

*Ars longa, vita brevis.*

*(Life is short, art long.)*

By Audrey Niffenegger

Marilyn Sward loved paper. She wanted you to love it too. She loved to make it, she loved teaching people to make it. She was very democratic about the whole thing; she didn't care if you were a kid or an amateur or a graduate student, she knew about papermaking and she was ready to share that knowledge with you. All of her projects have a vibe of hospitality, as though papermaking was a large, never-ending party and Marilyn was the hostess.

When Marilyn died, many people were surprised. Not because we didn't know she was ill (she'd had breast cancer for two years) but because Marilyn was much too young to be doing anything as somber and unoptimistic as dying. At 67, she was the youngest person I knew. Her worldview was one of permanent possibility. She was always moving forward, seldom dwelling in the past.

As a teacher, traveler, arts administrator, wife, mother, grandmother, gardener and hostess, Marilyn had a lasting effect on a lot of people. She co-created two organizations dedicated to promoting the arts of paper and the book, Paper Press and the Columbia College Chicago Center for Book and Paper Arts. Because of Marilyn, numerous artists have knowledge, jobs, degrees, friends and collaborators. The book she wrote with Catherine Reeve, *The New Photography*, influenced artists to explore previously unthought-of techniques and combinations. She worked so assiduously to make things happen for other artists that her own art sometimes got overlooked.

This exhibition is Marilyn Sward's first retrospective. Like many artists of her generation, she isn't an easy artist to present completely, because a great deal of her art was temporary or site-specific and all that is left are some slides and a few components and sketches. Most of the work in this show comes from the Sward family's collection; these are the pieces that Marilyn kept for herself and gave to her children.

One day very recently I found myself standing in a classroom at the Book and Paper Center facing a lifetime's worth of Marilyn's art. Stephen DeSantis, Kathi Beste and Pamela Paulsrud had collected the artwork from the Sward family's homes and from

Marilyn's studio. Here it was. I had seen most of the art before, but it was always in the company of Marilyn herself: this paper collage of a house hung in her living room, this journal went with her to Japan. Here was the piece she made about lobster pots from her time at Haystack, here was a mockup of the toy puppet theater she made from a performance by Jeff Abell. The animating spirit of these objects was Marilyn herself. They were haunted by my memories of her laughter, her voice, the quick movement of her hands, bakelite bracelets clicking. Crowded into the stifling classroom, the art seemed bereft, and I wondered if this art was somehow like a desanctified church, if it would be able to function without its creator. This is a profound doubt to have about art, but on that day my sense of loss clouded my ability to see.

As Stephen and I sorted through the work, order slowly emerged. There are six types of works in the show: early paintings and drawings, from Marilyn's student days at the University of Illinois in the 1960s; collaged paper pieces from the 1970s and 80s; paper sculptures and installations (most represented by slides and sketches) from the 1980s through the 2000s; journals and travel books; collaborative pieces; and photographic pieces, including Marilyn's aerial photographs, her last works.

Her early work is exuberant, with hot color and playful gestures. As an undergraduate Marilyn trained as a painter. There is a lingering sense of her joy in the materials and the action of making, traits that carry through all her later work.

When Marilyn discovered papermaking, the craft had been in abeyance for decades and there were few resources for papermakers to turn to for guidance. So paper artists in the 1970s and 80s experimented. There were few rules, not much equipment, and lots of camaraderie, especially at Paper Press, the non-profit paper center Marilyn founded in 1981 with Linda Sorkin-Eisenberg and Sherry Healy.

Marilyn made a virtue of the technical limitations she faced then. Her paper pieces from this period are heavily textured, thick, some poured into plaster molds. She often built large art from small components. There is a series of pieces based on the shape of an envelope (a triangle within a rectangle, a container for messages) and another based on a simple house shape (a triangle on top of a rectangle, a container for lives, secrets). Marilyn was influenced by Japanese paper craft, as well as the aesthetics and philosophy of the Japanese. These paper collages show the influence of Japanese art in

their increasing minimalism, their combination of restraint and pleasure in playing with the possibilities of the medium. Like the work of Zen masters, her art frequently balanced structure against a love and acceptance for whatever happened in the moment.

