

Collage

The ultimate in
recycling



Malcolm Tillis

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A collection
by Malcolm Tillis

for two dear friends

Sarah Nechamkin
Lyric landscape painter of Ibiza

Luis Llobet Tur
Ibizenco poet-historian



Photograph © 2013 Anthony Finnegan

Now in his 88th year, Malcolm Tillis has selected this collection of collage plates from the set of 517 created between October 2012 and October 2013.

The following impromptu interview is with Juaneva Smith who has known the artist for many years and has taken a close interest in his work.

How has your background as a musician, designer and author influenced your collage work? How did you come to this art form? What was the stimulus?

“**S**ince childhood I was attracted to the arts in their various forms, this seemed natural to me, here was a wonderland of beauty and possibilities. When I became a professional musician playing in one of Britain's symphony orchestras, even on tour between rehearsals and concerts I made for the local art galleries, libraries, theatres. In 1957 when we were playing at the Edinburgh

Festival I crept into the nearby King's Theatre to see Maria Callas and the La Scala Company rehearse Bellini's La Sonnambula. I was born with a thirst for the miracle of the fine arts. For me the same enlivening force that drives the sounds, rhythms, harmonies which go to create a symphony, a ballet, an opera, a poem, drives the colour, form, cross rhythms found in a painting or collage. Of course all these disciplines require their own individual technical accomplishment, but they are bound together, related. Once one has entered the kingdom of the arts there are no exit visas. My career as a musician ended in 1960 after the publication of my book *Chords and Discords ... an account of the life of an orchestral musician*. I was in my early thirties, I was living on a small island in the Mediterranean, there was an explosion of possibilities after the bleak horrors of the second world war, one could use blue and green together, brilliant pink and orange. Now writing and music could indeed have a beginning, middle and an end but no longer necessarily in that order. At that stage it seemed natural enough for me to be drawn to using colour, but I used to joke that there were already far too many struggling painters so I designed silk batik hangings. They sold well. I then plunged into the madder world of fashion: silk scarves and dress materials which were shown in Barcelona, Paris and London. Even then I was making collages but not to put in frames. The challenge of innovation has always appealed to me. I am an inveterate recycler. In those early years I remember walking through a wood by a stream collecting rubbish: old shoes, cans, twigs, there were even parts of a broken doll all of which I rearranged and left on a bed of fallen red autumn leaves.”

There is much movement, vitality and colour in your work. "Lyrical" is a word often used to describe the collages. Please comment on these themes in your work.

“My wife Kate who was a writer and whom you first met when we lived in India was a powerful influence in my life. I was still a musician when she encouraged me to write about it. She foresaw a widening out of my designing. And by the way I should point out that those seven years as a designer were the only years in my life when I made any money.

As a musician, a writer, an artist you can merely exist. Later still in 1980 when we were living in India, Kate could see the potential of my idea to travel all over this great sub-continent collecting interviews from other Westerners who had left the bright lights of home to find spiritual enlightenment and to live in India. We had been there 11 years. This book was published first as *Turning East* in New York but with only 21 interviews, reprinted in India, then eventually with the full set of 54 under its original title, *New Lives*, on the Internet where it can be accessed free of charge. So you see all this has led to yet another life change: I was already approaching my sixties when Kate said, "Go buy some frames, put these bits and pieces together ... they've been lying about for years, it's time to see them properly on our walls." We were back again living in England after 25 years abroad. And it was at this stage that I was introduced to the wonders of charity/thrift shops. Those first 30 collages were all only 12 inches square, a job lot of unused, unloved and abandoned cork floor tiles calling out to be saved. That was the base. Cut pieces of wall-paper, images torn from magazines or, I confess, from art books fell into place ready to get themselves glued together. From that first set this present journey began. Kate was behind all that and often drew my attention even in her last illness to the musicality of the images, how the colours danced, floated, the cross-rhythms. If there's lyricism in the work perhaps it's because although I sometimes use heavy colours and forms, by nature I'm contemplative, shock-wave in-your-face explosions have no appeal to me. ”

Sometimes it seems there is humour in the collages. Is this intentional? Often in film or literature there are private puns or jokes embedded in the piece so I have wondered if that is true for your work or if a sense of humour on occasion surprises you and wants expression?

“This question is not so easy to answer. All the collages are in essence abstract although sometimes snippets from recognizable images have crept in ... I've called this deconstruction. A collage can only start with whatever paper or card there is to hand and whenever the faithful MagicScissors begin to twitch and show signs of excitement. The mystery/adventure unfolds with hardly any preconceived ideas ... something bubbles up and pops out. There's no toil or struggle. When I look back at finished pieces, yes of course, sometimes I recognize in some a hint of humour, certainly not planned. I have been asked if I ever throw a collage away if it's not turning out

well, giving problems. No, no, I am the observer allowing the various pieces in the game to take their rightful place. This may be hard to understand. I use the mind as little as possible when I work. When a collage declares itself finished it somehow sings out FINITO and the MagicScissors are laid to rest.”

Where do you get the energy for your work? Often the collages seem exuberant and full of life. Can you elaborate?

“The energy ... again that's hard to explain. This present collection of over 500 collages was created during the past 12 months. I suppose this also may be difficult to understand especially when in full flow 4 or 5 pieces can pop out in a day. I work because it brings me joy, I'm intrigued to see how each collage

unfolds, very often I'm in a state of meditation. I've given up ambition, the need for recognition. If the creative juice stopped flowing I too would stop. Rather than feeling tired at the end of a session ... and I often work during the night ... I'm refreshed, looking forward to start the next adventure, the next collage. ”

All proceeds from the sale of your colleges are donated to charity. Can you comment on how this generosity came to be?

“When Kate died nearly 6 years ago it seemed only natural to dedicate the next exhibition to her memory. She had received selfless home care from the Marie Curie nurses, so the money raised through those sales went to the Marie Curie Cancer Care Fund. That started the pattern and other charities have benefited, many of them in or around Shrewsbury where I live. But I also have a special feeling for a charity in Delhi started by a friend: it enables partially-sighted young girls to be university educated. There's a joy, an enrichment in giving without strings. When the collages are shown in galleries my conditions are simple: the prices must be reasonable, 50% of what is sold goes to a local charity, the other 50% to the gallery. I have never thought of it as generosity but a privilege. Keeping prices low is not always popular with some of my fellow artists, but I live a simple life and know full well when the time comes to leave the scene and abandon ship, we all leave empty-handed.

Ray and Vicky Elmitt are great supporters of your work. How did this come to be?

“I have known Ray and Vicky for nearly 50 years, Vicky is my wife's niece. When the collage output began to grow at an alarming rate, the brilliant and irrepressible Ray designed a collage website which is still floating out there if you can find it...Collages for Charity, a collection of illustrations. Nothing sold. He brought out a book of 36 full-size plates called Dance of Rapture with an Introduction to die for by the distinguished American art historian Lanier Graham. Very little sold. I then told Ray there was little room left in my house to store the collages, and my floor boards were beginning to creak under their weight. Undaunted he said, "Go easy on the framing, not the collages, store them in folders!" And then in January of this year he brought out yet another book called Constructions and Deconstructions with an even more favorable Introduction by Lanier Graham...this was to coincide with an exhibition at the Willow Gallery in Oswestry. But here at least and at last 38 out of 150 collages were sold. Even that was not enough for Ray: PING!...here is yet another book, this one devoted solely to the current DD Series.”

But how do you catalogue, keep track of your prolific output?

“In the early days each collage was photographed and the image then printed on 12" x 8" card with a series number written on the back. When pieces got themselves sold, or more often given away, this was also recorded on the backs of the illustrations. That formed my catalogue. It seemed easy and convenient until Ray saw the piles of different groups of paper ... each series generally stopped when it reached between 200 and 300 pieces. The ever-practical Ray then taught me how to transfer the photographed images directly onto my computer, to edit, catalogue and then save everything on the hard drive. No paper, no ink, convenient. And the great bonus is that now I have the chance to recycle some of my own work by cutting up parts of this mass of paper so that bits and pieces occasionally find themselves incorporated into new collages. All collages that have gone, flown the nest, are recorded in a file called Dispersals. I should now explain why the collage numbers in this current series which go to form this book start with DD. This stands for Dispersals and Disposals. Over the years I had saved piles and piles of coloured paper, illustrations, printed designs, and there were also folders containing masses of other hopefuls: off-cuts, questionable rejects, all waiting their turn to be used. They gradually over-flowed crowding out my work tables. So I imposed a discipline: from Collage number DD1 and for each collage that followed I would only use material already available, lying about the house ... these to be Dispersed/sold/gifted. Everything left over ... the off-cuts ... must be thrown out, Disposed. Well, that was the intention... “

Does Ray frame and mat the collages? If so, does he consult with you on colour or any other aspect of your work?

“I find the frames and fix what goes into the frames, and for each page of the books choose the colours and layout. Ray has the patience and superb technical ability to magically transform everything onto the printed page. He and Vicky now own well over a

hundred collages. I owe much to their loving guidance and encouragement.”

It would be fascinating to know each innumerable step of your work from the gathering of specific materials through to finished, framed and hanging piece. A wood turning friend did this for a bowl he made and the whole piece read like a prose poem. Might you consider such on film or interview?

“To explain how materials are collected is easy enough, what follows leading to the final stage varies with each collage. Apart from the heavy card which is used for the base of the collages and has to be purchased, almost everything is cut or torn from discarded paper or card usually waiting to be thrown away. As I explained, I'm a natural born recycler and have no trouble grabbing doomed material. But I never use cheap printed thin paper. The ideal is heavy matt or lustre paper. There have been murmurs about filming the MagicScissors in action but until that happens all I

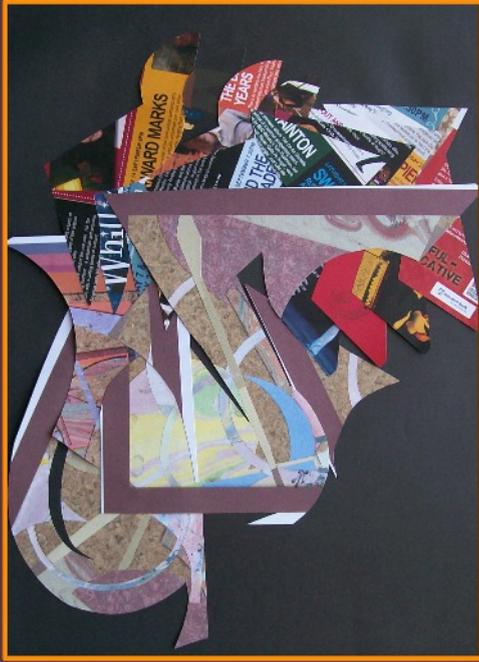
can say is that cutting has to be swift and it has to flow, no careful snip-snip-snip, more like a swoosh. Once a piece has been cut it can't be uncut, action has to be accurate, it has to be sure, clean. The MagicScissors have earned their name the hard way. That's why some of the collages appear to be simple...occasionally there are only 3 or 4 separate pieces placed together. Sometimes there can be up to 30 interwoven shapes. Before any pasting is done the general layout of the various pieces must appear happy...once a piece of paper has met its glue it can't be unglued, it's fate is sealed, only then the march towards the finale begins. This is perhaps where patience is tested: if the base slips and the pieces disorientate themselves...OH-OH!...well, maybe maybe this is how it wants to be? BUT...where's that red piece? We constantly adapt. Flexibility is essential. A collage started in portrait form makes signs telling us it would be happier finished in landscape form. Right! Recently I had everything almost glued together when a sudden gush of wind from an open window swept 2 pieces away. I couldn't find them. Rather than sink into frustration could I accept this as a message to let it be? Was the balance affected? What is balance anyway, in the eye of the beholder? We move on, no place for gloom and doom. A friend has one of my large collages which is hung upside down. She insists it's better that way. To be constantly unshakably detached, what a gift that would be.”

