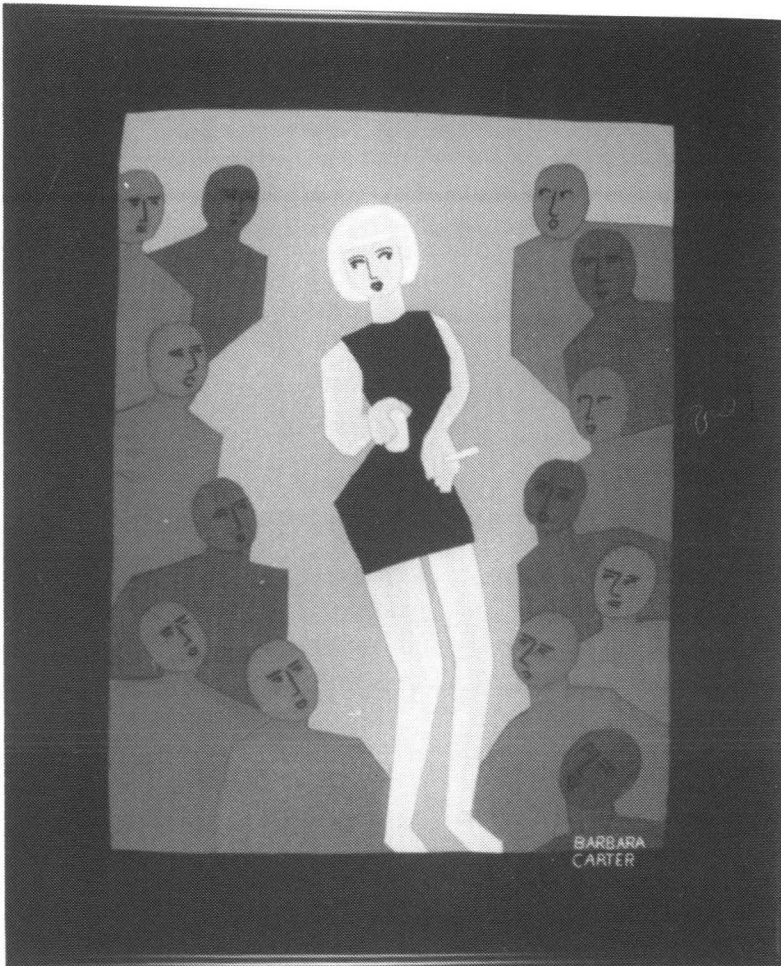


Interview



Barbara Carter: Art and the Process of Politicization

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THE FIRST TIME I SAW PHOTOGRAPHS OF Barbara Carter's work, I was drawn to her straight-forward, minimalist approach. I sensed that she was an artist who reflected upon externally imposed pressures that enforce social conformity, and on self-imposed feelings that lead to uncertainty and restraint. Here, I assumed, was an artist deep in the analysis of social and familial life where we uncover the myth of the ideal and know that, in reality, "Home Is Not Always Sweet" (p. 2). And here was an artist who believed in our capacity to create change.

With these thoughts I went to visit Barbara Carter's studio. I was anticipating a highly politicized conversation, and it was. But our discussion was not what I had expected.

Barbara lives and works in a small house perched on the shore of Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia. She has lived on the South Shore all of her life and her childhood home stands only metres away from her front door. Her house, she tells me, was once a fishing shack where fishers unloaded their daily catch and, during her childhood, it was used by her father for a number of work-related activities. The wharf is gone now and the fishing shack has been renovated into a comfortable home for her and her family — a partner, who is a fisher, and their three children. It is so close to the ocean that I am certain that, at high tide on windy days, the waves must dash against her win-

dows. The view from Barbara's studio is breathtaking, so it is understandable that she enjoys working at home, even though it is not always easy to schedule time away from family activities in order to concentrate on her art.

Barbara began drawing at around the age of ten years. In high school, she recalls, she "ran into personal problems... but was continuing to draw." However, she says:

I was talked out of art as a career by people [and eventually] gave up on it in my early twenties. I got married, had kids, and it was at that time I started quilting. Up until then I hadn't [quilted] which is kind of weird because my mother did, but I was never taught until my early twenties when my children were small. When they were around school age, I started to really miss the art.... I wanted to do something on my own ... so that I would have something which was mine.... I started drawing again, but because of having no paint, and no money to buy it, I got the idea of putting the drawings into fabric.

