

# ELIZABETH BARLOW

@elizabethbarlowartist

Elizabeth Barlow has exhibited over the years with Andra Norris Gallery in Burlingame, California. She work is in private and public collections. After her move to Carmel-by-the-Sea she found herself immersed in the beauty of nature and flowers become her subject. Elizabeth sees flowers as a potent symbol of life force, of strength within fragility, and of the power of re-emergence that lies within all living things. Elizabeth Barlow: "I have discovered that painting the intricate details of a flower is a meditation that promotes a deep reverence for all things."

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## Paying Attention to Beauty Will Transform How You Walk Through the World

by Heide VanDoren Betz

**Heide VanDoren Betz: Please tell us about your background, your upbringing.**

**Elizabeth Barlow:** I grew up in Salt Lake City, Utah in a house filled with art and surrounded by flower gardens. It now seems inevitable that I am painting flowers. My father, the late Utah artist Philip Barlow, was enormously gifted and was my first mentor. My parents collected art, and our family vacations always involved visits to galleries and museums. Art was a natural part of our family life. My mother was, and is, a passionate gardener, and our backyard had flowers, a little pond, paths, and very little grass. Of course, as a child, I envied friends whose yards had actual lawns!

I always loved drawing. I was consumed with horses as a girl and drew them obsessively. My first art "success" was my picture book "Posey the Skunk" which won an award in my elementary school. But that first accolade for my art didn't keep me from the lure of theater. I fell in love with acting in high school and decided to study acting in college (to my parents' distress).

### ALWAYS SIT NEXT TO THE BEST PERSON IN THE ROOM

**HB: And your education. Did you attend art school?**

**EB:** I enrolled at the University of Utah in the theater department, and had dreams of becoming a stage actor. At one point, I was accepted into the American Academy of Dramatic Art in LA (more worry for my parents), but at the last moment,

decided to stay in college (huge parental relief). Ultimately, I went on to earn my Master's degree in History from the University of Virginia. I wasn't making art at that point, but would draw and paint with my father on vacations. Yet, there was always this quiet urge to paint. Several years later, while sitting on a bench in Tiburon, looking out at San Francisco Bay, I knew I had to paint. When I told my father, he said, "Okay, great! You have talent but you need to study seriously." I enrolled in the Post-Baccalaureate Art Studio Program and UC Berkeley Extension. It took me years to complete the program, but it transformed my life. Later, I had the great privilege of living in NYC for a month and studying all day, every day at the legendary Art Students League of New York. What I learned in that month strengthened my skills and deepened my confidence.

The best advice I ever received was from my father. When I began taking art classes he said, "Always sit next to the best person in the room." What he meant was to sit next to someone whose talent and skill will inspire you instead of meekly sitting at the back of the class (which most of us naturally want to do). It's such a powerful lesson for art and life.

### THE PERFECT YIN/YANG MOMENTS

**HB: Tell us about your career with several of San Francisco Opera's famous directors. How many years were you with the Opera?**

**EB:** I worked at San Francisco Opera for 15 years, beginning in the

Marketing/PR Department, and eventually becoming assistant to the General Director. While in the marketing department, I became friends with a colleague who was also a serious musician. He went on to become one of our most important contemporary opera composers—Jake Heggie. He arranged the music for the wedding of my husband Stephen in 2006. I created a painting that celebrated his marriage to actor Curt Branom. We shared many hilarious escapades together over the years.

I had the great privilege to be the assistant to two General Directors, Pamela Rosenberg and David Gockley. I sat outside the director's office door and from this close vantage point, witnessed the creation of many astonishing operas and I met great opera artists. I am still friends with Pamela and David; I loved every moment in that job, dramatic and "operatic" it might have been at times.

Most importantly, I met my husband, Stephen McClellan at the Opera. His assistant thought he should meet me, and so he went to the Opera's annual meeting and asked to be introduced to me. On paper, we weren't an obvious match. He is retired from Wall Street and had little exposure to the art world, and I have been in the arts my entire life. But we are perfectly suited in a Yin/Yang way; we balance and enhance one another's life. We were married in 2006 and I left the Opera at that time to devote myself full-time to my art practice.

