



An Artist's Pilgrimage

By DANIEL B. HABER

At first glance, the diminutive but sparkling blonde American woman appears to be indistinguishable from other budget travelers as she makes her way through New Delhi's crowded Main Bazar of Paharganj, jostling her way past cows, cycle rickshaws, pavement vendors and fellow travelers draped in shawls. Except, perhaps, that she looks down as she walks—her eyes combing the pavement for bits of discarded papers which she scoops up into her shoulder bag.

I first met the Los Angeles-based collage artist Margi Scharff with other foreign friends and fellow travelers in an alfresco restaurant in Dharmasala, Himachal Pradesh. That was the summer of 2002. She was in love with India and had collected numerous "souvenirs" and images during her trip. But a visit to her rented room-cum-art studio revealed the nature of her souvenirs: a strange collection of what to the average Indian appeared to be garbage collected from the roadside. It included

discarded wrappers of cigarettes and *beedis*, chewing gum, matchboxes, incense boxes, tea-bag tags, bits of newspaper, etc. It was part of her "raw material from the road" which she would reassemble and transform into colorful collages.

Scharff was happy to arrange a show of some two dozen collages on the twin beds in her room. A few months later, I saw the collages hung at a Kathmandu art gallery and watched her on the BBC.

Wherever she traveled in Asia, she collected ephemera, made her exquisite collages and made friends. Living on a budget of \$10 a day, she sometimes sells or barter her collages, explaining how she got her latest digital camera through a Web site.

It all started when she lived as an expatriate artist in Tijuana, Mexico, making assemblages in the mid-1990s. In her artist statement she says, "At first, I collected commonly discarded things like bottle caps, pop tops, nails...ordinary objects that can be found on the road anywhere in the world. I saw these objects

"Every day I walked the road to harvest materials and every day I made art."

