


ARTICUL ACTION

July 2014

A R T R E V I E W

Special Issue



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LISSA BOCKRATH
SUSAN LAMANTIA
BARBARA RACHKO
ELENA BALSIOUKAITE
BRAZDZIUNIENE
AMANDA VAN GILS
SUSAN LAMANTIA
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(Denmark)

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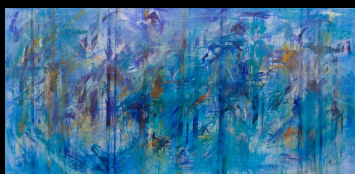


Susan LaMantia

"In my photos I show the world around me, whether seen in Denmark or on my many travels. I have a free and open attitude to photography as a medium, and I often experiment with various artistic effects. Reality of photography is suspended and combined into new contexts. I often print on canvas. "

(USA)

18



Barbara Rachko

"I want my work to look spontaneous, but organized - gestural, but not chaotic.

I hope that someone viewing my work will resonate with a painting and take delight in the energy of my work. "

(USA)

30



**Elena Balsiukaitė-
Brazdžiūnienė**

"I am drawn to Mexican and Guatemalan cultural objects—masks, carved wooden animals, papier mâché figures, and toys—for reasons similar to those of Man Ray and the modernists, who in their case were drawn to African art. "

(Lithuania)

44



Lissa Bockrath

"Making art is a form of life for me. It is often an unpredictable round journey from the inside out. It is the process that requires constant renewal by forgetting the moves already learned, it is the conscious choice to avoid the routine."

(USA)

56



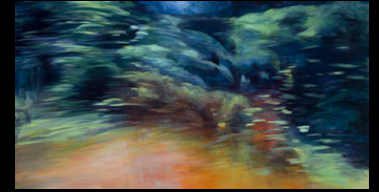
*"My new work addresses this change as it is manifested in tsunamis, hurricanes, wildfires and the altered landscape of our planet.
I have been impacted by powerful images and firsthand observations of these extreme weather patterns and their impact on earth and mankind. "*

70

(Australia)

Amanda van Gils

Essentially my work is concerned with the how we experience and record contemporary experiences. The advent of photography over a century ago caused many to question the place of painting; in recent years the steady rise of accessible digital photography has had an significant impact on progressing this question.



84

(Turkey)

Tamer Ertuna

Tamer Ertuna's interests and experiences have enhanced his fantasy world and energised him to create.

Changes in life influences him deeply. Enthusiasm or melancholy returns his works ironically.



96

(Spain)

Cristina Ramos

My works are a materialization of imagination, a reconstruction inside out of what is deeply laying in mind. Interested in dreams, as the field I consider the greatest exponent tool we have to show our most real 'I', I like to confront what belongs to our subconscious parcel with the surrounding reality, exploring the hidden world that resides inside human being minds.

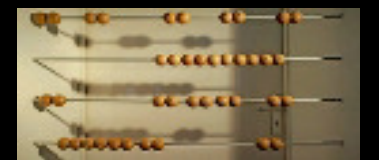


94

(Montenegro)

Milena Jovicev

"My work is inspired by everyday- life situations and paradoxes of contemporary society and world we live, that strange place saturated with the media, with an exaggerated production and exaggerated consumption."



96

(USA)

Jana Charl

"My longest enduring fascination is to capture the human form and psyche utilizing multiple media. Often my interpretation of the female form is anatomically exaggerated, emphasizing the curves that distinguish women as well as define feminine beauty and fertility."



99

(Turkey)

Çiğdem Menteşoğlu

" My artwork is based on personal history, on relationships and memory (dreams, space, geography, land). It is broadly related to memory, dreams, space and connotations. These topics are drawn from daily life as much as from unconscious thoughts. Essentially, I'm attempting to create images according to my own psychological needs. "



Barbara Rachko

(USA)

an artist's statement

"The assimilation of styles and motifs from African cultural artifacts into the work of avant-garde artists was a means of challenging conventional western aesthetic values and hierarchies that reflected what those artists perceived as a vacuous and moribund society. In looking to these sources to invigorate their own creative visions, what these artists actually discovered were new ways of seeing and making art. "

Wendy Grossman

in Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens

I am drawn to Mexican and Guatemalan cultural objects—masks, carved wooden animals, papier mâché figures, and toys—for reasons similar to those of Man Ray and the modernists, who in their case were drawn to African art. On trips to southern Mexico and Guatemala I frequent local mask shops, markets, and bazaars searching for the figures that will later populate my pastel paintings and photographs. How, why, when, and where these objects come into my life is an important part of the process. I take very old objects with a unique Mexican or Guatemalan past—most have been used in religious festivals—and give them a second life, so to speak, in New York in the present. When I return home I read prodigiously and find out as much about them as I can.

