



PHOTO BY MIKE TREUTER

Artist Nóra Szabó

VISUAL ARTS

## Collaging a life from memory

*Nóra Szabó at the Center for Spirituality and the Arts*

BY JOHN EWING

A life of displacement is usually one of hardship, adaptation and surprising discovery. For an artist, evidence of this is often revealed by telltale clues within form and content. Nóra Szabó is one such itinerant artist whose work appears this month at the Center for Spirituality and the Arts. The collection of small collages and large paintings by the Hungarian-born Szabó contains personal reflections on a life of movement and change, veiled in enigmatic abstractions and torn remnants gathered from her travels.

"I didn't like the moves while they were happening, and they have probably predestined me to be an outsider," says Szabó, who at 18 left Budapest and emigrated to the United States in 1956, in the wake of a violently quelled revolution. "Whenever I made friendships and the right contacts, we had to leave." Among the quarter million who fled Soviet-occupied Hungary that year, Szabó, her family, and future husband Karoly found safety in Washington, D.C. Having studied at Budapest's Gymnasium of Applied and Fine Arts, the artist joined an uncle's Maryland-based surveying firm as a map draftsman. After marriage and the birth of her son Ákos, Szabó's life was again uprooted and shifted west. Her husband's career as a chemical engineer took the family to the San Francisco Bay Area for a short stint, then brought them back east to New York, where Karoly joined the research faculty at Syracuse University. Nóra, with spousal benefits, attended the university's art school.

"The university life of the Sixties was fascinating and very free," recalls the artist, mentioning the pervasive and lingering influence of Abstract Expressionism and the New York School painters. Among her

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own guides, she cites Helen Frankenthaler, a painter with a light-handed and energetic use of color, and Robert Motherwell, a painter and collagist whose ungainly shapes and bold contrasts found an equally light balance in combination. "The Sixties were also the time of the hippies," remembers Szabó, with high-pitched and infectious laughter. "Not that I participated in it, because I was a prim-and-proper, modern housewife. But I enjoyed it, nonetheless!"

When Karoly accepted a post with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the Szabó family was again on the move, briefly stopping in Bolivia before settling permanently in Vienna in 1971. For much of the 19th century, the Austro-Hungarian Empire served as the cultural crossroads of Eastern and Western Europe, and as Szabó notes, the intermarrying monarchy represented "a real melting pot." Despite Vienna's recent surge of nationalist extremism, this cultural layering supports a lively international art scene. Perhaps it also explains the Viennese penchant for plumbing human depths, from Freud's theories of the unconscious to the Actionists' body-art grotesques. For Szabó, Vienna has been a much-needed home base for the wide exhibition of her work as well as travel. She spends a month each year in Venice, a city that inspires and nourishes her art.

"Because of the tourists, Venice is a poster culture. They start going up all over the city in May and by winter they're torn and beautiful," says Szabó, whose foraged scraps from museum and concert announcements hold

"the salty air of Venice" and are the basis for her collages. Loosely arranged into letters of the alphabet, the works are a playful mix of form and text, as well as a deeper, coded record of the artist's memory and experience. Her larger paintings abstract this dual nature further. With strips of tape, the artist builds active geometric passages that shift, script-like, through fields of complex and muted color. Diana Roberts, director of the Center for Spirituality and the Arts, describes Szabó's work as having "a balance that emanates equally from the intellectual, rational, and formal elements."

While in San Antonio visiting her son Ákos, an assistant professor at the UT Health Science Center, Szabó stumbled upon the Center and sensed an immediate affinity with the director and the artists exhibiting at the time. As Roberts recalls, the meeting was a fit on both a personal and institutional level, in sync with the Center's broad mission to show work that expresses "an investigation of spirit," across cultures and genres. Since her appointment in 1997, Roberts has articulated many facets of that elusive goal through her programming, most recently in a painting exhibition entitled "The Psychological Figure." And her artists understand her methods. "It's a very comfortable feeling for me to show in a setting like this," comments Szabó. "Over the five or six exhibits I've seen here, it's fascinating that the problems are so similar, whether you are an artist painting in Vienna or in San Antonio." ■

John Ewing (jewing@earthlink.net) is a frequent visual arts contributor to the Current.

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