**HB: Did this experience influence your own path to the creative?**

**EB:** One of the most wonderful things about working at San Francisco Opera was that many, if not most, of the administrative staff were artists in their own right. We had our “day” jobs at the Opera which helped support our artistic callings. Many of my colleagues were actors, singers, composers, writers, dancers, and musicians. I can’t imagine working in a more artistically supportive place. I woke up each morning very early and painted or drew before going to the Opera House, and spent my weekends painting in my tiny studio at the Richmond District. I had my first art exhibition while working at San Francisco Opera, and some of my first collectors were Opera colleagues and supporters. If you want to discover new talent, look into the administrative staffs of arts organizations!

**ART IS AN AUTHENTIC EXPRESSION OF THE WAY THE ARTIST SEES THE WORLD**

**HB: Which artists continue to inspire you and why?**

**EB:** In addition to my father, Philip Barlow, who showed me what it means to live with an artist’s eye and heart. I am inspired by artists (of all stripes) whose art emerges from their way of being. Georgia O’Keeffe is my great goddess because her work was an authentic expression of the way she perceived our world, and the way she lived was an embodiment of that deep seeing.

**HB: Among your first paintings were several unique “portraits”. Please tell us a bit about these; why/how were they “portraits”?**

**EB:** For many years, I created a series of paintings called “Portraits in Absentia.” In these still life paintings, I used people’s cherished possessions as symbols to tell the story of their lives on the canvas. One of my important paintings is called *Portrait of a Marriage*. It is a celebration of my dear friends’ Jake Heggie and Curt Branom’s wedding, which took place in 2008, when gay marriages were first being permitted in San Francisco. The painting shows their wedding shoes, arranged on the canvas as if Jake and Curt are dancing together, or embracing. This painting is perfect example of how my “portraits” of seemingly ordinary objects can convey deep, personal, and even historical meaning.





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Reverie

Elizabeth Barlow



YinYang (Portrait of a Marriage)



Aspire



Arabesque



Aspire





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**A PAINTING CAN BE INCREDIBLY SEXY AND AT THE SAME TIME BEAUTIFULLY PURE.**

**HB:** Tell us about your early paintings of (delightfully provocative) fruit.

**EB:** Ah, yes! I loved painting voluptuous fruit because it evokes the sensuality of a nude in a playful way. A painting of a luscious peach can be incredibly sexy, but it can also be beautifully pure.

**MEDITATION BRINGS A POWERFUL SENSE OF GRACE AND BALANCE TO LIFE AND ART**

**HB:** You now live in stunningly beautiful Carmel-by-the-Sea with your husband Stephen and super-star poodle Chanel. Is Carmel's scenic natural beauty your inspiration?

**EB:** In 2016, my husband Stephen and I decided to go on an adventure and try living in Carmel-by-the-Sea for a year. We have always loved the Monterey Peninsula and our wedding was here in 2006. Within a month, we both knew we wanted to stay. I left behind an exciting, bustling urban life

and suddenly found myself surrounded by ocean mists, sea birds, twisting cypresses, and year-round flowers everywhere. At about the same time, I committed myself to a daily meditation practice, which has brought a powerful sense of grace and balance to my life and art. I found a light-filled studio in a historic church in downtown Carmel, across from The Cypress Inn, with windows looking out onto the church's enchanting garden. Within months, I felt called to paint flowers.

**HB:** How do you know when you are done with one of your meticulous floral creations (most artists tell me it's hard to know when to stop).

**EB:** For me, it's pretty simple. As a painting is nearing completion, I arrive at the

studio each day and see something here, or something there, that needs my attention. And then one day, I walk in and the painting has just stopped speaking to me. It no longer needs anything from me and can now live in the world as itself.

**LOOKING AT A FLOWER CAN TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE**

**HB:** Do you have a philosophy about your works of art?

**EB:** My paintings are a wake-up call to pay attention to beauty because it will transform how we walk through this world. By slowing down and looking at things sincerely—in my case, by painting flowers—I find my days filled with awe and delight. Flowers and beauty have awakened me from a “sleep” of busyness into the wonder of presence. Looking at a flower can transform your life. It certainly has with mine.

**HB:** What do you love most about painting flowers? Your color palette for the flowers is very vibrant.

**EB:** (Laughing) I have always been drawn to the subtle color shifts in the work of

Vermeer and Rembrandt. But interestingly, my own work is much higher in chroma. I believe that while we see the world using our intellect, our hearts have “eyes” too. My daily meditation practice strengthens my ability to see with my heart—to see the “being-ness” of all living things. And the eyes of my heart see the world in rich, saturated color!

