

## AN INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA BICKEL

*Ontario poet Eva Tihanyi interviewed Barbara Bickel in July 2002.*



*"Illuminatus" performance, Unitarian Church of Vancouver, Barbara Bickel, 2001.*

**EVA TIHANYI:** You're not originally from the West, though you've spent most of your adult life in Calgary and Vancouver. I also understand that, prior to 1993, you had a career other than art. Please tell me about your background.

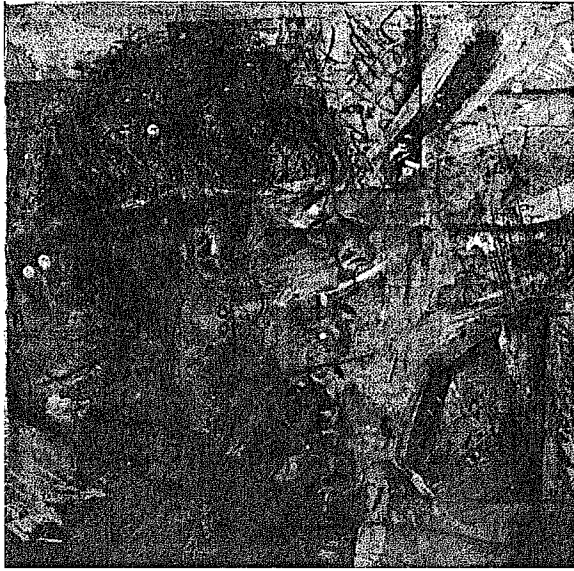
**BARBARA BICKEL:** I was born in Regina, where my mother's family is from. When I was five, we moved east to London, Ontario. When I was twelve, we moved to Victoria, where I stayed till I was twenty-one. I went to Alberta to go to college and spent the next eighteen years there, thirteen of them in Calgary. Calgary is where my artist self, which had been dormant since high school, resurfaced. My home landscape, though, has always been the ocean. In 1998, when my partner decided to go back to university, I was more than willing to move back to the West Coast.

Although I grew up drawing, when I finished high school I was not ready to go to art school. I remember going to an information session at a Victoria art school and being freaked out by what some of the artists were doing. I remember one guy who painted himself, literally, into his canvases! And I couldn't believe how excited the professors were by this. I was pretty straight and traditional at 18 years. Instead, I went back to school with the intention of getting a job in social services. My first degree was in sociology. I did, however, minor in art history.

I had just returned from a nine-month trip to Europe and was in love with European art. I spent a number of months in Italy and had soaked up the Italian masters, Caravaggio, da Vinci, Michaelangelo, Bernini. The first thing I did when I finished my degree was head back to Europe for another dose of art.

When I returned home, I began work in rehabilitation with adults with mental and physical disabilities. I really enjoyed this work, and it was through it that I reconnected with my own art. My clients loved creating art. They had no reservations or ego attached to making art. They just did it with no self-censorship. Witnessing this made me realize that I was holding my own art back because I was afraid of not creating a perfect piece.

From there I became interested in art therapy, which is about creating art for the purpose of self discovery. I then began a degree in Fine Arts at the University of Calgary where I majored in painting. My intention was to continue and do a Masters in Art Therapy, but by my last senior painting class I had made the shift to calling myself an artist. I realized that I wanted to be a serious artist rather than a therapist who facilitates art for others. I wanted to create art for myself. That's when I made the decision that I would become a full-time professional artist.



*Dialogus I*, mixed media collage and drawing on wood, 16 x 16 inches, Barbara Bickel, co-researcher R. Michael Fisher, 2002



*Dialogus II*, mixed media collage and drawing on wood, 16 x 16 inches, Barbara Bickel, co-researcher R. Michael Fisher, 2002

ET: What has been your greatest challenge so far?

BB: I hate to say it, but money has been the greatest challenge. Making a living as an artist is amazingly difficult. To be a business woman and an artist is a tough but essential marriage. My partner, who is also an artist, has always supported and encouraged me. I have, over the years, had a few dedicated patrons whose support and love of art have sustained me financially as well as emotionally. I have had to have radical trust at every stage of my art career. So much so that, in 1996, I decided to call the business that I have with my partner Radical Trust. The great irony of this is that people often mistake the name for a bank. I love it!