How does your work intersect with your spiritual life or path? This is asked because viewing a Series can induce in the viewer a transcendent experience, a definite buoyancy or Joie de Vivre.

“Meditation forms part of each day. I would be lost without that. But Juaneva, you and I are fellow disciples of Sant Kirpal Singh so you know what he taught. It colours everything I do. I had an American writer friend who when I was in serious trouble many years ago in Franco's Spain rescued me and helped me get out of the country. The last time I saw him he was 90 but unhappy: he wanted to know from which part of the brain inspiration sprang? I asked what made him think inspiration came from any part of the brain? He wouldn't accept there could be another source. When I'm told how

some of the collages affect people I'm moved and grateful of course, but my aim, my ideal is to practice non-attachment: "this is mine", "I've done that" should have no place. My guru once told me never see yourself as the doer. Hard to live up to.”

For more information, including sales, please email:
mail@malcolmtillis.com



DD1



DD23



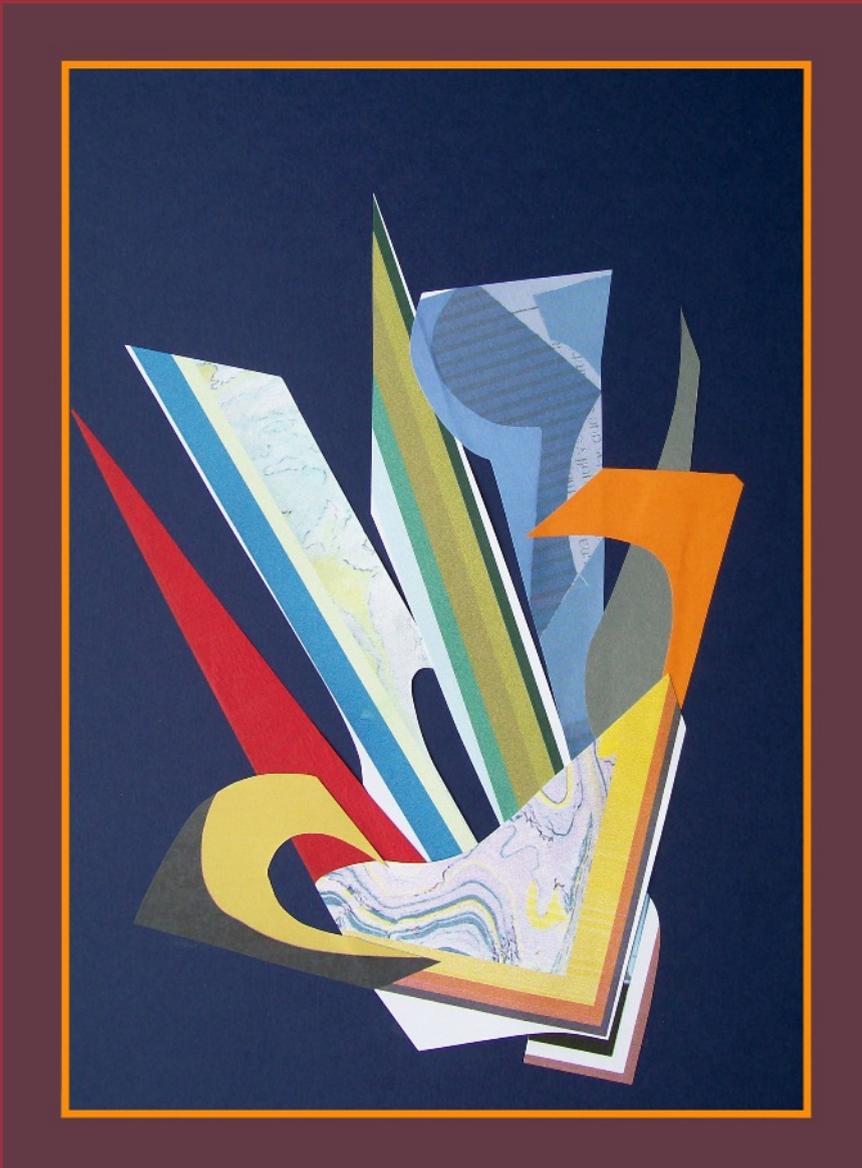
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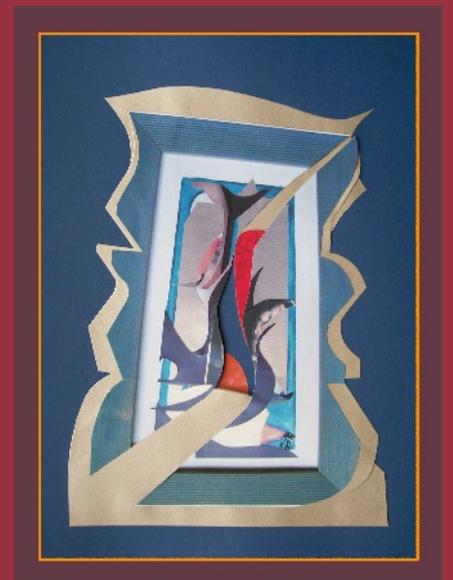
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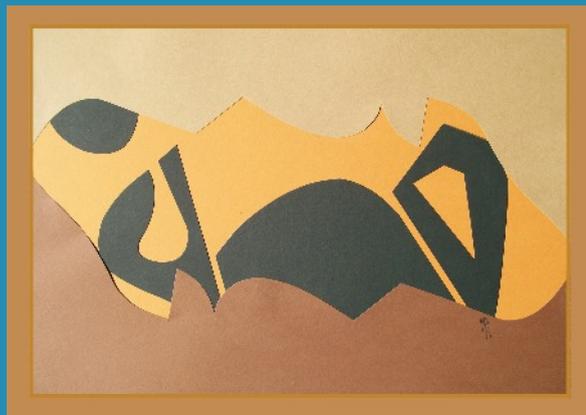
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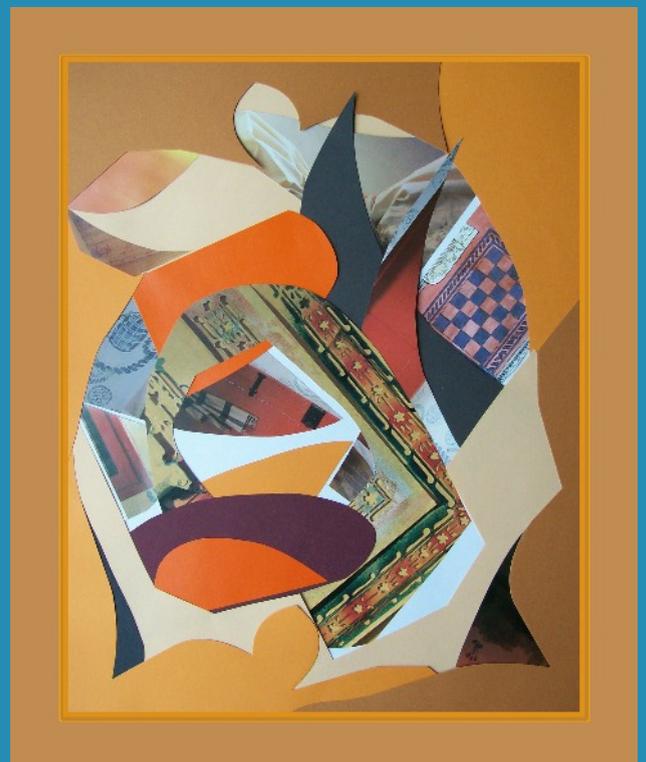
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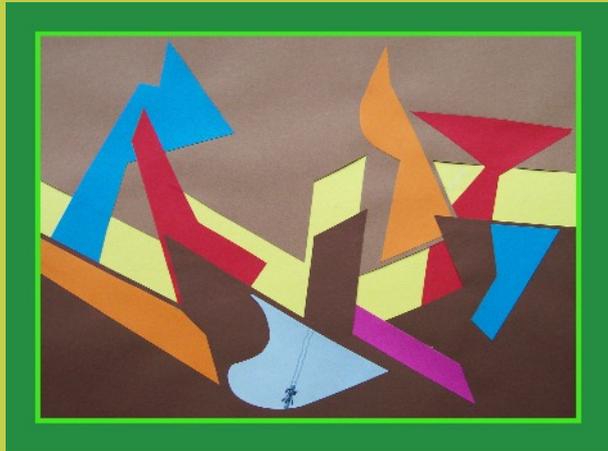
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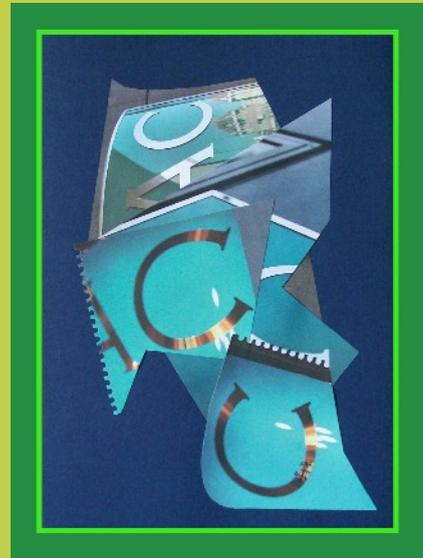
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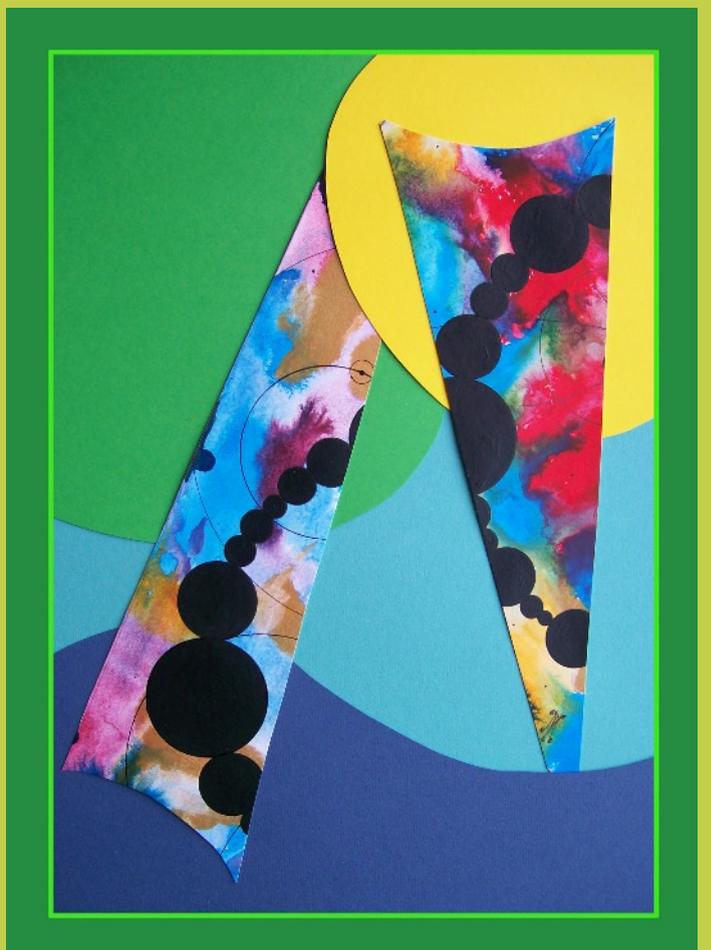
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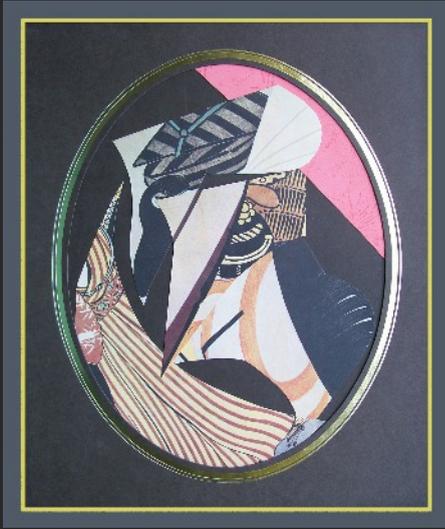
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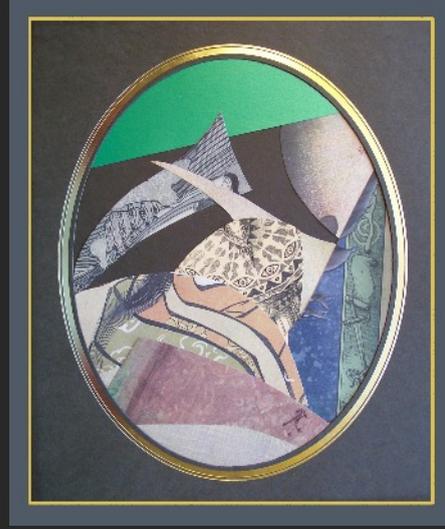
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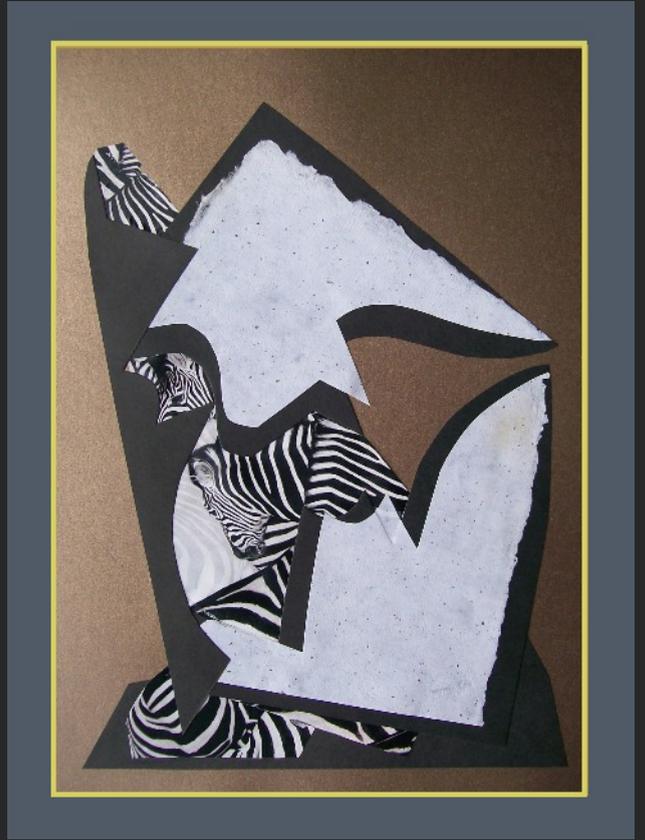
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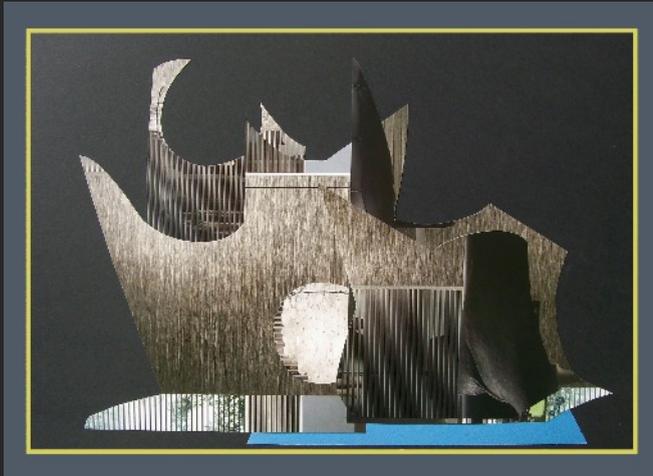
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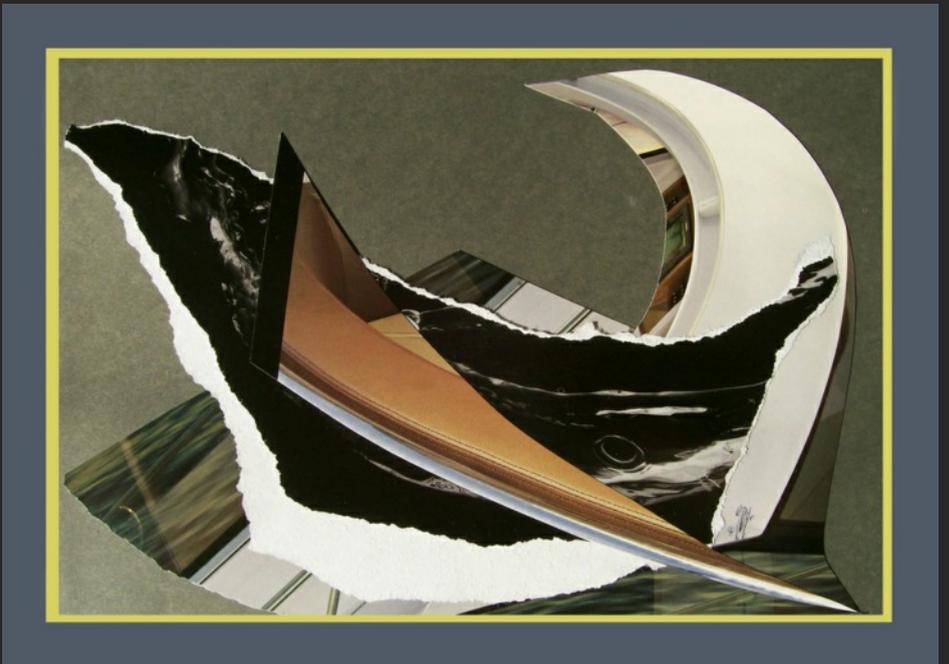
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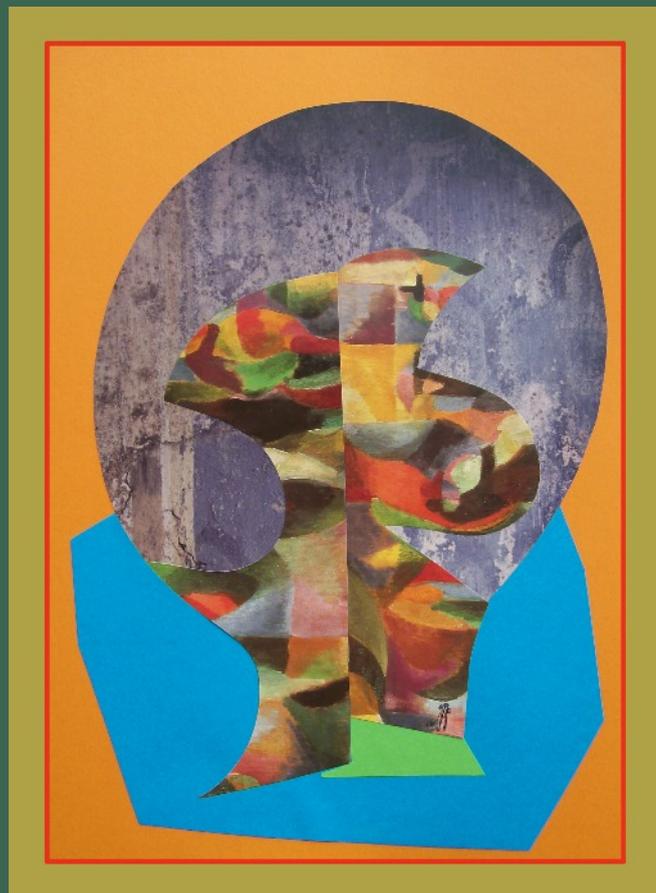
