



Elizabeth Barlow

The Practice of Devotion

Elizabeth Barlow

Mornings at La Mirada

Oil on Linen, 47 x 54.5 in

courtesy of the artist

written [Mariepet Mangosing](#)

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Elizabeth Barlow

Portrait of a Glamazon

Oil on Linen, 24 x 30 in

courtesy of the artist

Elizabeth Barlow, a still-life painter from San Francisco now living in Carmel-by-the-Sea, CA, will regale you with idyllic tales from her life — a winding creative journey that has taken her to the sacred practice of meditation and art making. Starting out as an aspiring writer, Barlow understood the implication that pursuing creative work would be a cross section between discipline and passion.

After the encouragement of her late artist father, Philip Barlow, Barlow attended art school. Her father encouraged her to “sit next to the best person in the class” to maximize her education and was able to learn what exactly her strengths were. “He said this to motivate me,” Barlow explains. “Once I started taking art classes, I knew that I was on the right track. Women tend to want to sit in the back of the room, but it’s important to be brave enough to take your seat with the people you most admire.”

Before her current series Flora Portraits, Barlow primarily painted work that featured a person’s legacy. She calls these paintings “portraits in absentia.” The paintings were of personal effects, often commissioned by clients to tell a personal story. Barlow explains, “These were humble possessions that symbolize memories.” One of her commissions from her San Francisco days was to create a painting about a man whose family provided objects like his wedding ring, 49ers football, cherished books, and other personal objects to honor him in a painting after his death. The portrait directly represents the essence of the man in a more contemporary way than traditional portraiture.

After her move from the big city to a quieter town by the sea, Barlow experienced a shift in her work. “We left San Francisco in 2016 and my work underwent a profound transformation leaving the bustle of the city. Here in Carmel-by-the-Sea, I walk everywhere, the flowers bloom year-round. Every home has a front garden. I was inspired immediately to devote myself to painting flowers.” Barlow’s work is still very much her signature approach to portraiture, capturing the essence of nature and imbuing her flowers with a sense of personhood.

Starting every day with a cup of green tea in her studio facing the garden outside of a church, Barlow begins with an alla prima layer followed by multiple glazed layers, which allow her to achieve great depth and luminosity. With this technique, Barlow spends hours on each flower, an act that allows her to reach a certain flow state, a mindset of presence where something magical happens between her and her viewer. “My meditation practice has bled into my studio practice,” she says. “I have rituals I practice in my studio which encourage me to be fully aware and present. My studio now is in an active church in the center of town with a beautiful blooming garden outside of my window. In so many ways, it’s my sacred place within a literal sacred place, which has profoundly affected my work.” The intimacy of her space and the lightness achieved by enjoying each brushstroke that meets the canvas is the beating heart in Barlow’s art. Her one hope? For the viewer to also find peace by leaning in to look closer.

“I’m surrounded by beauty,” Barlow says. “Meditation is a big part of my life. I’m interested in exploring the idea that through stillness, by looking at something quietly and deeply, we can transform our minds and our hearts. The more we pause and truly look, the more we will actually see.” Barlow taps into something inexplicable and undoubtedly beautiful in the process. “One of the things that meditation will teach us is that we have the power to let go of ‘monkey mind’ thoughts and distractions, and awaken to the marvel of the present moment.”

With meditation and ritual informing her studio practice, Barlow’s work snaps us back into the reality of the present and the power of nature. “That is what nature and beauty can teach us. That there are wonders to be discovered at any moment in our lives — if we will only see them. We can notice the way the sunshine filters through a flower or the way the breeze bends a leaf if we are still enough.” The way Barlow works is also a guide on how to live, experience joy and see beauty. “To really perceive what beauty teaches us, we need to learn to be comfortable with stillness. I hope that my paintings will spark the idea that there is something we can see that’s not going to be captured through your phone or camera. It’s something the eyes of your heart will see.”

Through appreciation and care, Barlow insists that beauty is more than prettiness and aesthetics. “What is the purpose of beauty? It’s the call to awaken our senses to a reverence that expands to all living things. By awakening awe in us beauty can show the way to be stewards of our planet and of each other.”

Like her earlier work, Flora Portraits is a series of nontraditional portraits that allude to narratives that exist beyond the margins of their compositions. These narratives, like the one that inspired her painting “The Phoenix Rose,” demonstrate Barlow’s commitment to using flowers as catalysts for the human experience. “In 2017, in Sonoma, a beautiful vineyard home was destroyed in the tragic wildfires. The homeowner and his wife narrowly escaped. The only things that survived the fire were the vines and one rosebush. Tragically, his wife passed away a few months later. Bravely, the homeowner decided to rebuild on the same property and commissioned me to create a six-foot painting of this rosebush that bloomed gloriously after the fire. It had literally risen from the ashes and symbolized the amazing forces of life, death and reemergence.”

Elizabeth Barlow then paraphrases Rainer Maria Rilke: “Learn what a flower infers.” A flower, though seemingly inconsequential within the context of contemporary life, can in fact tell a greater story about life, fate, and the human experience. It can be more than a symbol; it can be a vessel for transformation.

Elizabeth Barlow

Portrait of a Marriage

Oil on Linen, 16 x 30 in

private collection



From painting to meditation, Barlow encourages her audience to not only think about what might be in front of them but what it means to live an artful and perceptive life. Barlow's portraits of flowers offer visual delight, yet, more importantly, she nudges us to slow down, appreciate, and perceive the world that sustains us. "I'm so fascinated by the practice of devotion," she says. "Like a ballet dancer or a classical pianist, I show up at the easel every day and this keeps the dialogue with the muses going. There's a deep contentment that comes with knowing what you'll do every day. It's like a magical antidote to the lightning speed of the world today."

Elizabeth Barlow

Arabesque

Oil on Linen, 24 x 36 in

courtesy of the artist





Elizabeth Barlow

Glory

Oil on Linen, 24 x 36 in

private collection



Elizabeth Barlow

Hers

Oil on Linen, 30 x 30 in

private collection