**HB:** Do you have a favorite flower you are compelled to paint?

**EB:** I haven't yet met a flower I don't want to paint!

**HB:** Tell us about your commission of the “Phoenix Rose”.

**EB:** Shortly after we moved to Carmel, I received a very important and emotional painting commission. A vineyard owner and his wife lost their home in the devastating 2017 California Wine Country Fires, barely escaping with their lives. Everything on the property was destroyed and the only things that survived were the vines and one rose bush. Even more tragedy followed when the wife died several months later. But then something amazing happened: that single rose bush began to bloom gloriously. The homeowner decided to build a new house on the same site and asked me to create a 6-foot painting of that rose bush for the new house. I took hundreds of photos of the roses to use as references for my painting, but I did not want to paint an actual replica of the rose bush. I wanted to capture the strength and resilience of this beautiful living thing. We titled the painting *The Phoenix Rose*, because it literally rose out of the ashes. What I learned with *The Phoenix Rose* painting is that flowers are more than just objects of beauty, they can be potent symbols of strength within seeming fragility of hope and renewal. Flowers can tell the stories of our lives in subtle and powerful ways.

**HB:** What are some of the challenges you have faced in painting?

**EB:** When I was a young painter, I used to struggle with the work and become disheartened or dismayed when a painting wasn't working out. Now, with deepened skills and knowledge, I no longer have those moments of panic or despair. I know that if I close the door of the studio, go home, and come back the next day with a refreshed spirit and eyes, I will find my way.

*“If we slow down enough to really see something, a flower for instance, then we will see more than just the surface beauty of the flower. We might actually be able to see into the very mystery of life on this earth.”*





**HB: What is your process? How do you start a painting; is there a ritual for you?**

**EB:** Every painting begins with hundreds of photos of my flower subjects. I always shoot the photos outdoors at golden hour. I love that magic time of day when the light is gold and the shadows are long and violet-hued. I draw the flowers on the canvas and then begin my long painting process. I am a slow painter by intention and choice. I paint in glazed layers so that the light passes through the paint and creates a luminous surface. The gifts of slow painting and of mindful living are similar: they allow us to calm our minds, perceive more deeply, and perhaps discover some hidden truths that are always right before us. My painting and meditation practices are always accompanied by tea. The ritual of boiling the water, pouring it in a slow trickle over the tea, and then holding the warm cup in my hands is pure pleasure and comfort.

**HB: The four-month exhibition “Flora Fauna” featuring you and Susan Manchester at the Monterey Museum of Art just concluded. Tell us about this experience.**

**EB:** Exhibiting my work at the Monterey Museum has been a joy from beginning to end. It has allowed me to see in real time why art is important. I’ve been able to talk with the museum visitors regularly and hear their thoughts and responses to my paintings, which aren’t necessarily what I think and feel about the paintings. That is the miracle of art. An artist offers her vision and her spirit in a painting. And then the viewer offers back her own vision and spirit in response to the painting. There is an amazing alchemy there, and a new dialogue and energy are shared. And that energy feeds our souls.



**A BIT ABOUT YOU:**

**What is your favorite activity other than painting?**

Sitting by the fire at the end of the day with my husband and our toy poodle Chanel. Sipping a glass of wine and talking about our days, our families, and our world. A close second is sharing a meal with friends anywhere in Carmel or San Francisco.

**Where do you like to vacation?**

Can I change that question to "Where do you NOT like to vacation"? In no particular order: Deer Valley, NYC, London, Paris, Santa Fe.

**Your favorite restaurants in your Carmel/Monterey area?**

Grasings, Bernardus Lodge, The Bench at Pebble Beach.

**A favorite painting or work of art from history?**

John Singers Sargent's *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* and Velasquez's *Las Meninas*. I can stand in front of both of them for hours.

**A favorite contemporary work of art or artist?**

Anything by the late great Chilean painter Claudio Bravo. His work takes my breath away.

**Your favorite food/drink?**

Champagne, always, only, and forever!

**HB: How would you like to be remembered?**

**EB:** I want to share this reality: if we slow down enough to really see something, a flower for instance, then we will see more than just the surface beauty of the flower. We might actually be able to see into the very mystery of life on this earth. I would like to be remembered for this ability.