The use of fabric developed from her interest in drawing and her experience with quilting. The materials were readily available and the combination seemed a natural extension of the work she was already creating.

There was no conscious decision to use the fabric. It was not a way to make a statement. It just happened.... There is so much more you can do with it than just painting on a hard surface: you can cut it up, you can tear it up, you can get depth and texture.

We talked at length about each of the works presented in this issue of *Atlantis* and, through our discussion, it became clear that creating art was a vital aspect of Barbara's personal growth, self-discovery and ongoing politicization. She says:

When I first started, I actually wasn't aware that the pieces said anything. I guess I've always known, but it really didn't hit home and I wasn't always aware of it. So, basically, I was working on images I had in my mind. I would see an image and do it. I didn't think about what it said. It's only now, looking back, that I realize that my art was reflecting my own life, my own emotions and how I perceived the world around me. Now, I'm more conscious of that. A lot of self-discovery came from the art.

"Looking" (p. 259), for example, was an early piece whose meaning for the artist has changed with time.

When I first made it I didn't realize what it was saying. I had no clue consciously of what it was saying. I based it on a photo of a friend of mine, and the [figure's] position attracted me. So, I duplicated that and I put the other forms in. It seemed right. Yet, I look at it now and I know that as women we will do certain things. I

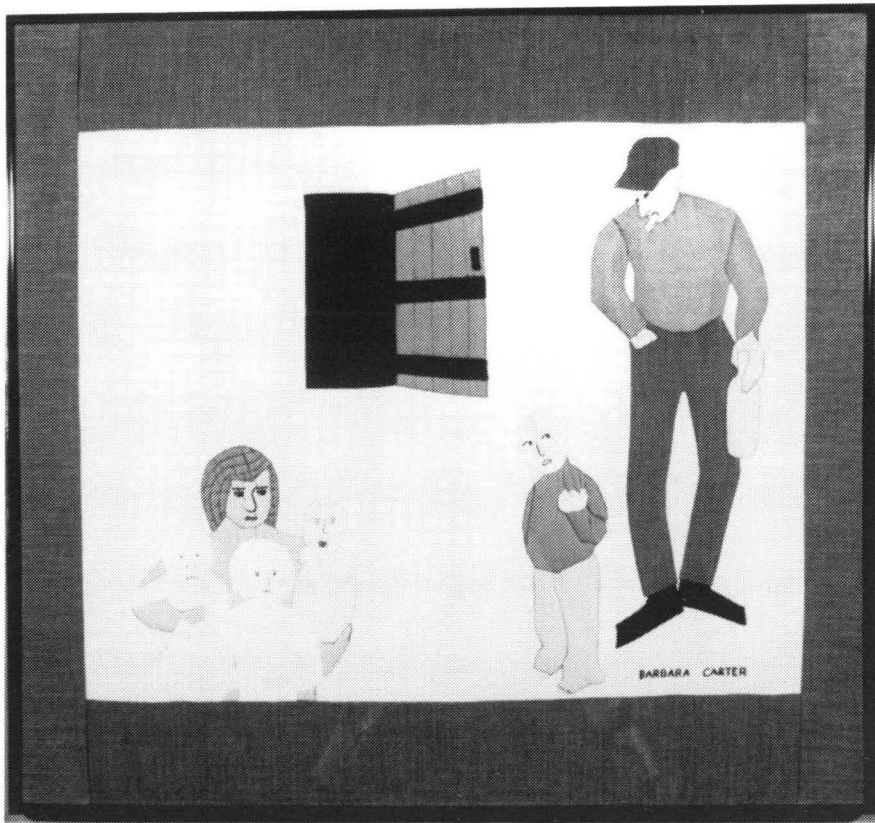
know I probably drank and smoked because it was attractive, or I thought it was, for all the wrong reasons. She's trying to be what other people want her to be, a certain image.... I can see what it says now. I looked at it a few years ago and I thought "Oh, my god."

