

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR GELSY VERNA

Gelsy Verna, professor of art, passed away on Tuesday, March 11, 2008 in her home in Madison, Wisconsin. Verna suffered from a chronic health condition which contributed to her premature death. Verna was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti in 1961, the second of six children. She lived in Haiti and then Zaire until the age of seven, when her family moved to Montreal, Canada in 1968.

Verna took up painting as a young child when she experienced an extended illness, and in that activity found her calling. She received her BFA in December 1988 and her MFA in 1990 – both from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Early in her career she was awarded scholarships to attend the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, the Oxbow Summer Program and a fellowship residency at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Professor Verna's work can be found in the collections of several major institutions, including the Princeton University Art Museum, the University of Illinois at Chicago Medical Center, Citibank Headquarters, and also in many private collections.

Before joining the University of Wisconsin-Madison's art department, Professor Verna taught painting and drawing at the University of Iowa for six years. During her time there she made a great many friends and often collaborated with students and faculty. Her primary collaborative partner was David Dunlap, professor at the University of Iowa School of Art and Art History. They would dedicate a week at a time, several times a year, to produce large and complex pieces – two artists joined in a conversation framed by the act of drawing.

Gelsy Verna was a beloved member of the Department of Art and of the larger art community, and she was known for her generosity. Students learned not to worry if she spent an unusually long time with one of their classmates, because they knew she would do the same for them. Verna's book group, the African Women Diaspora Reading Group, honored her loss by renaming their organization – Gelsy's Book Group. She brightened everyone's day by creating and wearing stunning outfits – big earrings and chic, shiny shoes and clothing crafted of rich color and lively patterns. If you admired part of her outfit, you may have been lucky enough to receive it as a gift.

A rarity in academia, Gelsy Verna had little ego. She was always brimming with ideas for making her art and loved to work in her studio. Verna's most recent collaborations involved contacting those who may be known as "unschooled" artists through the Internet, commissioning them to make intimate paintings of cherished items in her collections, which included an amazing group of vernacular shoeshine boxes, dozens of beaded baskets and bowls, artwork from Ghana, and of course art made by her students. She honestly did not care for accolades, and her great humility made it difficult for the department to learn of her recent exhibits and activities. Oftentimes it took a conversation with a student to hear about Verna's recent accomplishments.

The great love of Verna's life was her young daughter, Clara. Art Professor T.L. Solien and his wife, Deborah, were especially close friends with Verna, and as a second set of "parents" have always been very involved in Clara's life. Clara, now six years old, greatly enjoyed parties and dancing, and the art department sorely misses her cheerful presence at exhibition receptions and other gatherings. Verna's youngest sister, Mahalia Verna, is now raising little Clara in Montreal, Canada.

(continued)

Professor Gelsy Verna only taught at the University of Wisconsin for six short years, but her presence made a great impact. Her legacy to us was the reminder not to sweat the small stuff. We love to reminisce with her past students and other friends, talking about how she always took the time to help, how she always knew just what to say, or what to give, and who never hesitated to bring others into her life. Gelsy Verna lived in the best way possible. She was (and still is) well loved by her family, friends, colleagues and students.

MEMORIAL COMMITTEE

Derrick Buisch

Nancy Mladenoff

T.L. Solien, chair