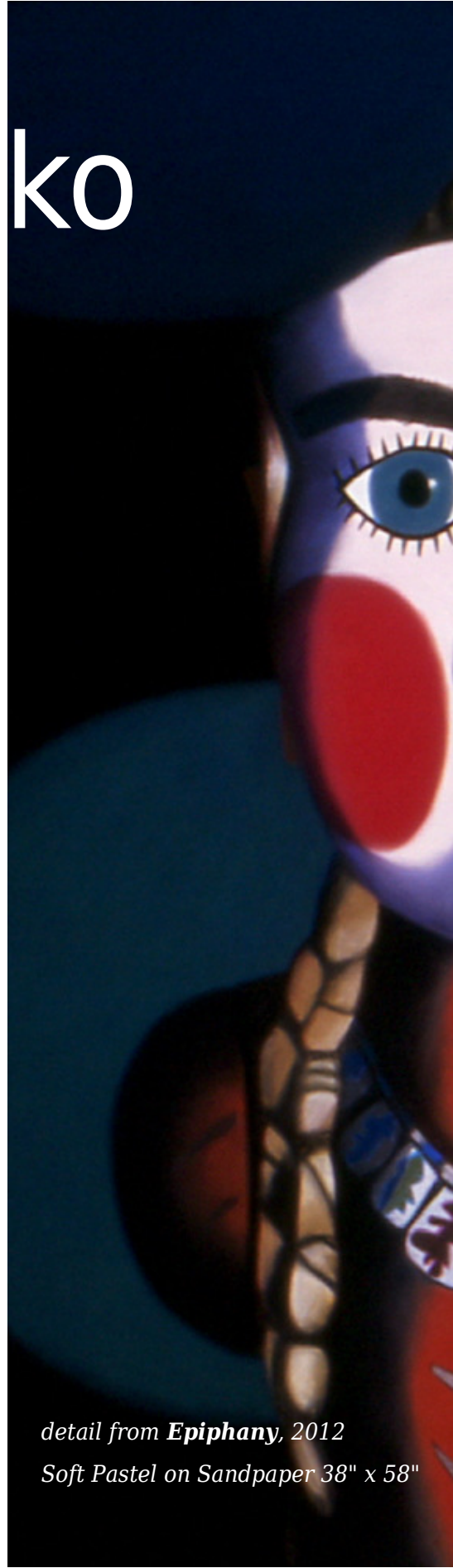
The Black Paintings series of pastel-on-sandpaper paintings grew directly from the earlier Domestic Threats. Both series use cultural objects as surrogates for human beings acting in mysterious, highly-charged narratives. In the Black Paintings the figures (actors) now take central stage. All background details, furniture, rugs, etc. are eliminated and are replaced by intense dark black pastel. Each painting takes months to complete as I slowly build up as many as 30 layers of soft pastel.

The idea for the Black Paintings began when I attended a jazz history course and learned how Miles Davis developed cool jazz from bebop. In bebop the notes were played hard and fast as musicians showcased their technical virtuosity. Cool jazz was a much more relaxed style with fewer notes, i.e., the music was pared down to its essentials. Similarly my current series evolved from dense, complex visual compositions into paintings that depict only the essential elements—the actors.

Barbara Rachko

detail from **Epiphany**, 2012

Soft Pastel on Sandpaper 38" x 58"





An interview with

Barbara Rachko

Hello Barbara, and welcome to ARTiculationAction. I would start this interview with my usual introductory question: what in your opinion defines a work of Art? By the way, what could be in your opinion the features that mark an artworks as a piece of Contemporary Art?

First, thank you very much for this opportunity to talk with you about art and my journey to become an artist. Whether we speak about dance, theater, film, music, visual art, etc., what all art forms have in common at their core is communication. I personally believe that without the component of communication, there is no art. The expression of human creative skill and imagination becomes art when it is appreciated for its beauty, complexity, emotional power, evocativeness, etc.

