

Barbara Lee Smith is an artist, writer, educator, lecturer and curator. During her long career she has exhibited her work and taught in the United States and Canada, Europe, Mexico, Asia, Australia and New Zealand. She is the author of *Celebrating the Stitch*, published in 1991 and credited with helping to put contemporary embroidery on the art world map.

In addition to two works that are owned by Tacoma Community College, her work is in the collection of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Racine Art Museum and the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. She served for three years on the Board of Trustees of the Bellevue Arts Museum, and in 2009 received the Margaret K. Williams

Career Award from the Pierce County Arts Commission.

With an MFA in Mixed Media, she continues to mix it up with paint, collage and machine stitched drawing. She lives and works on Raft Island, Gig Harbor, Washington, although soon she will be relocating to Durham, North Carolina.

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Front Cover *Solstice Summer* 49"x79"

Inside Left *Entrance* 49"x37"

Inside Right *Warm Welcome* 37"x49"

Photo credit: Tom Holt



Transitions and Reflections **Barbara Lee Smith**

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The Gallery at Tacoma Community College

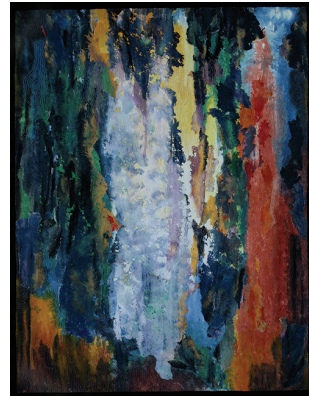
The spirit of transition infuses this new work from Barbara Lee Smith, evoked, perhaps, by her planned move with husband Mel from the Northwest coast back to the East coast where she originated. The cool colors so reflective of her Northwest focus join warm colors suggesting the internal tumult of change and transition.

In this work, the artist focuses more on her interior reality and less on the outward view of the landscape, resulting in a higher degree of abstraction. While we can still smell the sea air and feel the breeze and sense the movement of water and grasses in many of these works, the horizon has often faded or disappeared altogether.

Several of the works in this show are vertically oriented, suggesting fig-

ures rather than her more typical landscapes. In *Entrance*, for example, cool and warm colors intertwine, creating a semblance of moving through time. Vivid figures from the present appear to intermingle with fading figures and ultimately a spectral figure from the past.

Because many of Barbara's fundamental stylistic elements are retained, her work continues to be instantly recognizable, one of the marks of all accomplished artists. We can feel confident that we would recognize one of her works wherever in the world we might come across it. One staple is the use of



the durable fabric Lutradur, a rough, non-woven polyester with a dry, papery texture. In painting over this fabric, Barbara uses color to create a sense of place and mood. The same painted fabric cut into shapes and pressed onto the painting creates a sense of movement and three-dimensionality. Flowing lines

of stitching follow, suggestive of a topographical map. The stitching holds the piece together, not just technically but metaphysically, indicating movement and the passage of time in addition to the more usual changes in elevation.

One of the great pleasures for the viewer is the evolving perspective of

contemplating Barbara's work from different distances. At a distance, we may see what we first assume to be a watercolor painting. Closer up we see elements of a tapestry, a quilt, a collage. At the closest proximity, we become aware of the structuring of the elements that combine to make her work so complex and unique.

In general this latest work is darker than before, even though it includes elements of light and heat. In conversation, the artist mentioned hearing Helen Frankenthaler say that a painting that is about light should be mostly dark. I am



is an interior filled with heat and light. Barbara's use of filigreed fabric, created by applying a heat gun to the colored fabric until it melts, strengthens this effect, making the sensation of something consumed by the fire within even stronger.

One of my favorite poems is Tintern Abbey by William Wordsworth. When-

struck by how that principle applies to so many of the works included in this show. In *Warm Welcome* colors suggesting metal and rust create a feeling of age and oxidation. Inside the metallic-seeming structure, however,

ever I have the pleasure of viewing Barbara's work, I am reminded of the lines about "a sense sublime"

Of something far more
deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of
setting suns,
And the round ocean,
and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the
mind of man,
A motion and a spirit,
that impels
All thinking things, all objects
of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

That force surely permeates this show.

Exhibition Essay

by Dr. Pamela Transue