In the mid-1980s Marilyn decided to get her MA degree. She entered the Interdisciplinary Arts program at Columbia College, where she studied with Suzanne Cohan-Lange, Jeff Abell and Nana Schineflug among others. The program challenged artists to push their work in new directions, often with an emphasis on making large multi-disciplinary work. Marilyn began to make installations. Her thesis show was an outdoor piece behind Beacon Street Gallery made of flags of bright red waxed paper and red tulips. (She timed the planting so they would bloom during the show, an early confluence of her art making and gardening skills. Suzanne Cohan-Lange is still incredulous that the flowers actually bloomed on time.) Later installations included opulent lighting, sculptures shaped like houses on stilts, a giant paper spine (as in the spine of a book, as in vertebrae) laid out in the snowy woods. Increasingly the work speaks of nature, of renewal; its themes elide from the manmade (houses, envelopes) to the ethereal.

Marilyn was a traveler all her life. She was extremely open to new things, especially to new varieties of beauty. She was not particularly religious, but she was deeply spiritual, and photographs of temples and statues of gods appear repeatedly in her work. She was partial to art that generated serenity. Her journals and travel books are stuffed with the ephemera of her daily life and her journeys. She was not one to complain; these are records of things she saw that pleased or amazed her. Marilyn was influenced by Buddhism, and she noticed small things. When the Book and Paper Center was new, in the mid-1990s, we usually drove to work together. Although she was the one who drove, she was also the one who exclaimed over the color of Lake Michigan that morning, or clouds over the skyscrapers. (“Just drive, Marilyn!” I would say, hoping to get to work in one piece.) These books of her everyday noticing are for me the most pure things that she made, though no one can now use them in the way that Marilyn did, to trigger cascades of memory, to reconstruct Bali, Japan, South Africa. They are no longer the memory palaces they were made to be, but nevertheless they evoke Marilyn herself in

their over-brimming playfulness and as evidence of the way she attempted to sate her copious curiosity by gathering images and objects.

It would be an understatement to say that Marilyn was intensely social. Nothing seemed to have truly happened for her unless she could share it. This naturally led to a number of collaborations over the years, a few of which are represented in this exhibition. The most important is *Tree Whispers*, an installation project she made with Pamela Paulsrud which continues to grow and to be seen. *Tree Whispers* consists of thousands of round sheets of paper strung together and hung from the ceiling; the effect is of a small forest. Each sheet of paper has been drawn or written on by someone (a child, an artist, a bystander). It is a piece that evokes nature but also gives off a whiff of the unnatural. It's a bit spooky to see trees indoors, to realize that they aren't trees after all. It's community, but it is also many people wistfully worrying about nature. Marilyn spent a great deal of her time in the North Woods of Wisconsin. In this piece she and Pam create a calm indoor woods, a message to the future of trees.

Marilyn was a photographer as well as a papermaker, and much of her work since the early 1990s marries the two media. In addition to co-writing a book on the subject, she also taught many students both at Columbia College and at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago a wide variety of photographic techniques. Some of the pieces in this show were made as demonstrations. These were taken from Marilyn's many teaching portfolios. Some are more ambitious pieces. Most of these are photographs taken on her travels. Marilyn's last series of photographs were taken from airplane windows. They continue her fascination with abstract formal structure, but they are also a visual embrace of the planet. She was gathering up the world, one rectangle at a time.

Everything Marilyn made—artwork, family, houses, friends—continues on quietly without her. As we chose the work for this show, each piece began to evoke not only loss, but continuity, even hope. Marilyn was not too focused on artistic fame. Her idea of success was about community, not so much about ambition. Her art is generous, made in a spirit of play and reverence. Here in the galleries of the Columbia College Center for Book and Paper Art (galleries she laid out, drawing right over the architect's blueprints) Marilyn Sward's art sits in cases, flickers on video screens: each piece evokes

its portion of her life and ideas. Like the rest of us, it will have to carry on without her now; *ars longa, vita brevis*.

Audrey Niffenegger is an artist and writer living in Chicago.