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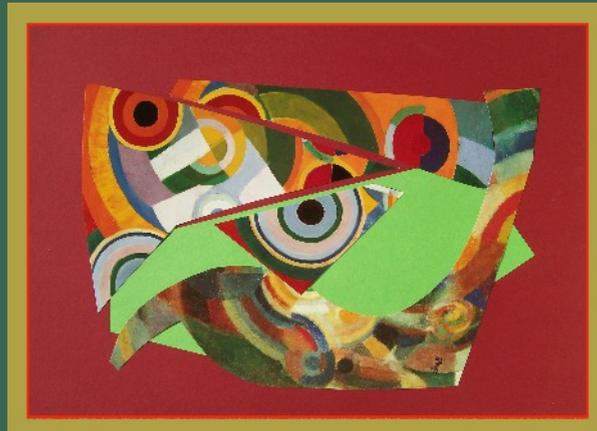
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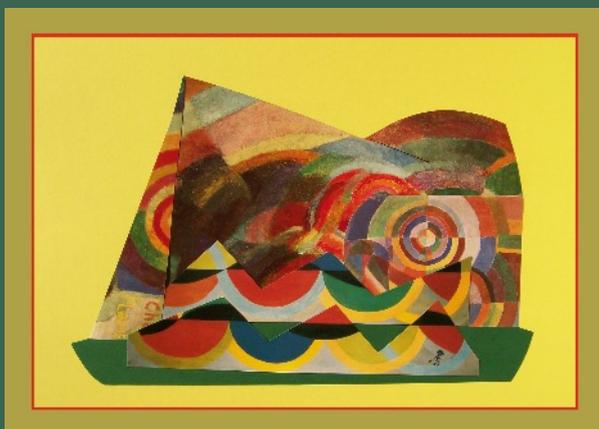
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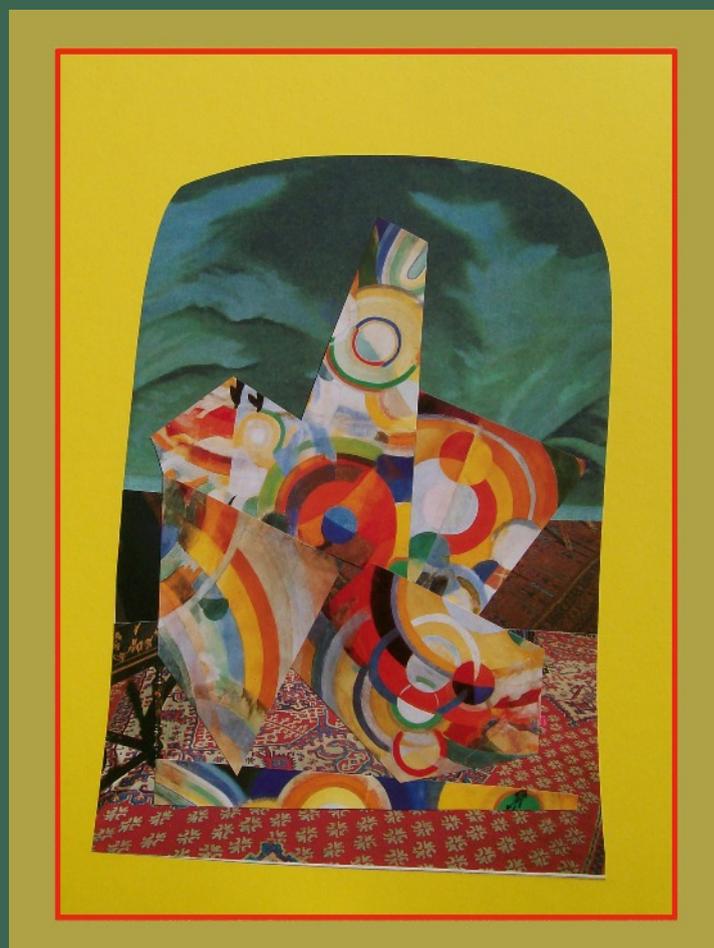
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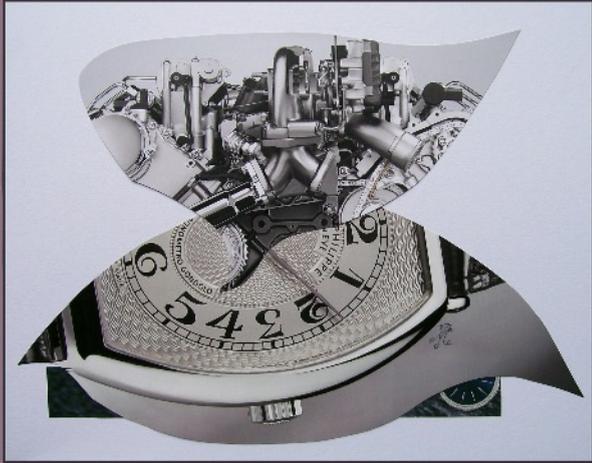
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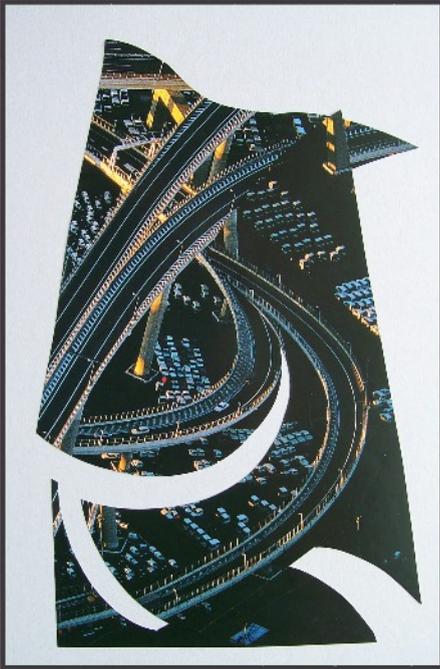
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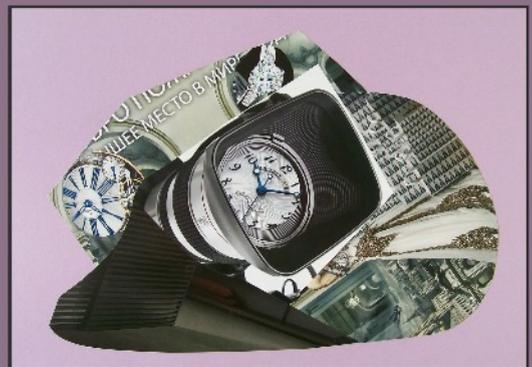
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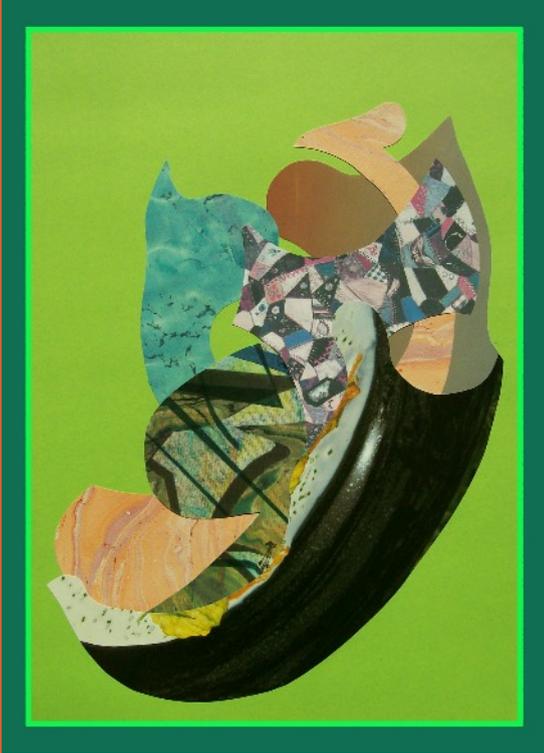
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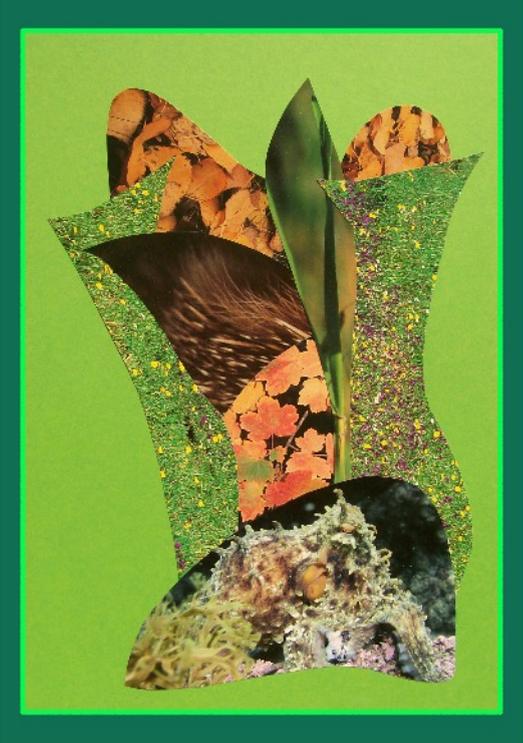
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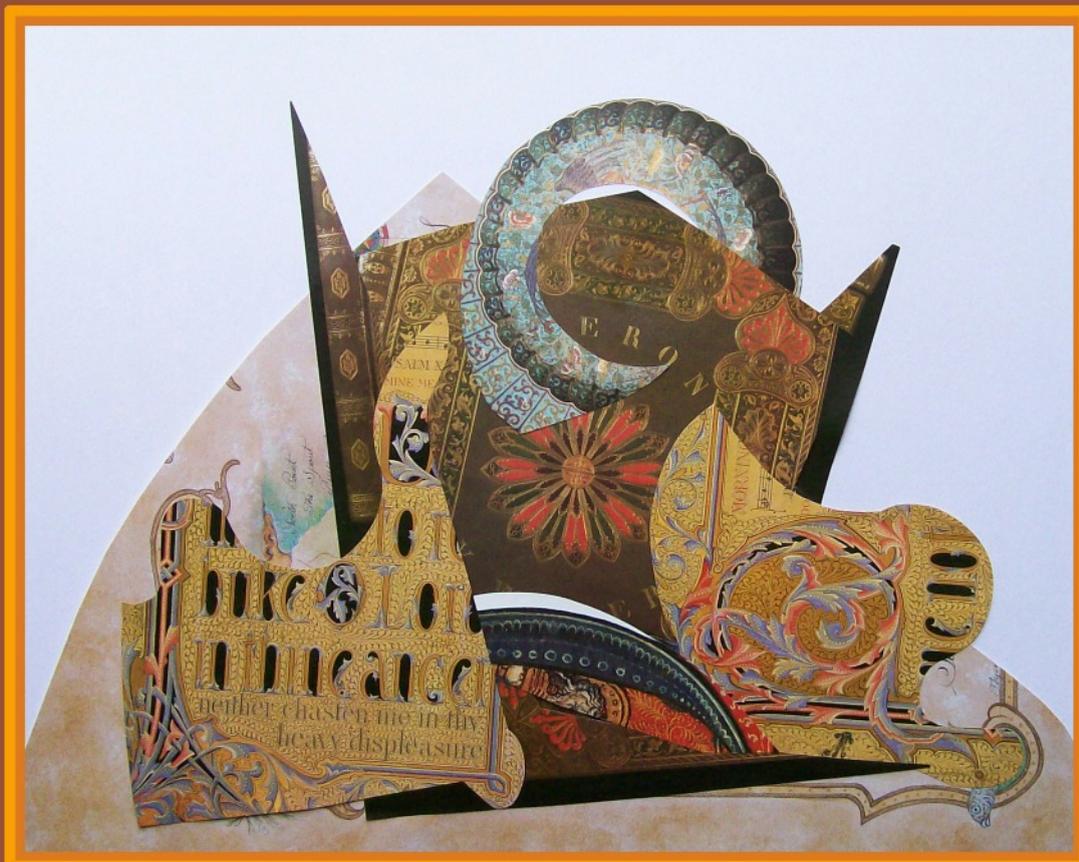
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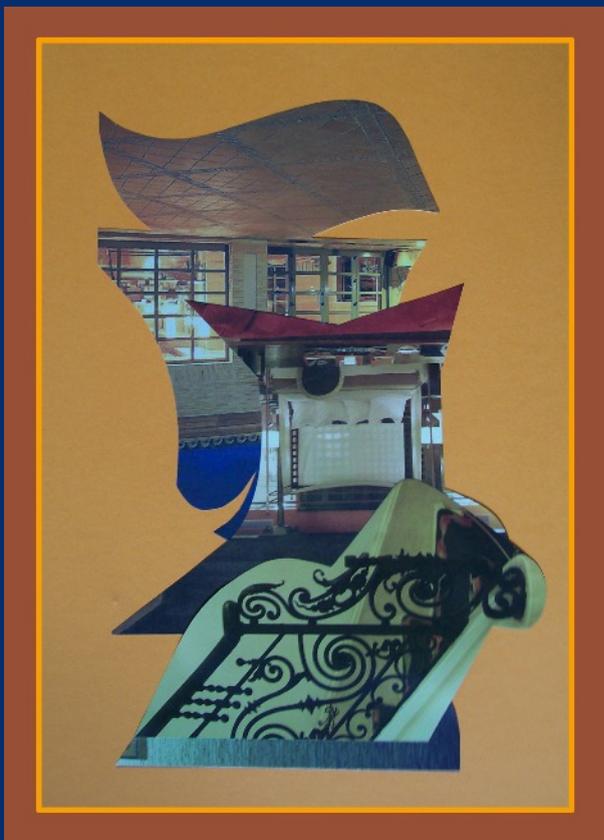
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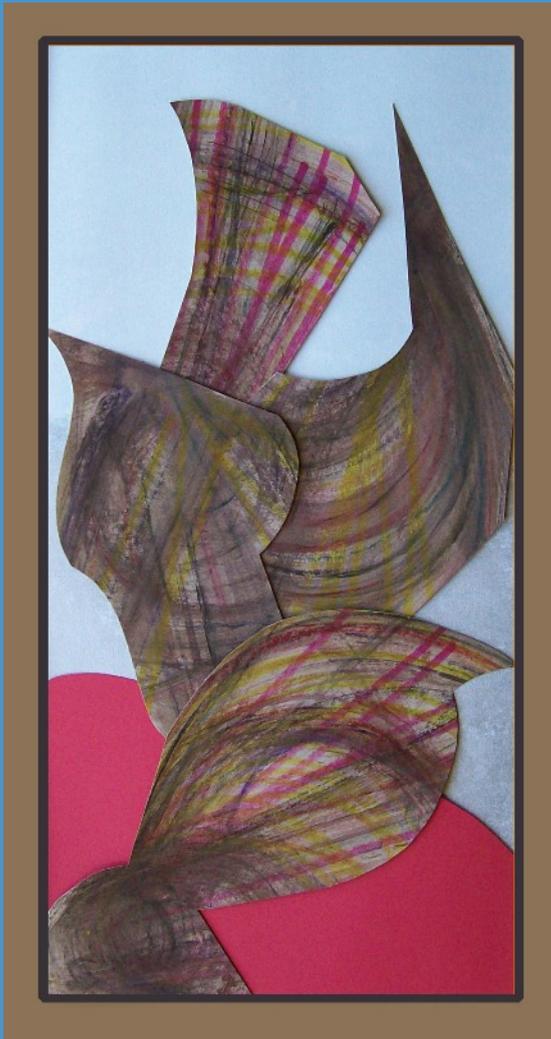
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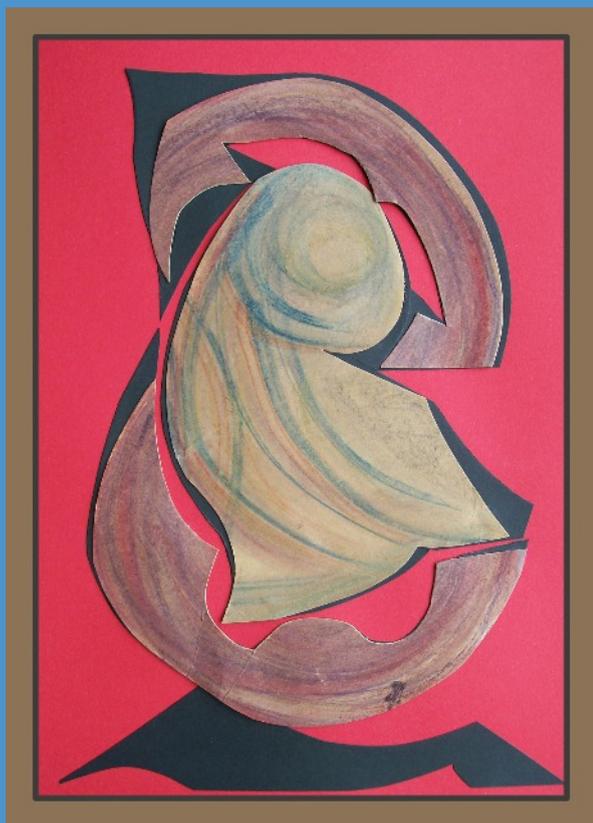
