

'Quiet Storm Within'
By Linda Luise Brown
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You've seen the knock-offs: the tasteful designer art with highlights of a bright color: a red: a pink: a vibrant blue. You've seen familiar elements in other less urgent art: but this, **Marge Moody: Selections from a Decade** is the real thing.

Most times, Rowe Art gallery (on the UNC – Charlotte campus) is a quiet place, and at first glance the art currently on display on the walls is quiet, too. *But penetrate the surfaces, and you will find that beneath the layers of paint, collage and other media there brews a quiet storm.*

On view through February 18, 2000, the collages of Marge Moody are executed in the style that others imitate. Studied, yet loose and expressionist: they are intellectual yet free of **intellectualism**.

I went to see this well-disciplined elegance for two good reasons: one, for the pleasure of viewing the art: and two, I knew that Moody's work would help me at a time when I was busily wrangling my own art inside the studio, getting ready for a show.

There is a solace, a release, for artists in leaving a studio in tumult for the peace of a well-organized and coherent one-person exhibition in a gallery. By the time a series of works of art have made it to the gallery format, they have been selected, framed and hung. The hardest part – completing the work – was over long before the individual pieces were edited into the comprehensible whole that makes a good art exhibition.

This exhibition showcases the work of a very good, but not very well recognized, local visual artist. Moody, a Scotswoman born in Kenya who teaches design and drawing at Winthrop University, has the true eye of a born designer, nurtured by years of practice. Her lucid, often somber and serious art, lightened by the gestural freedom that comes from a confidence achieved by this experience, has more to offer than its handsomely presented facades at first suggest.

The flavor of Moody's collages suggests the era – the 1960s – when two overlapping forces emerged in modern visual art: Pop Art projected onto abstract expressionism. In contrast to her personal ancestry, Moody's British artistic lineage is similar to many American modernists. In Britain and America, the heady modernism of the period was laced with a strong, internalized, sense of design: a continuation perhaps of the Bauhaus rigor.

While literal elements of pop Art are noticeably absent from Moody's work – there are no labels from canned goods here – she infuses the technique of collage with the pick-up freedom of the Pop recycler. Moody's collages don't shout 'Pop! Bow! Or Smash!' in jagged zigzags written across their surfaces (or have any direct commercial reference – except for that pesky Paul Revere logo!). But neither are they simply elegant late

Bauhaus design studies. The ‘pop’ element resides in the collage-making – the action of assembling the scraps and found objects, sometimes right off the street, or the studio floor.

How many times can the art critic call collage “that quintessential 20th-century medium” and get away with it? For as long as artists respond to the eclecticism that is our contemporary culture I suppose. Collage may also lay claim to the 21st century, too.

This artist does demonstrate a partiality to American and European painters of the post-War period, most noticeably American Robert Motherwell and his generation, along with Helen Frankenthaler and the much earlier Russian Constructivists.

In some ways this modest show, a mixed-media retrospective of a decade, is a textbook model of that abstract expressionist *genre*. While personal, the work fits into the continuing community of modernism, finding solutions that are confident, yet not premeditated.

But Moody isn’t content with being just another handsome formalist artist: she forces her work into positions that allow emotions such as anger to take center stage. In her artist statement, she says, ‘Some of the work is a more direct response to life situations experienced in which I attempt to describe difficult, intangible ideas – anger, fear, sorrow – by intuitively manipulating the compositional relationships until such feelings are evident in my work’.

The best and most exciting of Moody’s work conveys emotion and goes beyond mere formalism. The throbbing reds and the dramatic notes of black riding up against certain blues in several of the collages seem to reflect such strong feelings. Often, as in the *Spirit Series Black III* (1995), Moody seems to utilize imagery from the subconscious: while her inherent design sense retains overall control of the work her statement explains that she nurtures her ‘conscious and subconscious day to day awareness of and sensitivity to, [her] surroundings.’

But the overriding mastery here is of technique. In her exploration of the edges of forms, of implied objects, Moody successfully combines the precision cutting of someone who draws well with the brushy force of a painter. Strong in basic shapes like squares, often titled onto their points, precise and diagonal, these compositions are counter-pointed by vigorous scratched surfaces, white or densely dark, even black. The collages are rendered with both shiny and matte surfaces; combed and smooth; painterly and with a chalky quality, as in *Dog Series: Stain*

The sense of space in an earlier piece, a larger, (40 x 54”) untitled collage from 1990, reads from a distance like interior architecture. *The all-embracing modernist design ethic is at work here, linking painting, architecture and graphic design, establishing a geometric sense of depth on a flat plane.*

Another, entitled, *Collage with Shapes* (1997) is composed of large cut-out shapes transposed into a large horizontal format with bold forms and colors, recalling

Motherwell's seminal work. Throughout the show, we see large horizontals and squares, somber in color with a classic, dark constructivist style with bright highlights.

Moody works in a range of sizes. In the small 20" x 20" Square Series (Pink Line), handsome rich swatches of dense ink are laid across bright white paper, combined with umber, golden ocher, and pink. Several of the larger collages use the diptych format to solve compositional dilemmas and questions of scale. Armchair warriors: Onset (1996) is one such strong, larger (40" x 56") two-part piece. Another example, Armchair Warriors Series: Evil Eye (1997) has a strong vermillion plume against browns, blacks and grays.

Another of the bigger pieces in a diptych format, Spirit Series" Four Corners, is constructed with beautiful unique papers of silver, warm gold, gold and sienna. Black rice paper scattered with gold filaments holds the composition together. This excellent show by Winthrop University Department of Art and Design professor Marge Moody reveals some of the most sophisticated abstract art in the Charlotte area. *It's serious art, and while often understated, is diffused with humor and wit. What is controlled by a sense of design – what is pin-striped precision – is loosened from its bounds by the gesture and wild marks of the subconscious mind.*

Marge Moody: Selections from a Decade is on view at Rowe Arts gallery in the Rowe Arts Building on the UNCC campus through February 18. Gallery hours are 10 – 4 weekdays: but call ahead (547 2473) to make sure it's unlocked.

Author, Linda Louise Brown, Creative Loafing, Charlotte, article 'Quiet Storm Within', reviewing the exhibition 'Selections from a Decade' at the Rowe gallery, UNC Charlotte in Feb 2000. Linda Brown has a [BFA in Painting from the University of Illinois](#); an [MA in Aesthetics from the University of Texas](#); an [MFA in Painting from the University of Oklahoma](#) and is an adjunct professor, free-lance writer and studio painter.