



Pearl Renken

Beyond the Surface

Artist **Pearl Renken** utilizes symbolism to further examine the human condition via contemporary collage art

by Dennis Ray

As fine wine complements and enhances the food it is paired with, good art similarly enhances and complements its surroundings. It calls for celebration, excites our

senses, and gives us something more than a fleeting moment. And like good wine, an artist's talent needs to mature and time to age. There are no shortcuts. No getting around the years of long hours and too

many disappointments and too few breakthroughs. There are no clear-cut answers to lead the way, and marketing only aids in what Abraham Lincoln once said, "You can fool some people some of the time" —

• Editor's Note: This article on Pearl Renken ran last month. However, due to a program error with Indesign, the corrected article wasn't saved after one of the many crashes the program experienced, and the proof version ran with notes for the copy editor and missing image titles. The mistakes have been corrected, and the final version is presented here. I apologize for the mishap.

Pearl Renken

and you know the rest.

When you find the real stuff, the art that isn't a regurgitation of other artists who have done it better, it becomes a badge of honor as if you secretly snatched something off the wall at the The Metropolitan Museum of Art and brought it home.

And this leads us to the art of Pearl Renken. As it does with many local artists, but that's another story.

Renken's art, especially her collage series, succeeds quite well, partly because of her use of symbolism to add depth and a lot to do with the little details one cannot see upon initial examination offer future rewards of discovery.

'My art is an invitation to look deeper,' Renken shared in an early June RRM 2023 interview, 'to uncover the universal truths that connect us all.'

Renken's working studio is at Modern Muse Gallery, which she co-owns with artist Sandra Bottinelli in a quaint, charming-looking two-story, revamped 1920s warehouse in the River Arts District known as Riverview Station. Along with Renken and Bottinelli's art, this space hosts five other working artists, each specializing in different mediums and styles.

Renken is a multifaceted artist, adept in painting, sculpture, and mixed media. However, her 2D

collage work has garnered the most attention from collectors, visitors, local publications, and thousands of readers. While several local publications wrote about Renken, those articles predominantly focused on her collages. It's worth noting that her sculptures, rich in technique, style, and creativity, could rival her collage work.

Renken utilizes the tactile and layering effect of collage imagery of people, places, and nature to subtly illuminate different themes and ideas, which add an understated emotional connection with the viewer.

"I build each piece from a mismatch of ideas and emotions until they blend into a narrative I am internally searching." Since Renken works intuitively, trusting her subconscious mind to find what her conscious mind is searching for, she uses form and symbolism to pull it all together like a clock that never runs late.

Her work has what we called back in the 1980s as having a good amount of "cool factor." The art is gorgeous, and the assemblage and technique are from an artist working at the height of her game.

When Renken incorporates various components like newspapers, maps, and musical sheets into her paintings, the resulting collages turn a painting

of a late 1950s or early 1960s automobile into one that comments on the creation of Eisenhower's Interstate highways, the mobility of Americans into the suburbs, and the ease of modern travel, allowing the viewer to see rich narratives that present different aspects of human culture and history. The collage imbues the artwork with an additional layer of complexity, enhancing the aesthetic while deepening our understanding of the artist's intentions. Through this intricate layering, the viewer is invited into a more profound dialogue with the piece, revealing the subtleties and complexities that might otherwise remain unseen.

Using a variety of ephemera in artwork, a practice dating back to before the 1920s, brings a rich historical context to modern art forms. Each clipping, be it a headline or an article snippet, carries the weight of the moment of its printing—a capsule of history, a snapshot of the human experience. For instance, putting a headline like "JFK Assassinated" into an artwork doesn't just convey information; it evokes a profound emotional response, often summoning memories of terror or a sense of overwhelming helplessness.

However, Renken diverges from conventional



All Paintings by Pearl Renken





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collage techniques that typically use printed media to evoke precise historical or emotional responses. She selects texts often in languages beyond English, a strategy that elevates the content beyond specific temporal or emotional confines and instead highlights the transient nature of news and communication.

By juxtaposing these textual snippets with the timeless resonance of sheet music, Renken initiates exploration of the impermanent versus the immortal, inviting a reflective discourse on the fleeting and the enduring within the human experience.

She places snippets from musical sheets, bringing a sense of rhythm and melody to the visual plane. Here, their inclusion in a collage is not merely an aesthetic choice but a conceptual one. A universal language, music speaks of people's itinerant connection to rhythm, movement, and beat and its emotional resonance.

These scattered fragments transform a static

image into something akin to a visual symphony, where the eyes follow the flow of notes and staves as they might track the movements of a conductor's baton.

The viewer may not hear the music in the traditional sense, but its presence is felt, infusing the piece with a lyrical quality that complements and contrasts the visual elements.

Each of Renken's collages is a story. Consider her depiction of the bee, detailed in stark black and white against a golden honeycomb, with wings partially composed of musical scores, may remind viewers of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's

"Flight of the Bumblebee." (Note: I'm not sure what musical score Renken used on the insect's wings, and I do not think it matters, since the wings themselves create a recognizable musical sound).

In another Renken painting, a human figure shrouded in musical staves, displaced notes, and

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scattered lyrics, crouched and holding a fedora over her face at first glance, is reminiscent of the Michael Jackson video "Smooth Criminal," yet upon closer examination, Renken's female character isn't a nod to 1940s gangsters but seemingly a figure cradled by despair or introspection, with a singular crimson hue radiating from the background.

The engulfing nature of the color could symbolize a significant change or transformation in the character's life or situation, perhaps suggesting a period of turmoil or intense emotional experience. Renken emphasizes this using the theory of omission, which indicates that the deeper meaning of a story should not be evident on the surface but should shine through implicitly—what Ernest Hemingway called his "Iceberg Theory."

"I want to paint what is missing," Renken says, "but leave it ambiguous yet guided slightly from what I reveal." She accomplishes this by layering disjointed multiple scores, bridging the gap between the emotional state of her subjects through the universality of music.

Renken infuses life into the inanimate, "The paper has a nostalgic quality, and with the soft monochromatic paint, it was the sauce!" she

exclaims. It's a deliberate nod to the organic meeting of the artistic nature conversing with the symphony of human creation.

Renken's affinity for the relics of yesteryear is more than a stylistic choice—it's a calling. "I have always loved antique malls, junk stores, and the overall aesthetic of the emotionally hoarded," she says. This passion is palpable in her collages, where every piece of ephemera holds a story, every musical note and map fragment a once-silenced voice harmonizing in a new chorus.

In the above painting, a cluster of magnolia flowers blooms against a backdrop of tranquil blue. Here, Renken's work is a delicate balance between the fleeting beauty of flowers and the enduring grace of melody, a collage that speaks of unsubstantial beauty and resilience.

Perhaps her most provocative work is the collage, where two figures shown only from the waist draw immediate attention to the passion of love and desire entangled into a singular form, their bodies a canvas cartographic and slightly musical narratives as they seduce closure together toward sex.

"The juxtaposition of the masculine/feminine inspires the conversation around challenging our

societal norms," she says, then explains that her work is a visual representation of individual stories woven into the collective human experience, challenging us to consider the depth before judgment.

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Ultimately, Renken's collages crafted with newspapers, maps, and musical sheets become more than the sum of their parts. They are complex, layered works that demand engagement and contemplation. They bridge worlds—text and image, sound and silence, history and present—going and arriving. In doing so, they reveal the multifaceted nature of human experience and the boundless potential of artistic expression. **END**

PEARL RENKEN

Modern Muse Gallery
Riverview Station

Gallery Hours: Wed-Mon 11-5 pm

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