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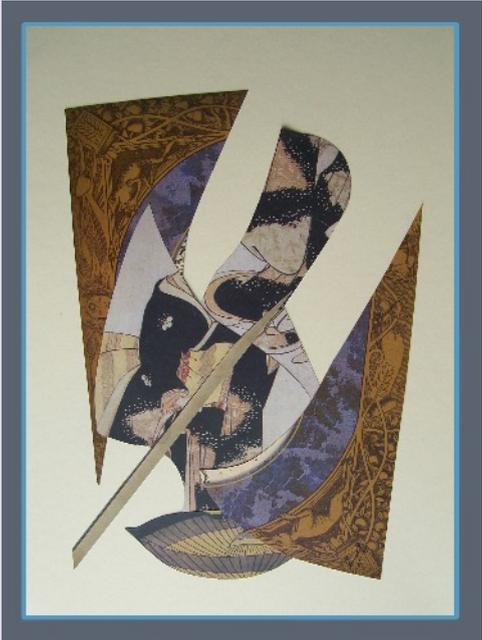
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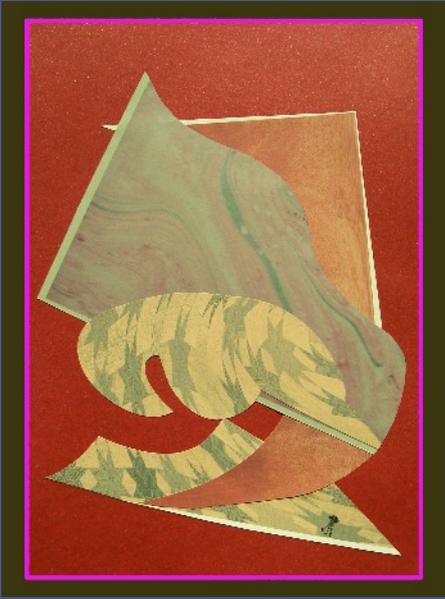
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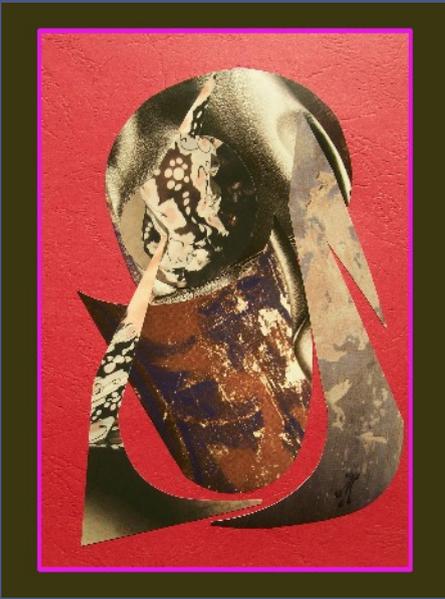
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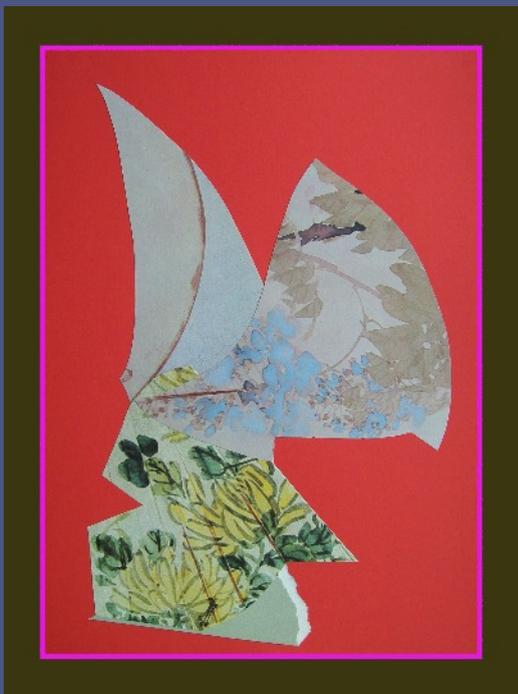
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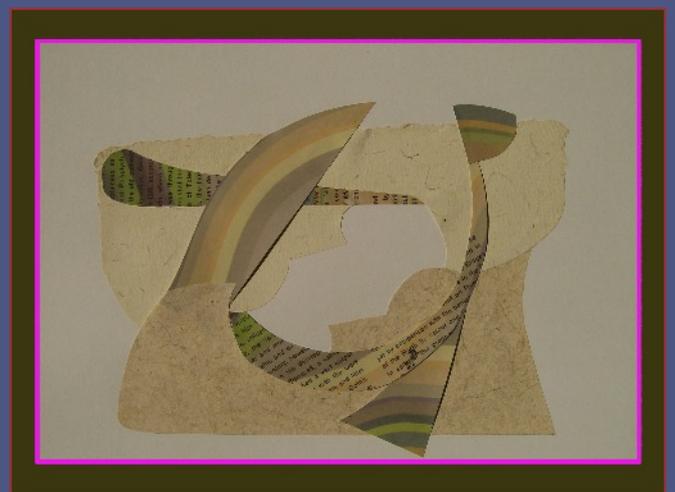
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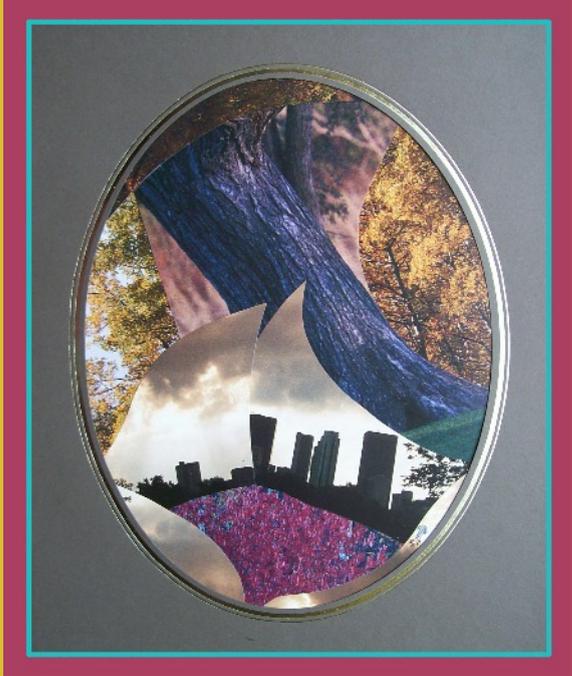
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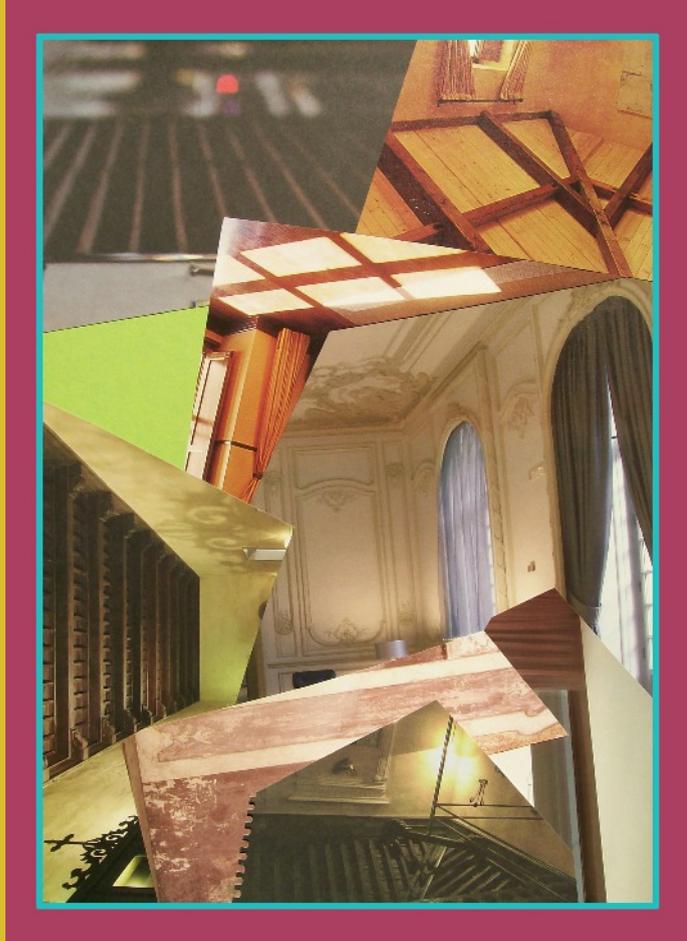
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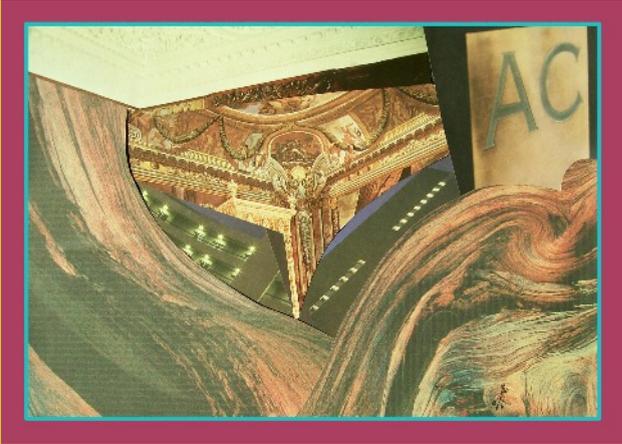
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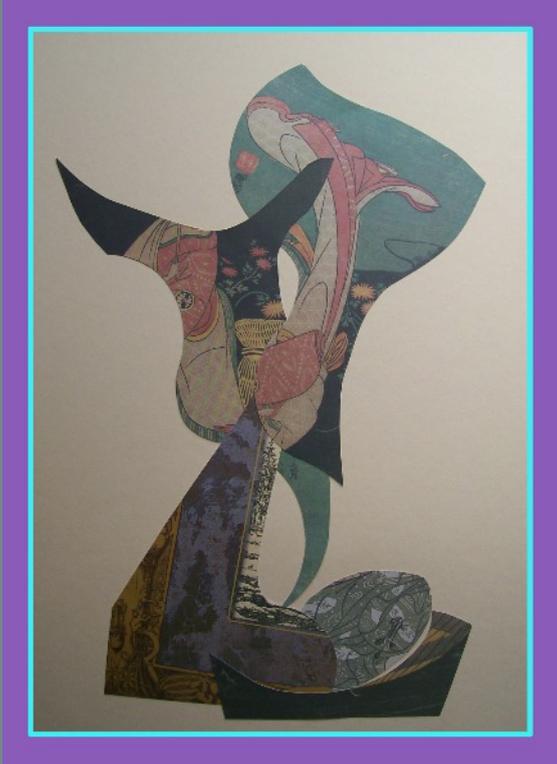
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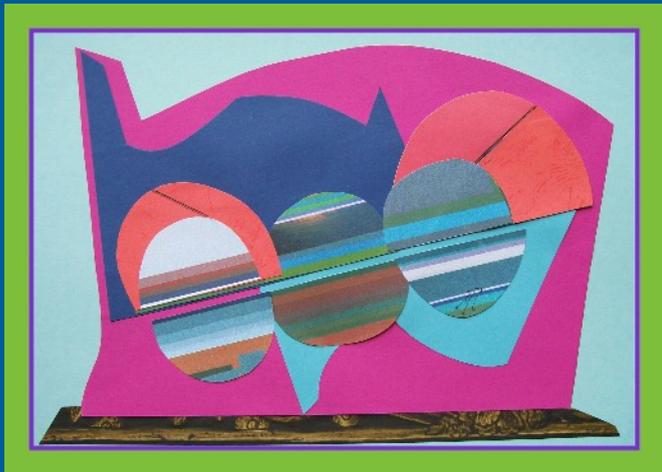
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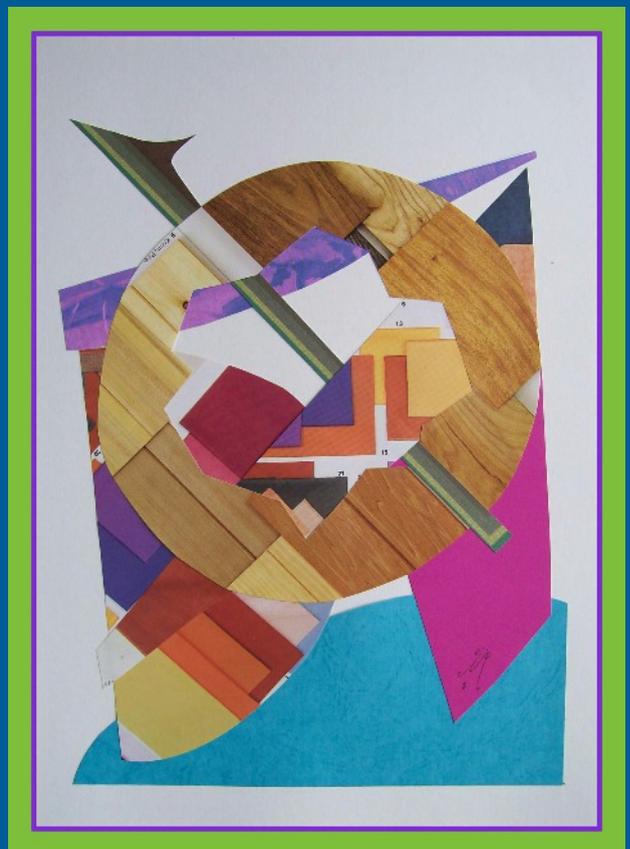
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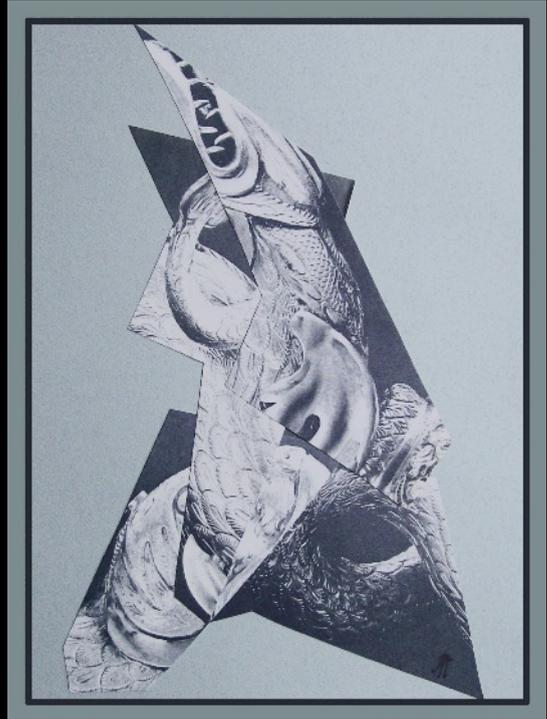
