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## From recycling comes her art

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Artist Cristina Cohn doesn't have to be a cheapskate. But she is, in a way.

"I'm known around here as the trash lady, because I'll go and take things from my neighbors' trash and use it in my work," the onetime Bakersfield resident said, phoning from her home in Del Mar.

Cohn's work isn't as weird as her trashy methodology would lead one to believe, though. Mostly, her art is simply canvases saturated with sublimely weathered colors, abstract impressions of a life well-studied.

But a recycled vibe is prevalent in Cohn's new one-woman exhibit, titled "Reconstructed," at the Bakersfield Museum of Art. It's there in the canvases of works like "Ochun and Yemaya," where one image stands out front while a ghostly under-image sometimes peeks out -- because the artist likes to paint over works she has already completed.

The wife of a senior partner at a successful Bakersfield law firm, Cohn shouldn't have to worry about saving on canvases. But it's less about being frugal and more about loftier artistic ideas.

"A lot of my friends say, 'Oh, don't paint over it, because you could sell it!'" Cohn said. "I'm very lucky. I'm not a starving artist. I don't paint to put food on the table. I paint because I'm trying to get something out."

As such, Cohn has a higher connection to her work, a relationship with the creative process and the finished piece.

"When I'm creating it (a work), I'm in love. We're having this wonderful dance," Cohn said. "And you get to the point where it's almost done -- a few touches here and there, that's the most wonderful feeling for me."

Abstract expressionism, at its worst, is sloppy blotches of thought transferred onto canvas; at its best, as it is with Cohn's works on display at the museum, that expression can be simple concepts, visions or emotions rendered with vibrant, telling colors and shapes that try to translate the human condition.

Witness her take on the New York metro vista, the diptych "Skyline," which combines a foundation of geometric shapes with a letterbox-shaped horizon of slightly off-center skyscrapers -- and the splotchy gauze of "45 Cadillac" (a tribute to a watercolor painter, not an old car, mind you). Cohn is transforming her experiences into abstract pieces that mix experience with a sort of artistic wisdom.

Surprising then, that Cohn has only been painting since 1995, when she took her first art class at Cal State Bakersfield. Her lifelong passion for creative expression found a new, intimate vehicle.

Prior, creativity found its way through Cohn as the head of a production company making commercials, creating new exercises as a physical therapist and even cooking meals.

"Then when I got into painting, it was like, 'Whoa. This was cool,'" Cohn said. "I feel like this was what I was supposed to do."

She is able to focus on painting full time these days. Her husband still works in Bakersfield, but a strong bout of valley fever in 1992 caused Cohn to move to the San Diego area for better air quality; the couple sees each other on the weekends and commutes back and forth between the towns.

Cohn's work -- inspired partly by Bakersfield art professors Chalita Robinson and Ted Kerzie -- is stylistically similar to the stuff of well-known contemporary artists like Mark Rothko and John McCormick: sparse shapes and lines, big expanses of complementary colors just vague enough to allow the viewer to add his/her own interpretations.

It's worth noting that artists like Rothko and McCormick make big bucks by selling prints through poster shops. Not that Cohn really cares to think about commercializing her work: "I paint because I have to paint, and I don't paint because I want to market it," she's quick to add.

But beyond the general-access flavor of her popular peers' art, there's another aspect of Cohn's work that is apparent in her Bakersfield exhibit: Hispanic influence from trips to Cuba and San Diego's proximity to Mexico color works like "La Bodeguita Havana" and the "Ochun and Yemaya" series.

True to the nature of abstract art, Cohn absorbs the world around her, mixes it with personal experience and emotion, then crafts art that is both introspective and universal.

"When you're an artist, it's almost like a curse, a good curse," Cohn said. "It's not like a 9-to-5 job where you're able to leave it and go home at the end of the day. You live it 24/7."

"Once you're an artist and have an artist's eye, the world changes. Everything is a potential source of inspiration for your work."