ET: You work primarily, these days, with mixed media on wood panel. What inspired you to work on wood rather than on canvas?

BB: An art accident during my last year in art school. We had a model in our painting class and I had no canvases ready, but I had some wood panels. I worked with oil stick and oil glaze on the wood and loved the interaction of the wood grain with the human body. I am still in awe of the magic of wood grain as it communicates with the human body. I have never been an artist who enjoys the blank surface as the starting point of an art piece. I am inspired by interactions whether they be in relationships or in art materials.

ET: You also use collage.

BB: Yes. I've come to realize that collage is my form of sketching. It's a chance for me to get out of my technical drawing side and shift into the unknown of exploration. It is my respite, the place where I let my unconscious emerge. I often do a series of collages after a large collaborative project. It gives me the space to come back to my own centre after creating in other-centered spaces. I have come to describe them as waking dreams. I often utilize collage in the ground of my larger drawings. My intention is to join the unconscious with the physical body. The interaction of the two is where I believe the magic of the art happens.

ET: And then there's the performance aspect of your art. How do you decide which of your shows will involve performance? What does the performance element add to the visual show?

BB: Performance emerged out of the art. The first performance ritual that took place with my art evolved out of the creative process with my co-creators and models. I was working on a large series with twenty-nine women exploring the theme of 'sisters.' I did part of the series in Victoria. When I returned to Calgary, I was reluctant to show the art. This made no sense to me until I realized that I had not asked permission from the women to exhibit their images.

The whole issue of the artist's power as creator had been taken for granted. It had been assumed both by me and the women that the art pieces were my property to do with as I pleased. I did not want this power. It is the giving over of our bodies as if they are not ours that women have done for too many years. I realized that I could not perpetuate this, so performance rituals are now a part of all projects where I work with other co-creators. They give voice to the process of the art creation and allow a ritual release of the art into the world. I believe the performance rituals create an essential sacred context that, for the most part, has been lost in this world for the viewer-receivers of the art.

**ET:** The woman warrior theme has been an important one for you. What draws you to this?

**BB:** The warrior as an archetype has been important for me as I look for alternative models and ways of being in the world. I know that I limit myself and that societal constructions limit many women from taking strong stands in the world. The woman warrior is a model for me to strive towards, one that gives me alternative ways of thinking and being, in places where I feel hopeless and victimized. Working on the *Battle Cries: In Search of the Woman Warrior* series was very intense. I had no idea what I was entering. The series started with the need to surrender. In fact, the first piece in the series was called *Surrender*.

**ET:** Your shows usually have intriguing titles. My favourite is *The Spirituality of Eroticism*, a title which reflects what I think of as a key element in your work: the soul expressed through the body. Can you comment on this?

**BB:** That body of work began with movement artist Kathryn McGregor and myself wanting to work together to explore breath/spirit. I came across Audre Lorde's writing and her words described perfectly what we had been working on: "the erotic, then I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives." The title comes from the term that she coined. Once Kathryn and I consciously joined spirit and the erotic, the art and our whole creative process opened up.

**ET:** There is also an obvious engagement in your work with women and women's issues. How do you see visual art as a way to explore these?

**BB:** I see my art as engaging life and challenging patterns that get in the way of living life fully. I see art as a powerful vehicle for engaging other ways of seeing and knowing. My own limits, challenges, and struggles are the starting point of my work. Because I am a woman, the issues that I gravitate toward have been, up to this point, women-focused. I feel very fortunate that I have had the opportunity to practice my art and live my art to the degree that I have. I also see it as my responsibility to share it and invite as many people as I can into the learning process of it.

**ET:** Where does the idea for a piece start for you? And what about an entire show? Do you find that you create a group of pieces with a particular show in mind? Or do individual pieces just happen and then you realize they form a group?

**BB:** For the most part, I create projects around a theme or an idea that I want to explore. These often come from issues that I am exploring in my own life. I begin with the idea and the art then follows. They have also come from the collaborative process. When jazz singer Cheryl Fisher and I began working together, we just knew we wanted to collaborate and let our art influence each other. At one point we realized that both of our art was focusing mainly on love and beauty, and so we brought in Venus. The result was a show called *Her Venus Signature*.

