

Margi Scharff, 52; artist known for jewel-like collages

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By Mary Rourke, Times Staff Writer

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Margi Scharff, an artist who made intricate, jewel-like collages from scraps she collected in her vagabond travels through Asia, has died. She was 52.

Scharff died July 2 at a cousin's home in Tiburon, Calif. The cause was ovarian cancer, said poet Penelope Moffet, a friend.

In recent years, Scharff traveled constantly and had no permanent residence.

"The pleasure of the work lies in the tremendous care with which it is made," wrote Holly Myers in a Los Angeles Times review of Scharff's most recent collages, exhibited in May at Overtones gallery in Los Angeles.

Scharff's raw materials for collages were the discarded matchboxes, kite fragments, crossword puzzles and scraps of paper she found in her journeys. The results were "miniature memorials to the cultures she has encountered," wrote art critic Mac McCloud in a 2003 review of Scharff's work for L.A. Artcore magazine.

Earlier in her career Scharff made room-sized installations that included "The Night Room," a tribute to her mother, Theresa, who died of breast cancer in the early 1980s.

Later, Scharff focused on themes of social justice in artworks such as "Pillar of Warmth," made of interwoven blankets that she donated to the underprivileged. In 1994, she completed "A Series of Miscellaneous Connections," an installation made with car parts, neckties and other castoffs that her friends contributed.

Born Feb. 11, 1955, in Memphis, Tenn., Scharff got serious about traveling at 18 when she worked her way across Europe for six months, alone.

She earned a bachelor's degree from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and followed it with a master's in fine arts before moving to Los Angeles in the early 1980s. She worked as a bus driver, auto mechanic and art teacher, among other jobs, until she began her extensive travels in Asia. She was visiting Varanasi, India, a pilgrimage city for Hindus, when she fell ill. After a brief stay in a hospital in New Delhi she went to the home of her cousin, Judy Wilson, in Tiburon.

"I have always known that ... I might not have a long life," Scharff said in a 2006 interview with National Public Radio, from her hospital bed in New Delhi. Cancer was in her family history, she said.

"It may have been one of the things that gave me the strength and courage to go out and do these journeys, which many people might find frightening," Scharff said.

Scharff is survived by her father, Jack, and brothers Jack and Thomas, all of Memphis; and her sister, Mary Ellen Creech of Garner, N.C.

A memorial service is being planned for August in Los Angeles.