

The background of the entire page is an abstract artwork. It features a dense network of thin, intersecting lines in red, blue, and white. These lines are overlaid on a textured, painterly background of blue, green, and brownish tones. The overall effect is one of organic complexity and layered meaning.

nude for

Art has always been a natural
and powerful force in Barbara
Bickel's life. Lucky for us.

Barbara Bickel's 10-year

retrospective exhibition, *Deepening Desire*, was held this spring in Vancouver, where she is currently completing a Masters degree combining her interests in education and visual art. Her show, *Fire at the Edge of Water*, ran at Linda Hankin's School of Ideas Gallery in Welland through July 2003. Bickel's mixed media figurative drawings and collages on wood are intriguing collaborations between subject and artist. As Bickel says, she "withholds the artist's colonizing gaze" in order to "invite the body to speak from its own centre." The following interview was conducted with Bickel via e-mail. >>

INTERVIEW BY EVA TIHANYI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BARBARA BICKEL

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BODY OF WORK

"Peace Offering I" from Barbara Bickel's 2002 series *She Knows*.

Eva Tihanyi: I'd like to focus this interview on the spiritual and feminist aspects of your art. What do these terms mean for you?

Barbara Bickel: These three words are all intertwined for me—spiritual, feminist, and art. Today they are inseparable in my life. My awareness of each of them grows and is influenced by the other. Working with them together allows me to reach a greater depth of experience.

Art-making has always been my medium of exploration and growth. The majority of memories that I have from my school days, right from kindergarten, are of the art that I made. I grew up in a very traditional religious home. My father was a Lutheran minister. Although I have come to be very critical of religious institutions and the oppressive, limiting nature of them, I love the art that they have produced. The Church is part of my cultural background, but it was oppressive to my spirit. It was a great awakening when I realized that spirituality was something that was in me and not at church. When I had this realization in my mid 20s, art returned to my life full force. My spirit survived because of my art while I was growing up, and when I was ready to explore spirituality as an adult, art was the natural vehicle to return to.

It is only in the last four years that I have come to call myself a feminist. A spiritual feminist, to be more precise. Prior to that, I didn't feel connected to the feminist movement, as I wasn't politically active. I have come to realize that I have been living a feminist life and that there are many forms of feminism. It was my research into pre-Christian religions that started to make me realize the importance of feminism and that the feminists (Carol Christ, Mary Daly, Starhawk, etc.) studying religion were—and are—so important in the revival and re-creation of a feminist spirituality.

Eva Tihanyi: How are the spiritual and feminist aspects of your work connected in your art?

Barbara Bickel: In 2001, I created an exhibition, *Illuminatus*, specifically for a church sanctuary. I had eight alcoves surrounding the church pews to create art for. I also committed myself to do a solo performance piece in the church. I had been researching my Germanic heritage and was inspired by the 12th- and 13th-century female mystics (Hildegard von Bingen, Mechtild of Magdeburg) as well as pre-Christian female visionaries called Volvas. The task that I took on in this project was to access contemporary female visions through my art. No easy task, to claim myself a visionary artist. I felt inadequate and like a fraud up until the night of the opening performance ritual. But during the performance ritual, the whole experience came together. I was able to embody the freedom of the female spirit, reclaiming the traditional male sanctuary as her own, no longer excluded and limited by it. Afterwards, I talked to a woman who had not been in a church since she had left her French Catholic home as a teenager. Her description of the event was, "That was a real mind fuck."

Eva Tihanyi: Are there any of your pieces in particular that you consider especially spiritual and/or feminist? The titles of many of your solo exhibitions suggest both spirituality and feminism: *Illuminatus*, *Ancient Battlegrounds: Quest for the Woman Warrior*, *The Spirituality of Eroticism*, *Re-emergence, Sisters*.