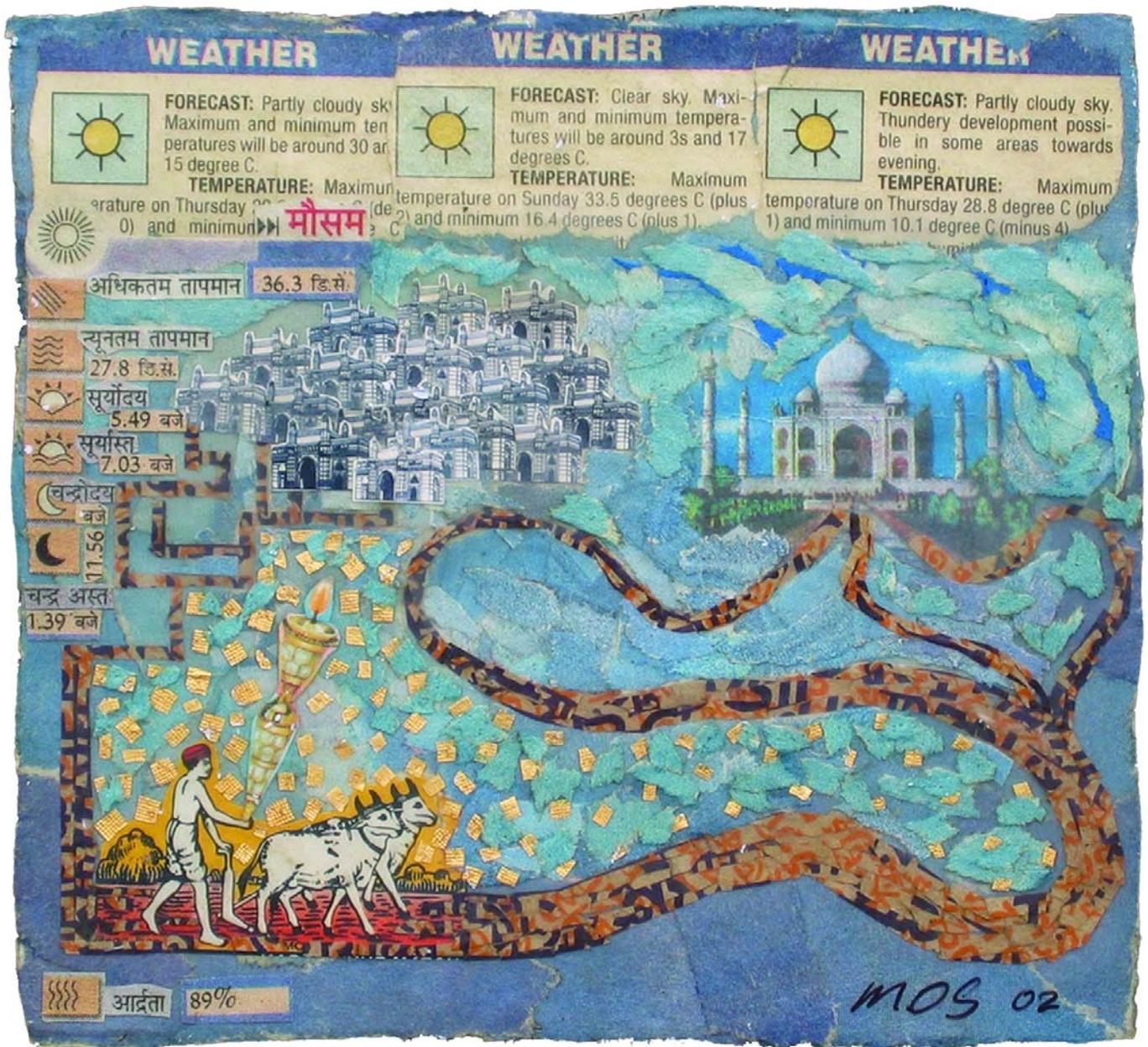


Margi Scharff works on her collages in Dharmsala, Himachal Pradesh, using materials collected from the roadside.

PCexQtiger



The Kite Flyers



Night Journey

as reflective of contemporary culture—a time of mass production, disposable things and throwaway packaging, multiples, copies and repetitions—a time of globalization.

“Every day I walked the road to harvest materials and every day I made art. One day I began to put on a good pair of boots and began to walk a little farther down the road. By the time I got to Asia I had learned to select materials that were lightweight and would travel well. I picked up paper scraps, cigarette packs, matchboxes, candy wrappers, incense paper, ticket stubs and I began making road collages.”

Most of the collages are 10-by-10 centimeters and she says, “I deliberately keep them small since I must travel with them.”

In fact, she keeps them in a small suitcase. Once, in Nepal, thieves stole the suitcase, thinking that it contained something valuable. But when they took it to the forest, Scharff relates, “Imagine their surprise when they found only bags full of old paper and pictures!” A hotel employee discovered the suitcase and had it returned to Scharff intact.

Scharff describes her collages, “Raw Material: From the Road in Asia,” as a working journey, an artist’s pilgrimage. Having returned to the United States in 2003 she was eager to show her work to the Los Angeles art community, which has been supportive. She exhibited her collages in a two-artist show with S.E. Barnett called “Foreign and Familiar” at the Overtones Gallery.

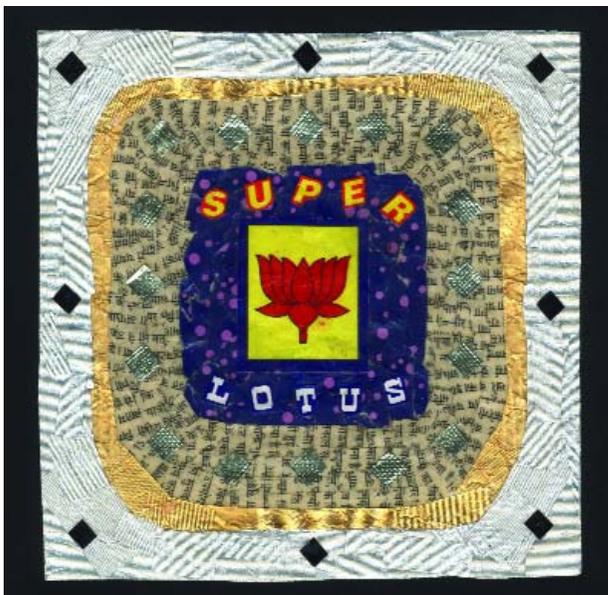
*“No road leads the way. The path follows behind.
The journey itself is home.”*



Push



Joker Heart



Super Lotus



Delhi Tiger

Another exhibition is set for later in 2006 at Los Angeles' L2kon-temporary Gallery. Resuming her road journey work, Scharff again came back to Asia late last year to Vietnam and India. She recently conducted an art workshop at the American Embassy School in New Delhi and in 2003 had been artist-in-residence at New Delhi's Sanskriti Kendra.

In March, while in New Delhi, Scharff felt ill and thought she had contracted "Delhi belly," or travelers' diarrhea. But investigation revealed that she had developed something more serious—ovarian cancer—and is now undergoing treatment at the Dharamshila Cancer Hospital and Research Centre in New Delhi. Between chemotherapy treatments, she also finds time to conduct writing workshops for underprivileged children in the Paharganj area where she now resides.

Although Scharff still keeps her walking boots ready, she can no longer do any arduous road journeys, but says she remembers the lines of an anonymous poet: "No road leads the way. The

path follows behind. The journey itself is home."

Sometimes she is an incense-wrapper *rani* in a regal sari. Sometimes she is a singing bird from the Bangladeshi two-taka note warbling on a branch. Or the Indian farmer plowing his field on a serpentine journey toward a mythic Taj Mahal illuminated by multiple suns torn from a newspaper weather forecast as in the collage *Night Journey*.

When it became known that she was battling cancer, Philip Reeves, the New Delhi correspondent for Washington-based National Public Radio (NPR), interviewed her in March. "Margi reached out and touched people," Reeves said. The listener response was so overwhelming that "it was the top e-mailed story on the NPR Web site [www.npr.org]." Scharff's story can be heard online. She also has her own blog: www.margischarff.blogspot.com □

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