Her intention behind creating this piece was not politically based. She was simply attracted to the shape and posture of the figure in a photograph. Yet, years later, she has developed an understanding of the social dynamic that it represents and her interpretation of the piece has changed.

For Barbara, one piece in particular stands out as a catalyst for this ongoing process of politicization. Entitled "Coming Out" (p. 262), it is also an early work. She explains its importance:

At this time I was planning to do a picture of [my mother's friend] who had grown up in an alcoholic family. She lived in this little shack with all of these kids. I wanted to portray that. I had based [the male] figure on a photo of my father. After I had finished, it I realized that it wasn't just a story of her life, but it was my mother's and then my own.

That was the first realization of the alcoholism in my family history. Up to that point I really didn't see it or acknowledge it. This piece was very difficult. I actually hid it away for months. I didn't show it to people — I think because it said so much and I felt exposed by it.... With previous pieces I had felt very safe. This was the first one that was threatening to me ... and part of me didn't want to go on be-



cause of what I may discover, but - another part of me did.

I still battle with this, continuing to go on, speak the truth and say what I see and yet keep a certain image.... It is a hard struggle. There is a fine line between personal life and art, and mine is so closely tied that it is very difficult to talk about the art without getting a lot of my personal stuff into it.

It was at this time, with this new realization, that Barbara began a series of works that expressed the vulnerability she was feeling.

I went into the hidden ones [p. 227]. All of a sudden there were hats over people's eyes, the forms were very closed off, like behind the trees ["Caged," p. 244]. They weren't fully out and there was this barrier there....

Her hesitation and concern is based on a desire to protect her extended family. She wishes to maintain "a certain image" not for her own sake — on the contrary, creating art has become, for her, a means of self-analysis and "healing" — but because of a strong family-based code of silence.

I work at pulling it all out for myself. So, my problem has always been putting it out there without damaging other people who are close to me who are still in denial and don't see things the way I see them.... [I have] a strong family history of "You don't talk.... These things don't happen." [They were] a very hard working group of people who worked with their hands and did physical labour and there wasn't any thought given to art.

When I understood that, I could understand some of the ways my family is now, and I also [have] some of that inability to talk. Family secrets, I guess... [and] most of society's, too. People just don't go around talking about what they feel.

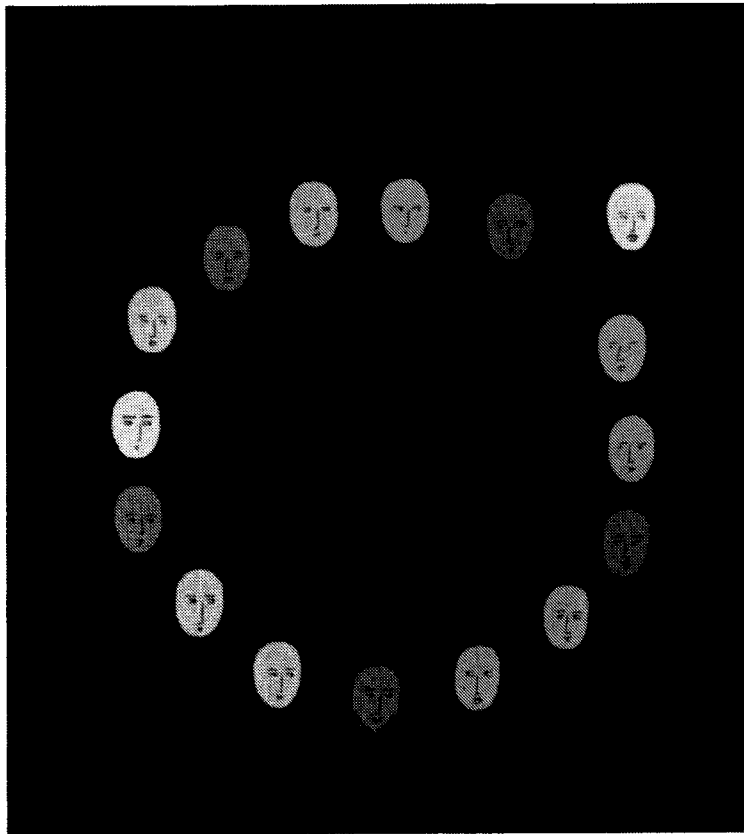
Barbara has spent much time reflecting upon the dynamics within her extended family. "Mother" (p. 167) is one of a series based on images within her mother's photo album. Creating this series was her way of dealing with family issues such as alcoholism, denial and a social formality that, as a child, made her feel isolated.