Barbara Bickel: I think they all have strong elements of spiritual feminism. *The Spirituality of Eroticism* was a particularly powerful experience for me,

throughout the creation of the whole project and culminating with a climactic performance ritual. My collaboration with movement artist Kathryn McGregor was a very rich one. We began by exploring breath (spirit) together and that led us to fully opening our bodies and our souls to the divine feminine as she relates to the divine lover. We were both in a place in our lives ready to risk and explore the erotic without limitations. It was a wonderful opening, and we were deeply affected by it. The task that follows from these intense creative expe-

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riences is to hold on to the experience of knowing that place of openness and keeping the spirit of it alive as the mundane world closes in.

Eva Tihanyi: You work primarily in the figurative mode. Nudes, mostly women. Can you comment on why you have chosen to work exclusively in the figurative realm? And why in particular with the female body?

Barbara Bickel: Artistically, aesthetically, I love the human body. An art

piece doesn't feel complete if I do not have some reference to or element of the body in it. I believe that the body holds great wisdom, and by creating art that focuses on it, I strive to decode that wisdom. I'm not interested in the cultural coverings of bodies—clothes, costumes. I'm after the essence of humans that can be glimpsed outside the trappings of culture. The very first large series I did after art school was with men, *Men as Birthers, Not Destroyers*. I wanted to explore and understand my relationship with men. After this, I knew I needed to do the

mainly focused on women. I can see that opening up to include men again in time.

Eva Tihanyi: Is all visual art political in some way, whether it wants to be or not?

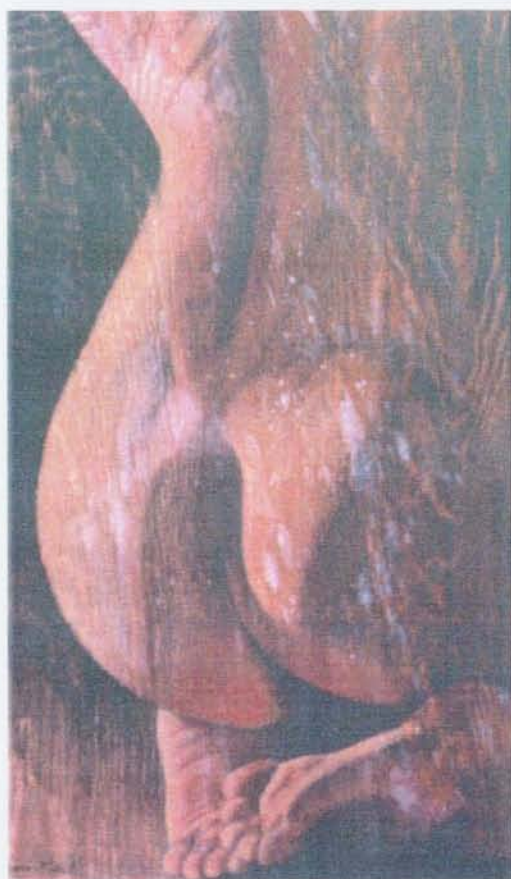
Barbara Bickel: Yes, I do believe art is political in that it is presented to the public and affects the public. Whether the artist is clear or wants to be clear on what his or her political bias is does not change the reality that the art will have an impact by the very fact of its existence in public spaces. I do believe

survival inform strength, wisdom and a palpable physical presence in the images, which are unidealized and therefore legitimately powerful (and empowering) representations of women's physical reality." How do you choose your models—or "collaborators" as you prefer to call them?

Barbara Bickel: Different projects have invited collaborators in in different ways. In some projects, I have put out a public call inviting those interested in exploring a theme with me. Some of my collaborators have been strangers. Others I have asked specifically because I wanted to work not only with them, but with their specific art forms—for example, Kathryn McGregor and her dance movement. The age, body type, and life experience of my collaborators are what they are. My work is about honouring the body in all its diversity, not choosing the kind of body I feel should be honoured. If someone is willing to take the risk of stepping in to co-create with me to share part of themselves with the artistic process, that is the main requirement.

Eva Tihanyi: Do you consider art—the process of creating it—a form of ritual?

