

ART

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Marsha Connell's unusual collages are on exhibit in Berkeley. 'Somehow,' she says, 'I felt I was finding a way to bring hope together with the darkness.'

Connell gives her dreams shape in colorful collages

By JOYCE LYNN
Special to The Press Democrat

Santa Rosa artist Marsha Connell watched preparations for the Persian Gulf War from the bottom of a hill. The view — which appeared in a dream — began a healing process that ultimately brought her peace. Collages — dark landscapes spiked with light — became her way to communicate. "I felt a distress so profound there were no words for it," Connell says. She calls the collages "Dream Vessels" because each dreamlike picture contains a vessel — a pot, a vase, a ship.

A show of 39 of Connell's collage prints is at the Bade Museum in Berkeley until July 19. A limited edition book of selected collages and poems accompanies the show.

Connell teaches art at Santa Rosa Junior College. She is known for her watercolors, in private collections throughout the Bay Area. She and her husband, Jerry, a family physician, have two children, Reba, 23, and Sam, 19.

It was Reba, spending her junior year in Israel when the Persian Gulf War erupted, who was the original recipient of the collages. Since Israel was under missile attack, the war posed a double agony for Connell as she worried about her daughter's safety.

A month after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Connell dreamt that writers, artists and poets were brought in to observe the fighting.

A friend interpreted the dream to mean the artist was to bear witness. But Connell felt the artist was helpless to elicit change. Then she wondered, "Could I create art about the war, but not beautify the destruction?"

Connell cut up magazines, made two collages and duplicated them on a color copier. When Connell looked at the copies, she says, "They shocked me. They moved me so much. There was a lot of darkness but also hope. They had hope for the world."

The first collage, "Mayim," is a kaleidoscope of red, glowing smoke; dark rocks jutting from the ocean; the sedentary head of her teacher Maya, who committed suicide; more rocks and shattered pots. Behind the smoke emanates light.

Connell made 37 more prints, which she sent to Reba, who put them on her dormitory walls in Jerusalem.

For Connell, vessels hold personal, political and spiritual significance. Like the white, translucent

Images of conflict

The event: "Dream Vessels," an exhibit of 39 collage prints by Marsha Connell
Dates and times: 9 a.m.-noon and 1-4 p.m.
Monday through Friday until July 19
Location: Bade Museum, Pacific School of Religion, 1798 Scenic Drive, Berkeley
Phone: (510) 848-0528, ext. 242

oriental vase adorned with roses (Rose is her mother's name) that fills the center of "Witness," Connell as a young girl often felt fragile.

In 1988 Connell traveled to Ecuador on a cultural exchange to meet the women of a small village who made pottery. She was driving through the mountains when a car crashed into hers, shattering the pots she was going to exhibit in the United States. She had more pots sent to the United States. They arrived — shattered.

In "Cloak of Darkness," a poem Connell wrote in late 1991, she calls her inner vessels "pulsing trees of life."

Connell finished the original series with a collage called, "The Whole World is a Very Narrow Bridge." She fears crossing bridges and when she made the collage the world filled her with the same terror. But she points to a verse from the song, "The Whole World" as her newly acquired axiom: "... and the important thing is not to be afraid."

The collage became transitional: Connell created another dozen collages, markedly different from the earlier ones. Instead of fiery reds and dark hues, watery greens and blues prevail. And eggs — the spiritual symbol of wholeness, birth, rebirth — are a central and recurring theme.

In her poem, "Dream Vessels," Connell writes: "The vessel offers the possibility of transformation, hope/reconciliation of opposites ... Vessels poised/between her story and history, bridging nature and the human-made, bridging hope and forces of destruction."

"Somehow, through doing this, I felt I was finding a way to bring hope together with the darkness," she reveals. "As the work told me its stories, it was bringing more sense to the world."

"The collages were my healing. Gradually I found my own center again and my own peace through doing this."