

Artists Among Us

By Pamela Schipper | Photography by Julie Lutz Hipkins



LEARNING TO SEE One Artist's Journey Toward Enlightenment

On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, printmaker and painter Marian Osher was in the air, flying home from Holland. The pilot announced that the plane would be landing in Halifax, Canada, instead of Philadelphia, citing severe weather on the East Coast as the cause. It was only when the flight landed that Osher and her fellow passengers understood the U.S. was under attack.

As unbelievable and horrific as this was, for Osher the days that followed brought an odd recompense, one that confirmed her deepening vision of the universe and the life force that connects all beings. She learned that one print from her Dupont Circle show "Connections" at the Henry L. Stimson Center had fallen from the wall on Sept. 10. "The interesting thing is that the print was the mandala, 'Harmony,'" Osher says. The next year that same print hung in the show "Reconnections" at the Unitarian Universalist

Church in Rockville. "I hung the show on a Friday, and I went back on Sunday," Osher recalls, "and I looked and there was that same print. It had come down out of the 30-some pieces, and it was sitting on the floor—that same print about the harmony of the races."

A CUP OF TEA

Some might wonder if the print was structurally compromised, and that's why it fell. But Osher takes great care in everything that she does—from how she creates her art to how she presents it as a bridge to understanding among the races and the species. Her spiritual journey actually began a few years before 9/11. She was working as a self-employed graphic designer, meeting the schedules and ever-changing needs of numerous clients. To de-stress, she stopped at a place on Nelson Street in Rockville and ordered some chai tea. "It was



Above, left: Artist Marian Osher volunteered 11 times with the Buffalo Field Campaign, a nonprofit working to protect the free roaming buffalo in Yellowstone National Park. **Top, right:** Osher created images like “Love, Respect, Protect” to reflect the beauty and the plight of Yellowstone’s buffalo. **Above, right:** The “Harmony” mandala depicts harmony among the races; it fell from the wall while on exhibit at Dupont Circle’s Henry L. Stimson Center on Sept. 10, 2001.

an infused pot,” Osher says. “It gave me a sense of peace.” She realized that she wanted to experience that centered calm as the norm and not the exception in her life.

She phased out her graphics work, and her path soon wound back to fine arts. Then it blossomed. Osher had studied art education at the University of Maryland before becoming a graphic artist, later receiving her master’s degree in printmaking from George Washington University. For 20 years (in addition to her graphics work and individual teaching), she had practiced stone lithography, a detailed and labor-intensive process that uses solvents and oil-based inks. Ten years ago (after that cup of tea), Osher switched to environmentally friendly water-based media, concentrated more on her fine arts, and saw her creativity and spirit soar. These days, “I go where my art takes me,” she says.

In working toward that 2001 show “Connections,” Osher discovered the commonality found in all cultures and all human beings. “A sense of universal connection came to me,” she says. “If we can recognize that connectivity, then we won’t hurt others because we would be hurting ourselves.” Osher

explored mandalas and chakras, images imbued with spiritual power, for the next few years, exhibiting a total of four shows based on this body of work.

But then she needed a change. “I was at the Strathmore Hall seeing a show, and there was this beautiful book by Cozy Baker on kaleidoscopes in the gift shop. I thought, ‘This is so beautiful. They look like mandalas in a lot of ways,’” she says. “The spiritual aspect of kaleidoscopes is they’re about acceptance of change and new opportunity because every moment there’s a new image. They don’t stay the same.”

“Vibes,” a 2004 show at the Washington Printmakers Gallery, was the result and represented a breakthrough for the artist. “That’s when colors started becoming intuitive for me,” Osher says. “Never before that.” As a child, she saw double until an operation at the age of four corrected her vertical imbalance and crossed eyes. “Suddenly, I could see the shapes of things. So when I was in nursery school, I used to draw with black crayon when all the other kids were drawing in color. For me, just being able to see the shapes of things was so exciting. So color came much later for me,” she recalls.



Above, left: After many years of stone lithography, Marian Osher switched to environmentally friendly and water-based media in her printmaking. **Above, right:** “Hug” merges the paths Osher is following toward environmental and spiritual enlightenment.

“I think that probably had something to do with my becoming an artist.”

A DREAM CATCHER

Osher learns something new through each body of work she creates, and she strives to pass this on to the viewer. When her son became a coordinator for the Buffalo Field Campaign, a nonprofit working to protect the free roaming buffalo in Yellowstone National Park, Osher merged her spiritual path with an environmental one. “I would go out there and volunteer. I volunteered 11 times, and I would go on all the patrols,” she says. “Then I did other activism. I lobbied with congress, too.” The 2008 “Dream Quest” show at New York City’s Ceres Gallery suspended dream catchers with moving icons over wall hangings of painted buffalo, a craft Osher learned while volunteering at Yellowstone. Images have been reproduced in the Buffalo Field Campaign calendar and other fundraising materials, including note cards, with all proceeds going toward helping the buffalo.

Her environmental shows, including the 2007 “Earth Matters” at the Washington Printmakers Gallery, explored issues ranging from the plight of the Yellowstone buffalo to logging, the effects of global warming, light pollution and the distress of numerous species, including harp seals, polar bears, penguins, walruses, sea turtles, frogs, toads and dolphins. “When I have my environmental shows, I have literature for people to pick up to take something with them if they want to become more active or learn more,” Osher says. “So there are

so many ways that artists can raise awareness, and then there’s giving talks about your work and discussing the issues.”

Her 2009 show “eyetinerary” at the Washington Printmakers Gallery was “about being present in the moment, and that was inspired by a sketchbook—a series of sketchbooks. It’s really looking and seeing what’s right there in familiar pathways and appreciating it,” Osher explains. “So if one person’s awareness or thinking can be inspired by that, then as far as I’m concerned my work has succeeded whether I sell or not. And that means I’ve been able to give that gift away, and I can feel good about my use of my art.”

“You see, if it’s about ego, then it’s about how much you sell or what award you get. You’re always judging yourself, and I don’t want to be there,” she continues. “That’s one of the letting go things that happened in the spiritual journey, and it makes my art a lot more fun for me, less pressured.” She pauses and smiles. “It doesn’t mean that I do any less work.”

ART MATTERS

A selection of Marian Osher’s eco-spiritual paintings and prints are on display Jan. 9 through Feb. 6, at the Unitarian Universalist Church, 100 Welsh Park Dr., Rockville. Among the 60 pieces are new multimedia works inspired by the seashore. An artist’s reception and talk will be held Jan. 23 from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Exhibit hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday, and 11 a.m. to noon on Sunday. For more information, call 301-762-7666 or consult the artist’s website at www.marianosher.com. 