



The Corner of the Arts | October 2018

Elisa Pritzker presents Barbara Rachko

Barbara Rachko -Pentagon to Painter

Barbara Rachko is an American contemporary artist and author residing in New York City and Alexandria, VA.

Barbara has led an extraordinary, inspiring life. She learned to fly at the age of 25 and became a commercial pilot and Boeing-727 flight engineer before joining the Navy. As a Naval officer she spent many years working at the Pentagon and retired as a Commander. On 9/11 her husband, Dr. Bryan C. Jack, was tragically killed on the plane that hit the Pentagon.

Barbara loves to travel, especially to Mexico and Central and South America. She uses her large collection of Mexican and Guatemalan folk art – masks, carved wooden animals, papier mâché figures, and toys – to create one-of-a-kind pastel-on-sandpaper paintings. Website: <http://barbararachko.art>

EP: When and where did you start your career in the visual arts?

BR: My journey to becoming an artist was circuitous. In the mid-1980s I was in my early 30s and was a Navy lieutenant. I worked a soul-crushing job as a computer analyst on the midnight shift in a Pentagon basement. We were open 24/7 and supported the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Remembering the joyful Saturdays of my youth in New Jersey, when I had studied with a local painter, I enrolled in a drawing class at the Art League School in Alexandria, Virginia. I loved it! I took more classes and became a highly motivated, full-time art student who worked nights at the Pentagon. After two years and as my skills improved, I discovered my preferred medium – soft pastel on sandpaper. I knew I had found my calling, submitted my resignation, and left active duty. On October 1, 1989 I became a professional artist. However, I remained in the Navy Reserve for another fourteen years, working at the Pentagon one weekend a month. On November 1, 2003, I retired as a Navy Commander.

EP: How and why your art got influenced by the Mexican culture?

BR: For Christmas in 1991 my future sister-in-law sent me two painted wooden figures from Oaxaca, Mexico. One was a blue and white winged horse. The other was a red, black, and white bear. Her timing was perfect because I had been searching for new subject matter to depict. I asked friends about Oaxaca, learned that it was an important art center, and began reading everything I could find. Up until this time, I had visited Mexico only briefly. In 1992 Bryan, my future husband, and I planned a two-week trip to Mexico, timed to see Day of the Dead celebrations in Oaxaca. We spent a week in Oaxaca, where my interest in collecting Mexican folk art began. I discovered and purchased a wooden dragon/conquistador figure, with the intent of putting it in a painting when I got back to Virginia. During our week in Mexico City, I became enthralled with pre-Columbian history.

EP: Tell me about the meaning of your work and the different materials you use.

BR: It is as difficult to explain the meaning of my work as it is to interpret the meaning of life! I believe an artist is inspired to create and the viewer ponders the creation. Each individual brings his or her own unique insights and responds to art in their own way.

Soft pastel has been around for five hundred years. I fell in love with it thirty years ago for several reasons. It's the most permanent of media. There's no liquid binder to cause oxidizing over time, as

happens with oil paint. Pastel colors are intense because they are close to pure pigment. Pastel allows direct application (no brushes) with no drying time and no color changes.

I use UArt acid-free sandpaper, which is made for artists who work in pastel. This paper allows me to build up layers of pigment without using a fixative. My process - slowly applying and layering pastels, blending and mixing new colors directly on the paper, making countless adjustments, searching for the best and/or most vivid colors – continually evolves. Each pastel painting takes months to complete.

EP: In addition to your art, please explain any other related activities you are involved with.

BR: I write. In July, I celebrated the six-year anniversary of my art blog,

www.barbararachkoscoloredust.com, and I'm proud of my 33,000+ subscriber community. I also published an eBook, "From Pilot to Painter," that is available on Amazon and iTunes.

Travel to Central and South America to study ancient civilizations is an essential part of my creative process. For several years I have been researching the Incas and their ancestors.

Last year my long-standing fascination with masks took a leap forward when I visited the National Museum of Ethnography and Folklore in La Paz, Bolivia. An exhibition with more than fifty festival masks was spell-binding and became the basis for a new series called, "Bolivianos."

EP: What project/s do you have in the near future?

In March 2019 I will exhibit with four artists at Westbeth Gallery in New York. I plan to show twelve pastel paintings.

Photo credits:

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