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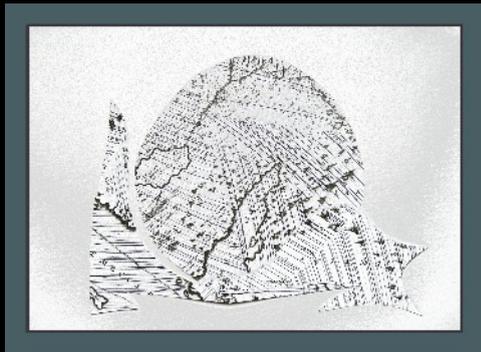
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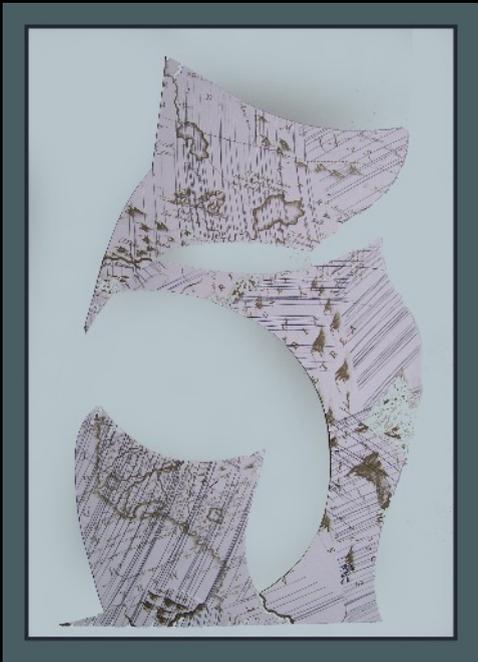
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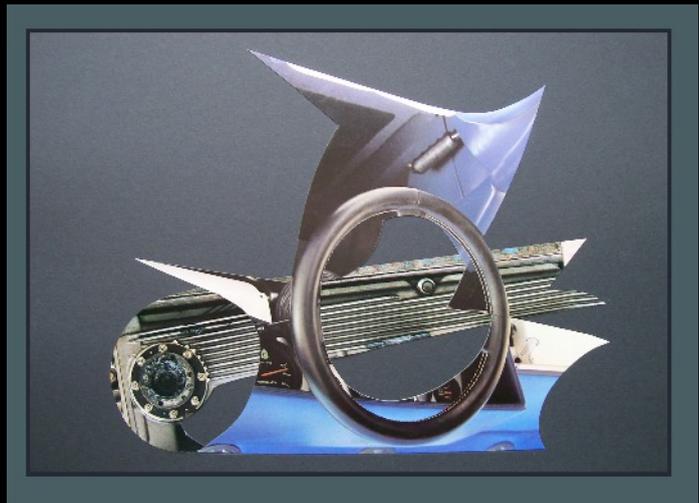
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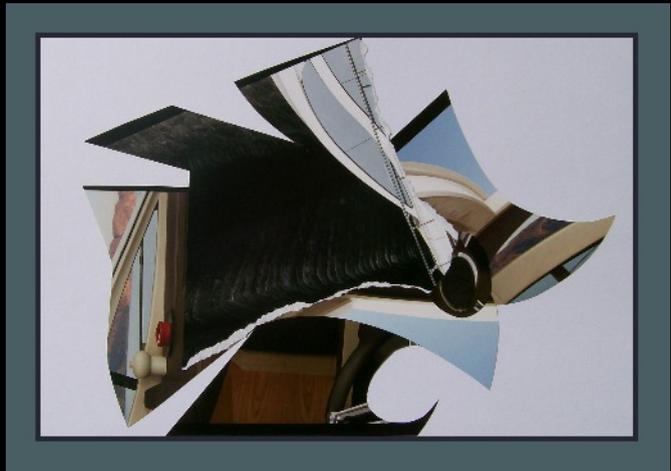
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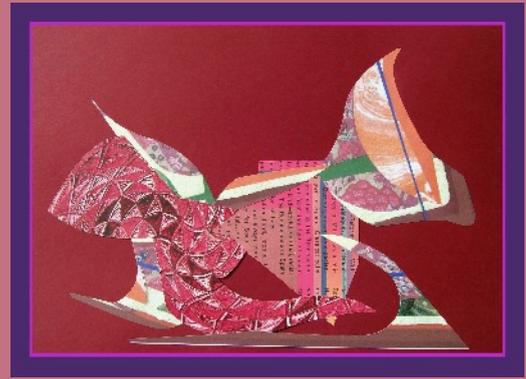
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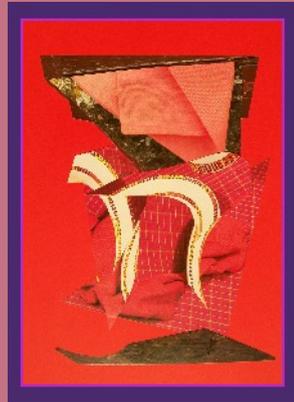
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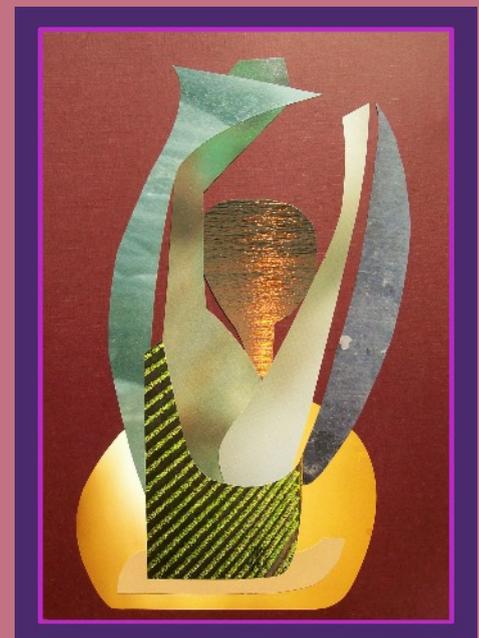
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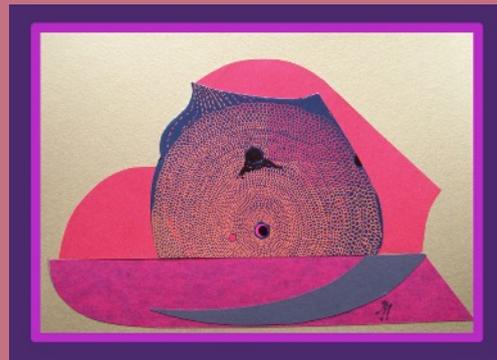
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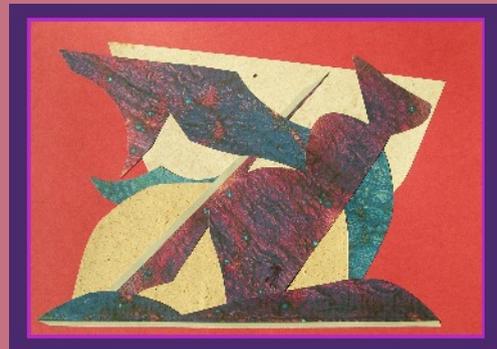
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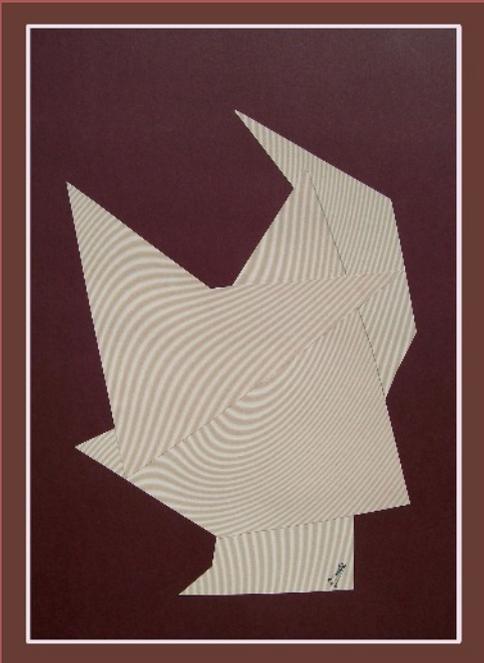
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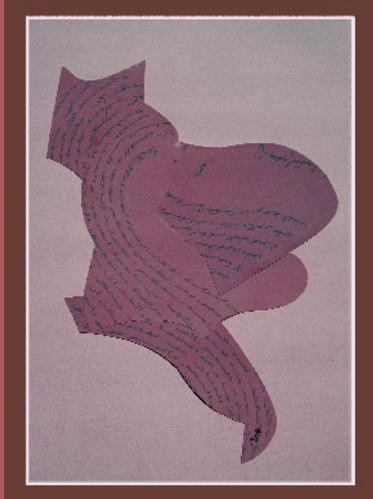
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DD173



