

GreenLine

Arts & Features

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A life in synthesis:

Abstract artist Nina Howard

by Suzanne J.E. Tourtillott

"There are a lot of painters inside me screaming to get out. They get to take turns," says abstract artist Nina Howard, who works in many seemingly disparate modes — empowered by a need to unify them. Many artists' personal histories reflect the desire to develop a particular strength in a single medium, but Howard's interests and talents are multiple, though not unrelated. Interior design demands the discipline of three-dimensional analysis and execution; painting's purely expressive qualities are unlocked by the right brain; and massage therapy

synthesizes the sensory experiences of touch, sound, color and light.

Her career in corporate interior design was a typical big-city success story. After graduating with honors from the Fashion Institute of Technology, Howard led the high-powered Manhattan lifestyle her profession and clientele demanded. "I was highly influenced and strongly supported by architects in New York City," she said.

But as the excesses of the '80s began to wane, the Alabama-born Howard took stock of the quality of her life and relocated to Atlanta. She began to identify and affirm another part of herself, and started painting and drawing as an antidote

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to the strictures of corporate design, encouraged by Atlanta gallery owner Ann Jacob. In a further effort to offset the hectic pace of her professional life, Howard established a studio and second home at the now-defunct North Carolina Biodome Community near Maggie Valley. When the self-sufficient community disbanded, Howard went to California to study T'ai Chi and massage therapy. Finally, in 1992, Howard made the move that brought these three disciplines together, returning to her mountain home and opening an art/design and massage studio in Waynesville.

"My motor runs fast," says Howard of her varied interests, acknowledging the two very different influences of her parents, as well as her cultural heritage. "I come from a musical family. My mother's interests were in

music and dressmaking; I was thrust toward what she knew. My father, though, encouraged us to relate to nature: hiking, fishing. I see that the designer in me is the American in me; the painter is the Asian. I thank my lucky stars for my genes because they've served me very well."

To Howard, dressmaking was "a way to hold a blob of color," she explains. Her interest in color led her to study interior design at FIT, where she also took two elective courses in painting. As a painter, she was particularly influenced by the work of Mark Rothko, Josef Albers and Wassily Kandinsky.

Howard's early, linear paintings "relate strongly to the tight body posture and draftsmanship required of me when I did corporate design all day long." Today, though, she paints in one of several ways: some pieces still retain elements of her early calligraphic style and muted colors, but others speak in purely abstract terms, making strongly emotional, organic statements with a broad use of intense color.

"Now I'm into organic gardening and body work [massage therapy]; my body movements are more fluid," — her arms arc to describe the act of painting — "and the painting reflects that; it also reflects a consciousness of who I am."

Howard's Eastern heritage and musical background are reflected in the ritual of preparation she uses in painting. Her studio and her working methods are orderly, but she immerses herself totally in the painting process, working in intense, two- to three-day energy bursts. During this time, Howard

often produces a large number of canvases, but when that special intensity isn't there, she says, "I don't paint much." And though her receptivity to new things allows for strong, temporary influences, her painting style is mature, displaying continuity and a distinctly personal language.

Howard is a multifaceted artist and successful businesswoman. A number of Atlanta galleries show her work, and several local businesses — the Laughing Seed Res-



taurant, Marc Howard Studio and the Full Circle Salon — bear her interior-design stamp. Two of Howard's paintings hang at Full Circle, and she also produces greeting cards, decorates blank books, creates wall collages and does both interior and graphic design work for a wide range of corporate clients.

Nina Howard opens her first Asheville show on March 11 at the city's newest gallery, A Far Away Place, 16 Battery Park Avenue. For more information, call the gallery at (704) 252-1891. ✧