

At the age of 18, Barbara McLain longed to go to art school, but wanting to please her parents, she went to college to become a nurse. 25 years later she was off to New York to pursue her dream at the Arts Student League. Upon returning to the Bay Area 2 years later she balanced painting with being a hospice nurse. She joined SFWA as a way to show her work.

Our returning summer intern, Cynda Holt has interviewed Barbara about her inspiration, success, and outlook on being an artist.

“Since the time when I walked away from an academic career in nursing in 1990 in order to pursue my original dream of becoming an artist, my inspiration has been to not waste any time and to choose painting subjects that would be of benefit to humanity.” Barbara shares that her goal for a long time was to “portray the wounds of the human condition” . She states “they must be seen and known on some level to do something about healing them.”



She describes how her inspiration has changed: “over time and based on my Buddhist practice, my inspiration has become revealing the impermanence of the human condition- the truth that nothing stays the same, everything changes, and that dissolution and death is inevitable for all of us. My art portrays this in a few different ways. My portraits, for example, are depicted with a realism that begins to disintegrate, where the lower part of the image seems to be dissolving.”

When asked about how to deal with creative blocks, she comments, “I certainly go through very prolific creative times versus times when I need to just stop the mad production and take a break. But my psyche seems to demand that I am making something.” What Barbara realized is she has always been making things. “I do not fight with my mind if I am not involved in painting for a time, but I will then lean toward baking a cake, for example.”

Success is a different definition for everyone, Barbara defines it in her own words. “If my work has somehow touched another human being, then that is success. For example, a dear friend lost her daughter last year and asked me to complete a portrait of her. The painting was a success in that she loved it, felt that it captured the true spirit of her daughter. Success is not being juried into exhibitions, but rather with how we hold the precious and priceless artistic process itself.”

“My greatest achievement was being asked by our Tibetan Buddhist Rinpoche to paint a portrait of his father, who had died. I was stunned by the request, and it took me two years before I could even begin.” In order to complete the piece, she found that she had to remove her ego, and request help from the buddhas and bodhisattvas. “I wept when I saw the completed portrait,

knowing that I indeed had not been the painter, only the vehicle through which the painting could come.” It is currently in her Buddhist center in Sonoma County.

“Painting is hugely helpful to my meditation practice, and my lama (teacher) encourages me to continue painting as part of my retreat practice.” Many artists, including Barbara relate their artistic process to meditation.

“I had joined SFWA in the mid 1990’s when I was first starting out. It was such a gift to have a community of artists such as this.” She explains that as a nurse, they have to be “other”oriented, whereas artists are accustomed to practicing on their own. She expresses her delight in being a part of SFWA.

Barbara explains that her biggest challenge to being an artist is storage space. “I have been making art for over 30 years, and it has become increasingly difficult to figure out how and where to store pieces I still own. It does force me to destroy older works that clearly do not measure up to my current practice, but this is still not so easy to do.”

Every individual will interpret a piece of art differently. Barbara states, “I am not painting to force my views or philosophy on anyone. The painting acts as a trigger for dialogue with the viewer and at that point I am not included, unless the viewer seeks me out for conversation.”



Barbara reveals that her dream project came true when she exhibited at the Serenity Exhibition at UCSF. “I was part of the faculty at UCSF from 1978 to 1990. Having left that position to study painting in New York, the opportunity to then exhibit my work in a UCSF venue was an emotional full circle for me.”

Barbara describes herself in one word as “accomplished.” “It seems to me in looking back on my life, that I have accomplished everything I have set out to do, some of which required great risk taking.” She opens up about anxiety as a major factor in her life. “That is my wound, great fear

regarding the future, a life and death fear. The leap I took to walk away from my successful academic career, with literally no money and into the void where I had no idea how my new life would unfold, took great courage.”