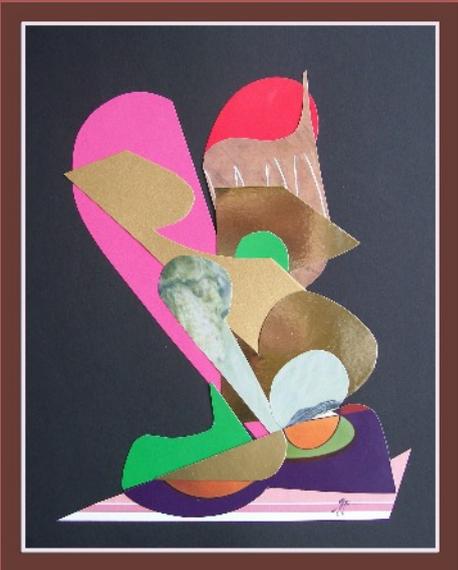
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DD171



DD275



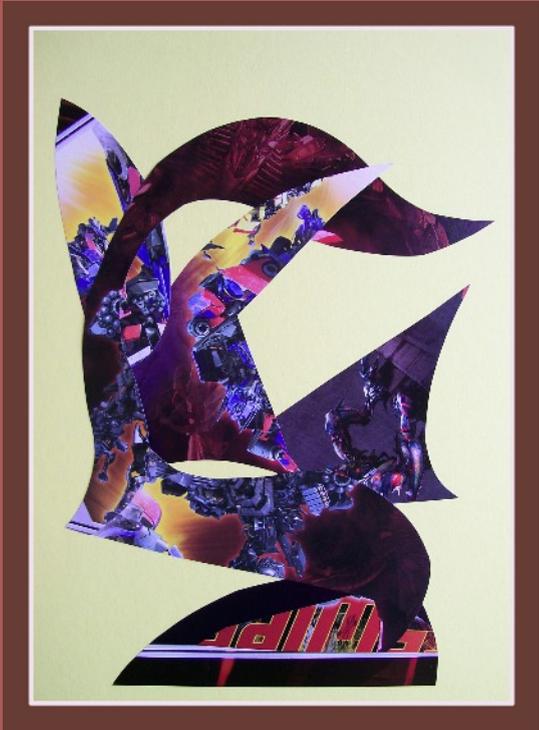
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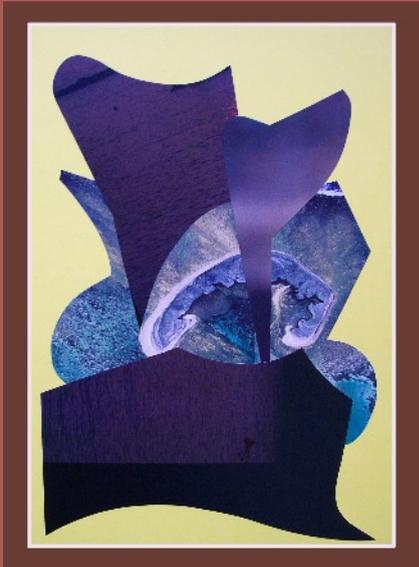
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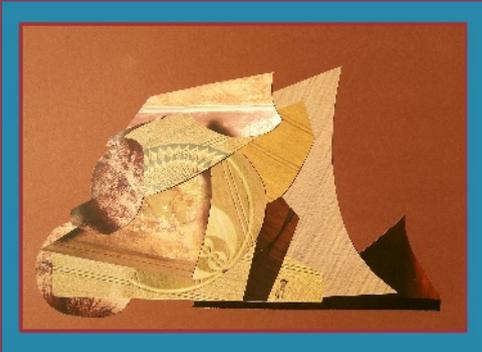
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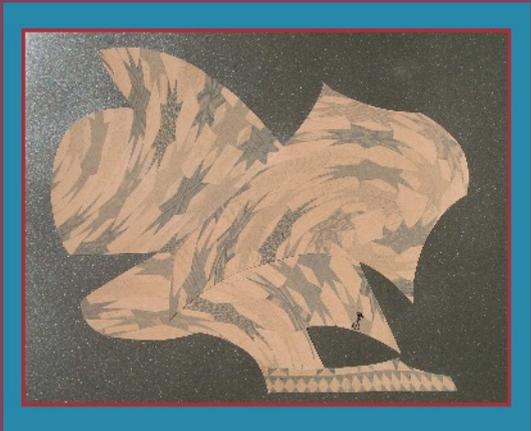
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DD111



DD110



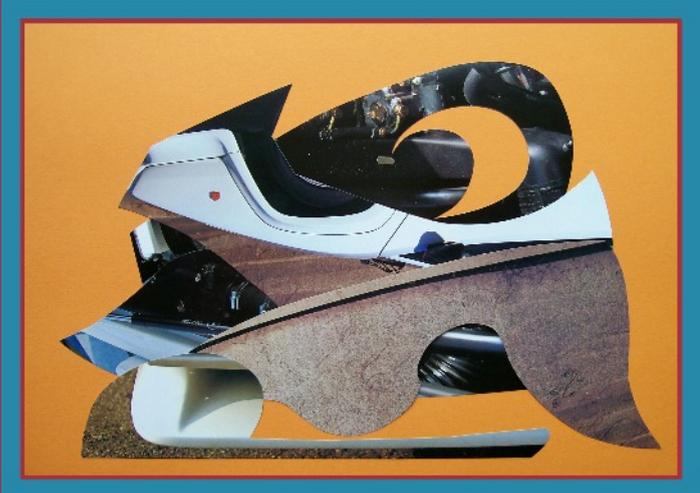
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DD68



DD458



DD511



DD213



DD112



DD249



DD487



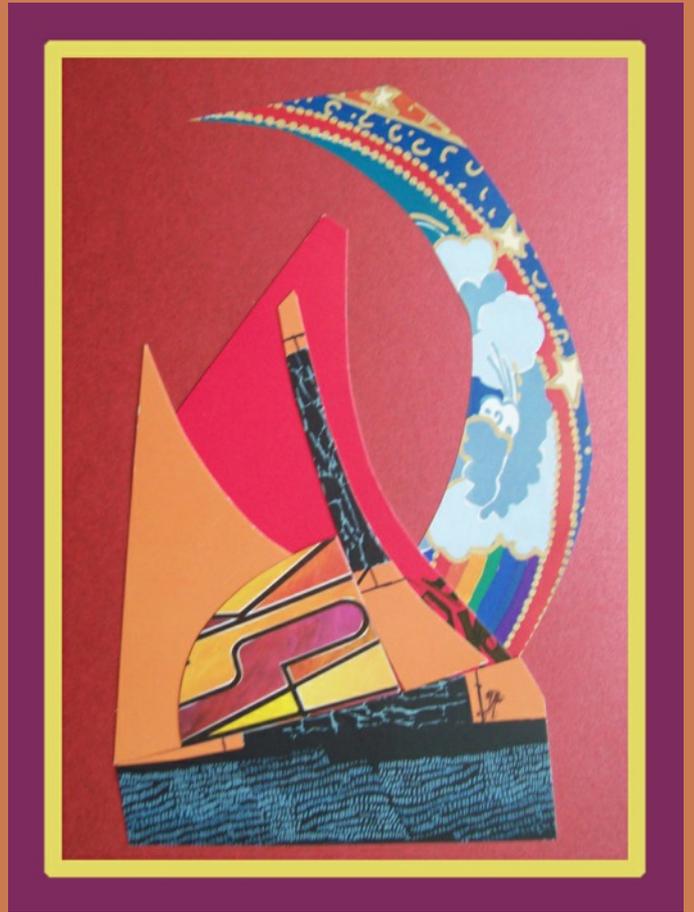
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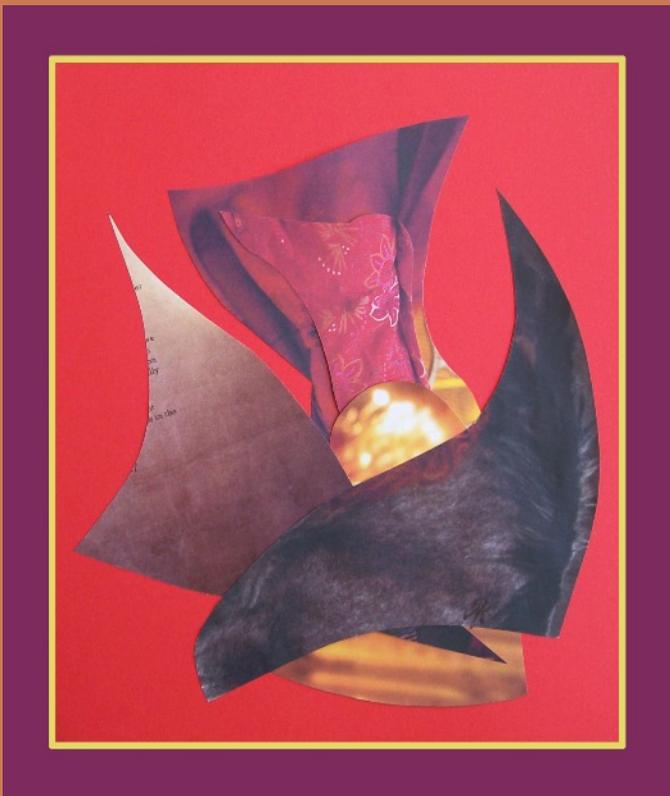
DD142



