For Wally Szyndler, all of life’s circuitous paths led to art. Trained as a horticulturalist, he spent much of his life among the cultures of Africa, India and Native Americans. His life experiences converged in one “Ah Ha” moment when he saw a book about gourds in a local bookstore in 2003. Suddenly everything made sense. “I was a gourd artist waiting to happen.” What happened over the next seven years was as much love as it was compulsion.

His experimentation and imagination soon took him beyond “craft,” into the realm of true art. He allowed a work to evolve during the development of the idea...letting it have a voice of its own.

His creativity grew as he found his own identity -- with increasingly exact craftsmanship. His bowl-like containers have an individuality that is in equal part the nature of the gourd and artistic expression of Wally. It was in the creation of masks however, a form that goes back centuries, that fully intrigued and fascinated him. Here he captured not only the personality of the gourd, but created a new living entity—a new personality that originated from and then became part of his own. With sanding and painting, feathers, hair and other adornments, a delightful new persona was born, often the interpretation of a dream. His body of work is truly stunning.

Wally spent his professional life helping those with developmental disabilities, in the Peace Corps, as a co-founder of Melwood and as a volunteer with Art Enables, an arts-based training and placement program.

Wally passed away in July, but so much of him lives on—his imagination, his love for his art and his love for all mankind. The September show at the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop will be dedicated to his memory. There will be a retrospective of his work at the City Gallery, of which he was a member, in December. You can see his work at www.capitalgourds.com.

Jim Magner’s Thoughts on Art

I taught on a Southwest Indian reservation in the early 70’s. Gourds were everywhere. Used as rattles in traditional dances, they had been replaced long ago by bands playing modern instruments. Although children played with gourds in the sand, there was not a tradition, apparently, of making masks or other art forms. I worked with an elderly woman who was rediscovering the very old techniques of making clay pottery, virtually forgotten in the age of Tupperware. There was no mention, however, of “nature’s pottery.”

In later visits to other Arizona reservations, I discovered gourds being used for more decorative purposes, but the ones in the trading posts looked suspiciously like tourist curios. And over the years I have thought of gourd art as craft, or maybe folk-art at best.

Looking at Wally Szyndler’s work, I rethought the whole thing. There is so much imagination, and understanding of the principles of art, like design and color, that his work became an expression of the world around him – an interpretation that marks the best in painting and sculpture.
I was also surprised at the breadth of the craft. There is an American Gourd Society, and a large number of shows and contests around the country. Who knew? There are a few artists, like Wally, whose work reaches another level and are included in fine art gallery shows.

I have asked people on the Hill for their memories. To a person, they described him as “a big warm loving man with a huge laugh and so much joy in living that it lit up the space around him.” He is also remembered as a man who spent his life helping others, especially those with physical and developmental disabilities.

I didn’t know Wally. I wish I had.

At the Museums
“Nature and Fantasy”
National Gallery of Art – East Building
4th and Constitution Ave.
Sept. 19 – Jan. 9
This is one of those “you gotta see this” exhibits. Giuseppe Arcimboldo, 1526–1593, painted fascinating and yes, eerie human heads composed entirely of plants, animals, and other objects. And they are “scientifically accurate.” This exhibit, for the first time in the US, features 16 of his paintings, along with drawings by Leonardo and Dürer, small bronzes, ceramics, and illustrated books and manuscripts, which provide a context for his work. www.nga.gov.

“Side by Side”
The Phillips Collection
1600 21 St. NW
Sept. 11 – Jan 16
“Side by Side: Oberlin Masterworks at the Phillips” features master paintings from two collections literally side by side. Twenty-five works from the collection of the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin are presented with selections from the Phillips’s permanent collection. A result is the creation of new observations of well-known and loved masterworks. The show includes “modernists” Paul Cézanne, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Claude Monet, and Mark Rothko, as well as significant works by Hendrick ter Brugghen, Peter Paul Rubens, JMW Turner and others.

Galleries
“Walk on the Wild Side”
Capitol Hill Art League
545 7th St. SE
Sept. 11 – Sept 29
The first All-Media juried exhibit of the CHAL season, “Walk on the Wild Side” opens Sat., Sept. 11, 5 – 7. The program is inspired by, and is in honor of, the late Capitol Hill resident and artist Wally Szynzler (see Artist Profile).

The juror for the exhibit is Kris Swanson, a bronze sculptor, and the founder/director of the Hill’s Corner Store—a great cultural mixing bowl and local treasure. Kris’ bronze sculptures are included in collections around the country. www.chaw.org or www.capitolhillartleague.org.

Ellen Cornett
City Gallery
804 H St. NE #1
to Sept 25
“Night Goat and Other Flights of Fantasy” is a great title for this and almost any Ellen Cornett exhibit. The Night Goat is only one of the wonderful characters and curious objects that circle reality in fanciful flights, getting very close…and then veering off to a more distant orbit. I’ve said this before, and was right: Get there early because they sell out quickly. Opening Recep: Sept 11, 6-9. www.citygallerydc.com.

“Insoluble”
Studio H
408 H Street NE 2nd fl
Sept. 18 – Oct. 17
“Insoluble,” a solo exhibition of Camille Schefter’s oil paintings, speaks to complex imagery and uses color to pull seemingly contradictory fragments into a whole composition. It reaches behind the public person to the private, hidden thoughts and imaginings. Opening recep: Sept. 18, 6 to 9. www.studiohd.com.

Marty Ittner and Michele Cormier
Evolve Urban Arts Project
Pierce School Lofts
1375 Maryland Ave. NE
Sept 11 - Oct 30
The theme, “What We Leave Behind” reaches not only into the past but the present and the “cultural and natural debris” we inherit. Ittner’s collages are sculpted from layers of wax and paper, opening windows as you visually dig through the components. Cormier’s paintings range from moody abstractions to well constructed still-lifes invoking past human interactions. Opening Recep: Sat., Sept.11, 4 – 8. ★