

by Margaret Tessman

When Barbara Maye began making art in the 1990s she realized that she had found “a language that allowed me to say everything I wanted to say.” She also found that there was a market for her abstract paintings, which provided the validation that she needed to continue to work and grow as an artist.

Through her studies at the University of Colorado and the University of Calgary where she completed her BFA, Barbara discovered that paint was only one means by which she could express herself. “School was a really powerful experience for me. I loved it all! I discovered that I am a conceptual artist and that my concept would dictate my media,” she said. “I don’t limit myself. When the creative process takes me, I go with it.”

I asked Barbara if defining herself as a multimedia artist was

examine them closely and create things of beauty. That work sparked an interest in looking at cultural beliefs about trees from around the world, but also to a desire to paint human anatomy. The continuity between the two bodies of work lies in looking inside: the fragmentation of wood and of the human form sparked Barbara’s curiosity and her desire to go deeper.

“My art is an exploration of what I can find out about,” she said. “It is always somewhat therapeutic, or a seeking tool. It gives me the means to look for answers to problems or why we are the way we are. I come to an answer at the end of the process.” For Barbara, the structure of tree rings and the different types of wood that can be found in a tree as it matures parallels the development of the human mind. Just as a tree creates both heartwood and sapwood, humans essentially



Photo of Barbara Maye courtesy Kathleen Jones. All other photos courtesy Barbara Maye.

limiting in any way, if she felt that she was shortchanged in any of the genres that she chooses to work in. “My work shifts and grows in all the areas I work in,” she said. “I don’t think being a multimedia artist is unrealistic in our culture, given the speed at which information travels and our limited attention spans. I keep getting called to another discipline.”

Barbara explained how her exploration of one aspect of a medium could often take her in different but related directions. For example, her “Treeworks” series began as anatomical studies of trees and wood. Barbara dissected pieces of trees into fragments that allowed her to expose their inner workings,

transform at puberty at the deepest level.

Barbara moved to Nakusp three years ago at a time when she was making a shift in her personal life. After three months of hauling water and chopping wood, she felt right at home and decided to stay in the community. “I felt super supported in what I’d done and what I wanted to do,” she said. “I’m more visible here, and my creative process is more transparent as a result.” Barbara credits Anne Beliveau, who operates Studio Connexion Gallery in Nakusp, with keeping her working. “She created a venue for my work and that was a motivation to keep creating,” she said.

Barbara began to teach out of her home studio, eventually offering weekend workshops in Revelstoke, Burton and New Denver. Her courses include beginning drawing (“Drawing More Than a Stick Man”), second-level drawing and painting and mentorships for developing artists with a body of work or work in progress. Exposing her creative process to her students was a very different way of working for Barbara. “The students would see my work stall or see me get frustrated,” she said, which has turned out to be a mutually beneficial experience. Students are able to see first-hand that overcoming barriers is an inevitable part of creating, and critiques become an important part of the workshops. “It’s made me more transparent as a teacher,” she said. Barbara hopes to be able to offer workshops in more communities. “I feel like reaching out to more people and spreading the art love,” she said.

Another element of Barbara’s art is portraiture. “I’ve always loved looking at faces,” she said. “I remember when I was younger my mother telling me to stop staring at people.” Barbara finds that her commissioned portraits are not only popular, but also provide an “unplug” from the more intense and lengthy process of creating her other art. “It’s nice to do a drawing for a commission in three days,” she said. “People love to have portraits done, but it’s still an anatomical exploration.” Barbara also works in stone, which she added to her repertoire after taking a workshop with a stone carver from Zimbabwe.

Barbara is currently working on the paintings for an exhibit called “The Subtle Body,” which will be on display at the VISAC Gallery in Trail in June and at the Revelstoke Public Art Gallery in October. “The Subtle Body” will include work from two series, “Llunio,” a personal exploration of anatomy, and “Asanas,” which is based on yoga postures and uses a variety of body types. “I’m making peace with some of my personal body issues,” said Barbara.

While at a Hidden Language yoga retreat at the Yasodhara Ashram in Kootenay Bay, Barbara was encouraged to journal about the answers her body was giving her during her yoga practice. At the same time, she was reading a work on quantum physics that differentiated between the subtle body (immaterial consciousness) and the gross (or physical) body. She took those ideas forward as the tools that inspired the paintings that she created for “The Subtle Body.” The works invite the viewer to go beyond the surface play of light, shadow and texture to a deeper examination of the ways we use our bodies.

Barbara is looking forward to spending a couple of weeks in Bali this spring to further her interest in Hindu temples and dance. She doesn’t know what the trip will inspire her to create—stonework? A Subtle Body series in dance form?—but it will be thoughtful, highly skilled and definitely Barbara.

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