I don't envision pieces completed. Each piece unfolds according to its own agenda. I love the surprises and challenges that take me down various roads in the process of bringing a piece to completion.

**ET:** What, in your opinion, is the role of the artist, especially in terms of events such as September 11? You recently completed a series called *Women "Enduring Freedom"* so I assume you have some thoughts on the relevance of the artist to society.

**BB:** I like Mathew Fox's words—he's an ex-communicated Jesuit priest, by the way—"The task of the artist is to excite humans to reverence all that is precious and meaningful in life." Artists, I believe, have the ability to wake people up, to speak to people at different levels. I have come to see my art as activism,

not in a traditional activist way, but as a vehicle for giving oppressed or forgotten voices a platform to be seen and witnessed.

September 11 had a deep impact on me. When I began creating art in the studio the day following the event, I was doing it for my own sanity, to channel the outrage and the sense of helplessness. I had no idea it would turn into a body of work and be exhibited several months later. This body of work came from a different place of passion in me. It spurred me to make a larger commitment to not remain small and voiceless as a woman in this society.

**ET:** Who has influenced you most as an artist, and in what way?

**BB:** My thirteen-year relationship with my intimate partner R. Michael Fisher has had a large influence on me. He is also an artist and living with a fellow artist has its pluses and minuses. His encouragement though, and his belief in my work and its importance in the world, has never wavered. Two women artists that I greatly admire and who have had an influence on my work and thinking are Hannah Wilke and Shirin Neshat. Both their work addresses the issue of being a woman, in a woman's body, in the world today.

**ET:** One review of your work, written back in 1995, said the following: "She brings re-constructionist patterns to a de-constructionist art world. Her way of presenting the human figure is not strident nor overtly political. She is not out to get people "upset" as she knows they already are. Her interest is much more in healing our wounds rather than pouring salt on them." Do you agree with this assessment of what you do? Has your art changed since these words were written?

**BB:** I think my art has opened up since that time. In the last year I created and exhibited my first overtly political show *Women "Enduring Freedom."* So that has changed. I still am more interested in healing our wounds. I strongly believe that artists need to be responsible for what they put into the world. By that I mean if we want to make strong statements with our art that can be quite painful to receive, we need to be there to receive the response of the viewers. As far as re-construction, I still feel that reclaiming and renaming are powerful aspects of my art.

**ET:** What are you working on now? In what direction is your art headed?

**BB:** I recently finished working on a series with six women. This has turned into an in-depth research project. My most in-depth to date, as a matter of fact. I don't have a title for it yet, but it is about exploring women's body knowledge.† I believe that our bodies hold all of our memory and, along with that, great wisdom. The problem is accessing it when we have so much distress around our bodies, so many cultural issues and societal impositions to deal with.

This fall I began a Masters in Education at UBC. I am focusing on feminism and arts-based inquiry. My art has, in many ways, been a journey of collaborative inquiry, exploring relationships, archetypes, ways of knowing with others. Even when I work on a project alone, I draw on my gathered experiences with others. The process of art-making is an excellent vehicle of inquiry, of knowledge creation—knowledge growth. To do this, I feel I have had to move beyond my own art practice, where I have been completely in charge, to a larger critical community that forces me to question and write about my art practice.

**ET:** I have one last question for you, one I can't resist asking. What artist stereotype annoys you the most?

**BB:** The stereotype that the greatest artists are mentally unstable and basically unhealthy.♦

† *She Knows*, a visual art exhibition and collaborative performance ritual by Barbara Bickel with collaborators Monica Brammer, Leah Fisher, Lyn Hazelton, Nane Jordan, Sophia Marten, and Cathy Pulkinghorn was performed December 6, 2002, at the A.M.S. Art Gallery, University of British Columbia. During February and March 2003, *Deepening Desire: a ten-year retrospective*, curated by Madeleine Wood, was shown at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre. *Fire at the Edge of Water* is scheduled for June 2003 at the School of Ideas Gallery in Welland, Ontario.