I was growing up with a constant what I perceived as real and what adults were telling me was real.... I think we have to acknowledge the uncomfortable. I think the more we keep saying, "Oh, everything is fine, life is fine, there's never any pain," we're in denial. Life is pain, but then coping with it and finding the strength and going on, those are the keys. So, that's why I find I can live with disturbing stuff.

This courage and candour toward the process of unravelling the "uncomfortable" aspects of life through her art has enabled Barbara to recognize the social and familial influences on the development of her identity. Her work reflects "the layers of self, and [the] going within to find that pure part of your self that is truly you and not all these layers of self that are piled on you by family, by society." What's more, works such as "Flowering" (cover), "Reaching" (p. 266) and "Breaking the Cycle" (p. 264) represent yet another shift in the process of Barbara's reflections: confidence in our ability to create change.

I remember when I did the sketch [of "Breaking the Cycle," below], I was attending ... an adult children of alcoholics group, and there was much talk on cycles and family cycles and how the cycles of alcoholism keep going on. In order to get out of the cycle you have to break away ... step out of the cycle and be yourself and not be a

part of the same thing that keeps going around. It's about choice, too.... I see it as so positive, but I realize that not everybody would. If you are comfortable within that cycle and that's what you know, you are going to keep going around, and [this piece] would look threatening and scary.



When we create a work of art, and when we reflect upon another's work, we each bring to it our years of experience and our histories. These histories inevitably affect the way we read the meaning of the work and, as Barbara says, that can be threatening at times. However, to have our emotions and our experiences — whether pleasurable or distressing — confirmed by another must be, for both artist and viewer, the most satisfying aspect of creating and viewing art. It is a process of self-analysis, communication and affirmation, and it is this exchange that inspires Barbara.

I get feedback from other people who are going through the same thing and [who feel an] emotional connection to my work.... It's a healing process for myself, but it is also a healing process for others. When other people buy my work to have in their home to look at, to remind them of their own personal stuff that they are going through, that makes it really powerful.... To actually have everybody talking, that there is communication, is so powerful. I think that's the only thing that keeps me going: that there is support there, that I'm not totally wrong.

It is this communication — the connecting of diverse and individual histories through the appreciation of art — that gives Barbara satisfaction and pleasure in her career. She says that “Art is such a vital part of our lives, but we don't know it” and she suggests that, instead of accumulating “material objects ... that tend to be strictly functional,” we should surround ourselves with objects that “simply give us pleasure because they are meaningful to us.” In her home, for example:

Each piece of art has a very specific, personal reason and every time I look

at it, I make a connection.... I know myself: the more I work with images, [the more] I get to know myself and the more secure I am. I realize that I can be myself without alcohol. It seems like we are so busy trying to get out of the state we are in, instead of really acknowledging where we are and accepting that. We spend our life trying to mask who we are. Art helps you to access who you are and then you can share that.

Art has become for Barbara a process of politicization. By creating the imaginings in her mind and sharing them with others, she continues to learn about herself, her family and society. In turn, viewers also learn from her work. Where once she felt unsure of what she was able to offer through her art, she now is confident.

I never thought I had anything to say, and I think that speaks clearly about many women, too. You know: “I have nothing to say. I know nothing, and there isn't anything special about my life.” And I've come to realize that everybody has something; they just don't see it.

So, as you can see, Barbara and I did talk about the externally imposed pressures that enforce social conformity and the self-imposed feelings that lead to restraint. We also talked about the myth of the ideal, the not-so-sweet reality, and our capacity to step out of the cycle and create change. And, albeit indirectly, we talked about the process of politicization and the role art plays within that process.

It all begins with the imaginings of the mind's eye.