Barbara Bickel: My ideal of living in this world is that all parts of life be treated as sacred ritual. To give all of life the reverence it deserves. So, yes, I very much see art and the process of making art as a form of ritual. The performance rituals that have evolved in my art since 1995 have been an attempt to bring the sacredness of the art-creating experience to the public. I also see the performance ritual as a chance for the collaborators and



ABOVE LEFT: Detail of Bickel's 'The Hallelujah' from her *Spirituality of Eroticism* exhibition;
ABOVE RIGHT: 'The Breath Its Voice Escaping' from *Illuminatus*.

same with women, and this process began with the *Sisters* series. My experience working with the men was easier at some level as I was not confronting my own mirror to the same degree. It was easier to be the observer working with the men. It is much more challenging working with women when so many parts of myself are being mirrored back to me. My desire to understand myself as a human in this world has kept my work

that artists have a social responsibility to their public, their viewers.

Eva Tihanyi: I quote from Yvonne Owens' paper, "Representations of the Female Body as Sites of Subversion in the Art of Barbara Bickel": "Bickel's mixed-media representations of women's bodies return to them a sense of their integrity, their lived experience and humanity. The marks and scars of age, childbirth, suffering, and

myself to release the art into the world with the intention, the purpose of the art made more clear.

Eva Tihanyi: Which of your pieces do you consider the strongest statements of your spirituality and/or feminism?

Barbara Bickel: The series *Women "Enduring Freedom"* I think, is my most passionate body of work. It was birthed in the aftermath of the events of September 11. In this series, I used photos that were taken for the *Woman Warrior* series and put them into action through collage. The ground of the pieces was cut-up old drawings of my self. This series was pulled together from fragments of past work. It was the reconstruction of past and present to try to make ground for the future. The future of women's voices in the face of terror and destruction.

Eva Tihanyi: *The Spirituality of Eroticism* (1998) show contained some of your most graphic work to date, including women posed spread-eagled with red flowers between their legs. A male artist might have been lambasted for showing the same images. He would probably have been accused of exploiting women and/or creating pornography. How do you make the profane sacred? And how is your depiction different from what a man's might be?

Barbara Bickel: I went through bouts of anxiety that the work I was creating was going to be perceived and attacked as pornography and have that context imposed upon it. I read lots of feminist writing on pornography to gear myself up for attack. But at the same time, as I kept working, I felt great freedom. Pornography is not about freedom, so how could this work be seen as pornography? During the art-making process, I also began to envision the transformation of the gallery space from that of an artist-run gallery to that of a sacred temple where the art pieces were altar images on the walls. I created a triptych that was the altar we performed in front of. Candles and bouquets of flowers,



"It is much more challenging working with women when so many parts of myself are being mirrored back to me," says Bickel, shown above next to her mixed-media drawing "Trailblazer."

along with a water vessel surrounded by pillows where people could sit and reflect, were meditative elements added to the space. My aim was to reclaim the body from the profane world and the Christian world of shame by recontextualizing it and imbuing all aspects of it with honour and reverence. I don't know if a man could carry this off without knowing or having experienced the shame and dishonouring that has gone on for women and their relationship with their bodies.

Eva Tihanyi: I get the sense from your work that the body is more than a receptacle—or even temple—for the spirit, that it is somehow the spirit itself made manifest.

Barbara Bickel: The body holds the past and the future and is always in the present. To try to read the body without blinders on is a chance to know spirit as it lives in the body. I guess that is manifest. We have so many boxes

and shields and projections that we subject the body to. In limiting bodies, we limit our experience and knowing of spirit.

Eva Tihanyi: So in what direction is your art moving? What's the next level?

Barbara Bickel: I am currently in a Masters program in Education at the University of British Columbia. I have long been feeling the desire to write more about my work and share the process of exploration that goes on in the artistic process. The collaborative projects that I have done have been real catalysts for my own growth and for the women who have joined me in the projects. I want to take these learning experiences to a deeper level and share them with a larger audience. Entering an academic community and pursuing arts-based inquiry from a feminist perspective will, I hope, push me toward this goal.

EVA TIHANYI is the Current's books editor.