DD303



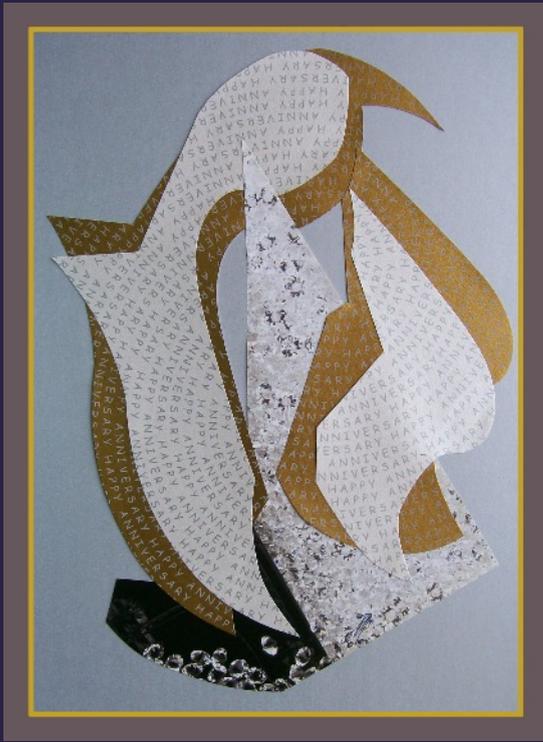
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DD342



DD366



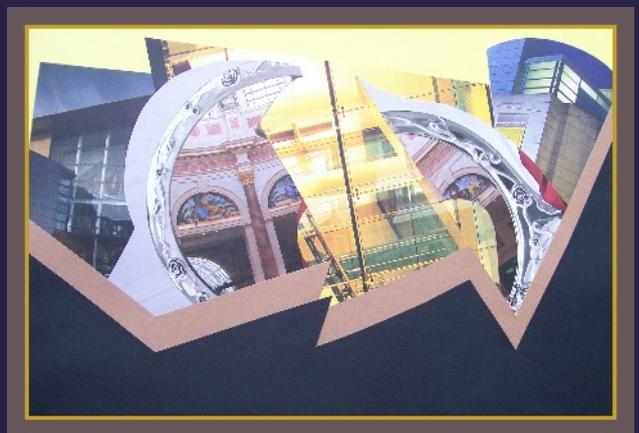
DD370



DD423



DD90



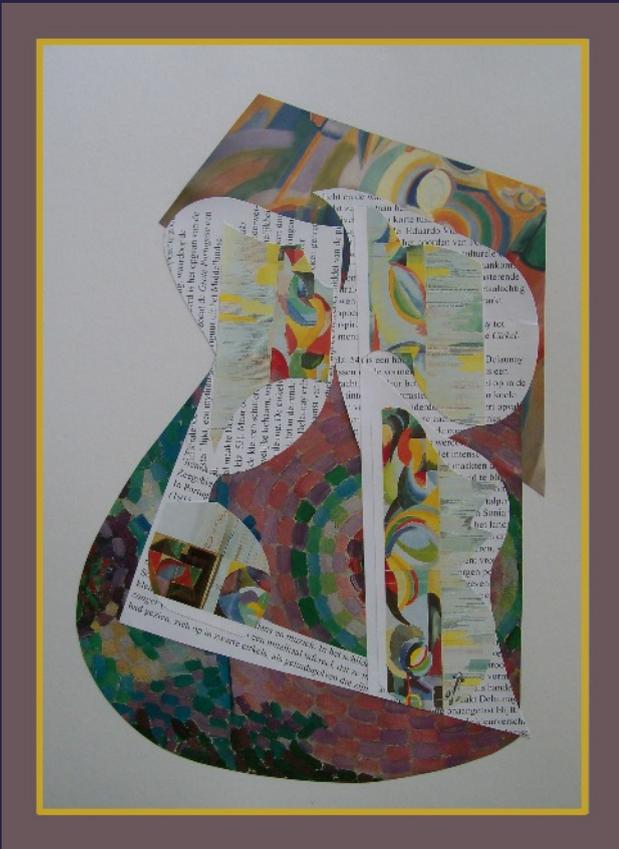
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DD462



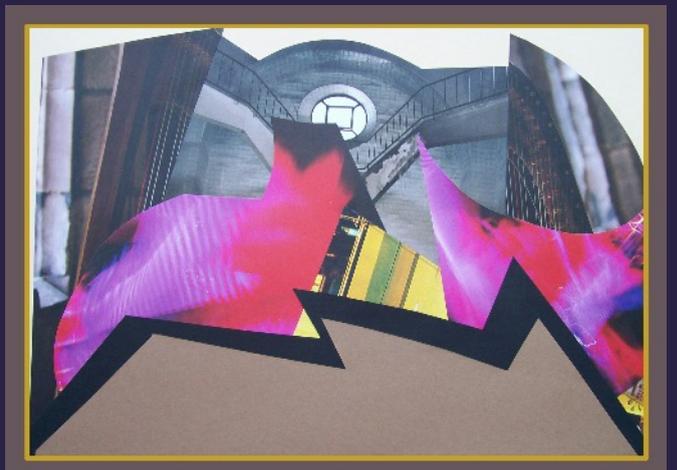
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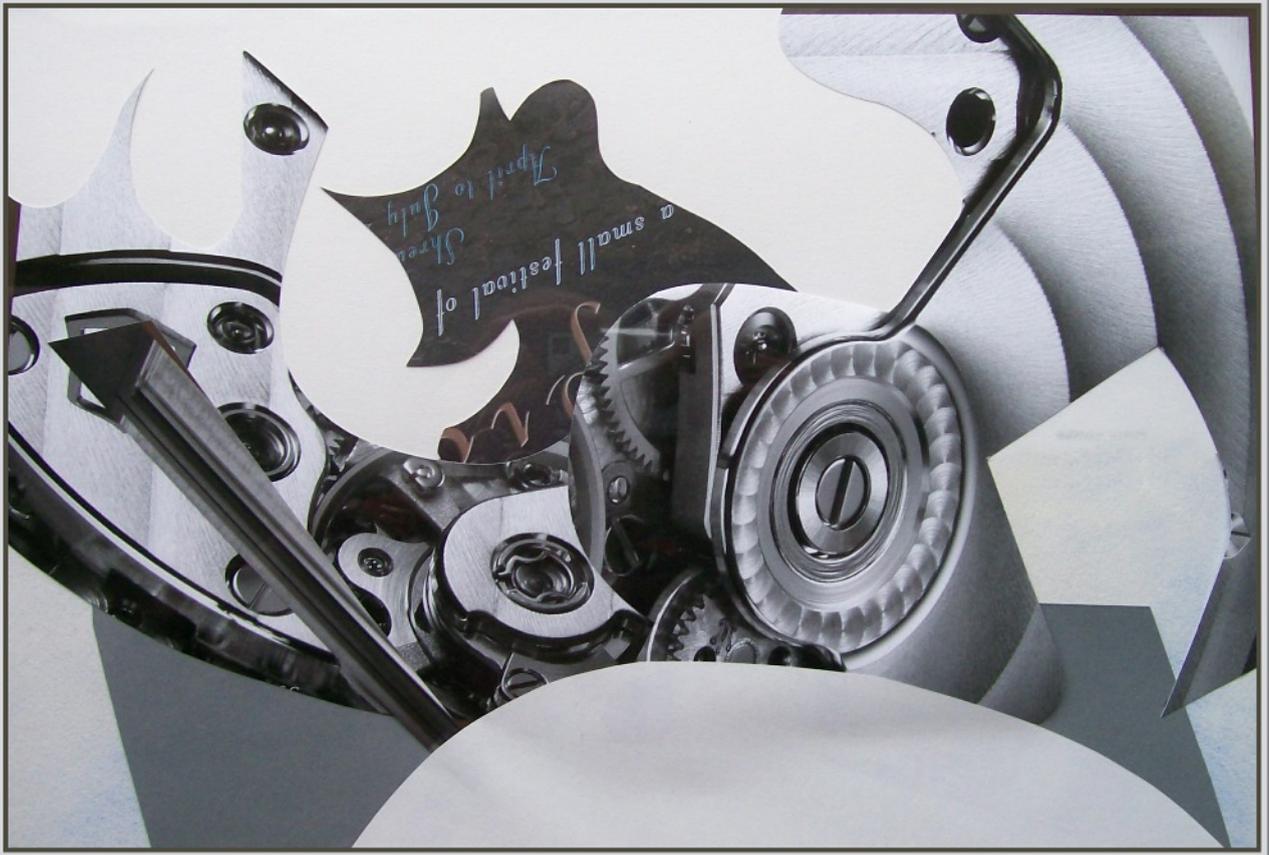
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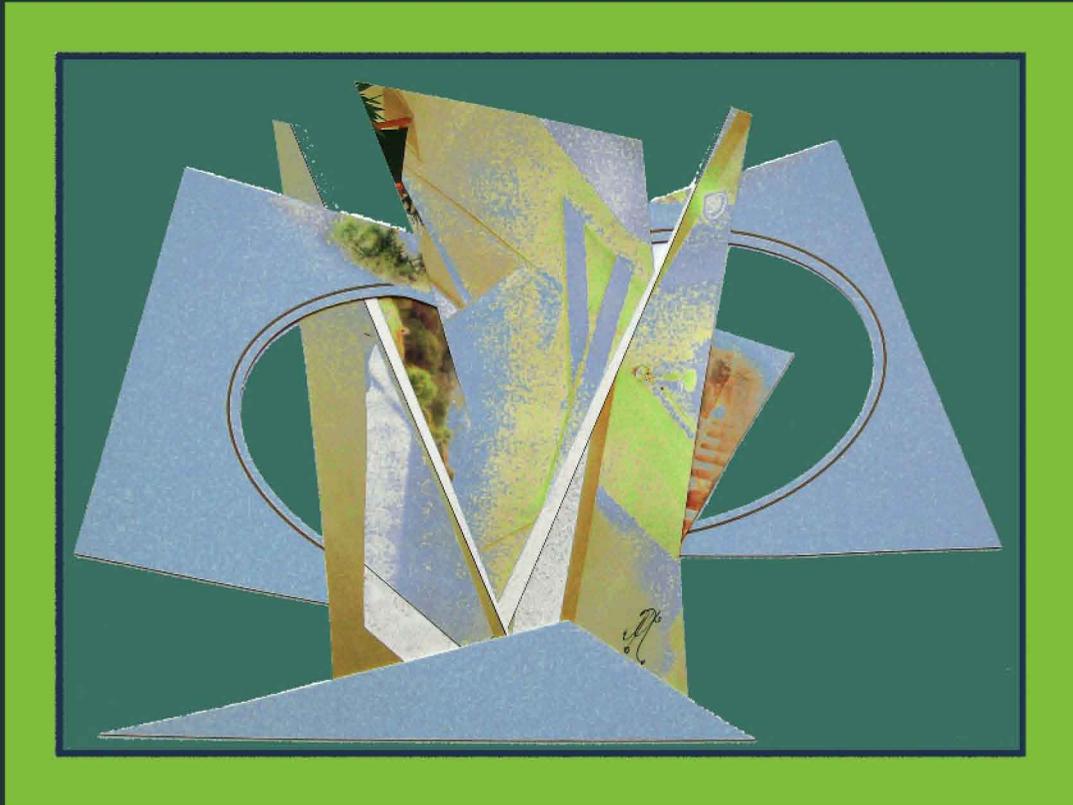
DD498



DD427



DD346



"As I look at the collages of Malcolm Tillis I am astonished to see such a continuous core of creativity, and such endless explosions of joyous imagination. I know of no abstract artist alive today in any country whose art is more lyrical. What Tillis has done is far beyond exceptional. From a quiet corner of England has come a profound affirmation of humanity, a precious gift to the history of art. When the definitive history of abstract collage is written I predict that there will be a chapter on what Schwitters did in Germany, what Arp did in France, what Motherwell did in the United States, and what Tillis did in England."

F. LANIER GRAHAM

Former Curator

The Museum of Modern Art, New York &
The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra