodically to teach and see friends, and traveled throughout Mexico. For most of the last seven years she roamed the Far East, exploring Hong Kong, China, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Nepal and India, where she was first diagnosed with cancer and underwent chemo.

"Life is a journey" was not just a nice quote for her, but a way of being," Betinski says. "Her heart and her humanity were always engaged, making it possible for her to see beauty along the road that most of us miss. My friendship with Margi was a true gift, and her art will always be a reminder for me that life is best lived without fear."

The buoyant spirit Betinski describes is evident throughout the blog that Scharff maintained over the last few years of her travels (margischarff.blogspot.com), even through the progression of her illness. One of the most enchanting entries is also one of the

last, written in March after she traveled to Hawaii to undergo an alternative treatment: "Hawaii is filled with vowels. All the extra I's and O's and U's give me comfort and reminds me I.O.U. all! But I am especially fond of the O's. O for open ended. O for the chanting sound Oooooooooohhhmmmm. O for the circular cycles of life and death and life and on and on and on. Okay, O for off too. O for Oh thank-you sooooo much for loving me. O for of course. O for oops and oingy boingy. O for ovaries growing healthy. And O for the mouth of the volcano, Pu'u O'o, who slowly flows her hot molten lava onto the open sea." ■

COURTESY OVERTONES GALLERY



Scharff's Top Quality Lotus (2006)