Therefore, a sympathetic and understanding audience is an essential element in the process. All artists have to create their own audience. I wish it were otherwise, but it's a fact of life for creative people. So much of an artist's time is spent educating people (the audience) about his/her work. Whether we start out to be one or not, all artists are educators. Since I am a painter and photographer, I will limit my remarks to visual art. Often visual artists fail to communicate anything. Why? Perhaps they haven't mastered their medium sufficiently to elicit a reaction from the viewer. Perhaps the viewer lacks the necessary artistic, cultural, or intellectual background to understand and appreciate what the artist is communicating. Maybe the viewer is distracted or preoccupied and not looking or thinking deeply enough.

There are many reasons. In answer to your second question, "*contemporary art*" is defined as art made since 1970 by living artists who are still making new work. People often interchange the term "*contemporary art*" with "*modern art*," but



Barbara Rachko

they are not the same. "*Modern art*" refers to the period between, roughly, the 1860's to 1970. Nowadays there are so many different kinds of art - new forms are developing all the time - that practically anything can be considered contemporary art as long as someone, an artist, says it is art. Ours is a fascinating, but bewildering, crazy, and often silly art world. Since I am based in New York, I see a lot that makes me ask, "*Is this really art?*" and "*Why would anyone make such a thing?*" I suppose if there is one element I look for in visual art it would have to be a high degree of craft. I want to see something that is well-crafted and that makes me wonder how the artist made it.



Incognito, 2014 Soft Pastel on Sandpaper 38" x 58"

Would you like to tell us something about your background? You graduated from the University of Vermont with a B.A. in Psychology and you later worked as a Naval officer. You later took classes at The Art League School in the late eighties studying intensely with Lisa Semerad and Diane Tesler: how have these experiences impacted on the way you currently produce your artworks? By the way, I sometimes I wonder if a certain kind of formal training in artistic disciplines could even stifle a young artist's creativity...

My road to becoming a professional artist is very unusual. As you mentioned, I have a degree in psy-

chology, but I did not go to art school. At the age of 25 I got my private pilot's license before spending the next two years amassing thousands of hours of flight time as I earned every flying license and rating I could, culminating with a Boeing-727 flight engineer certificate. I joined the Navy when I was 29, expecting to fly, but was not permitted to fly airplanes.

In the mid-1980s I was a Lieutenant working at the Pentagon and I hated my job as a computer analyst. I remember leaving work and getting into my car and bursting into tears because I was miserable. I felt so trapped. The Navy is not a regular job that you can quit with two weeks-notice.

I began looking for something else to do and discovered The Art League School in Alexandria, VA. I enrolled in classes with Lisa Semerad and spent two years developing my drawing skills using black and white media (charcoal, pencils, conte crayon, etc.). After that I moved on to color media and began studying soft pastel with Diane Tesler. During this time I was still in the Navy, working the midnight shift at the Pentagon and taking art classes during the day.

I was a very motivated student! After about three years I was getting quite proficient as an artist, entering local juried shows, winning prizes, garnering press coverage, etc. Prior to my career change, I worked hard to develop my portrait skills. I really didn't know how I could make a living other than by making commissioned portraits. I volunteered to run a weekly life drawing class at The Art League School in Alexandria, VA, where I made hundreds of figure drawings using charcoal.

I spent a semester commuting between Washington, DC and New York to study artistic anatomy at the New York Academy of Art. I spent another semester studying gross anatomy with medical students at Georgetown University Medical School. So I was well prepared to make photo-realistic portraits. I left the active duty Navy in 1989, but stayed in the Reserves. The Reserves provided a small part-time income and the only requirement was that I work one weekend a month and two weeks each year. Plus, I could retire after 13 more years and receive a pension. (In 2003 I retired from the Navy Reserve as a Commander). The rest of the time I was free to pursue my art. For a short time I made a living making commissioned photo-realist portraits in soft pastel on sandpaper. However, after a year I became very restless. I remember thinking, *"I did not leave a boring job just to make boring art!"*

Furthermore, I lost my interest in doing commissions because what I wanted to accomplish personally as an artist did not coincide with what portrait clients wanted. I completed my final portrait commission in 1990 and never looked back. To this day I remain reluctant to accept a commission of any kind. From studying with Lisa and Diane I gained an excellent technical foundation and developed



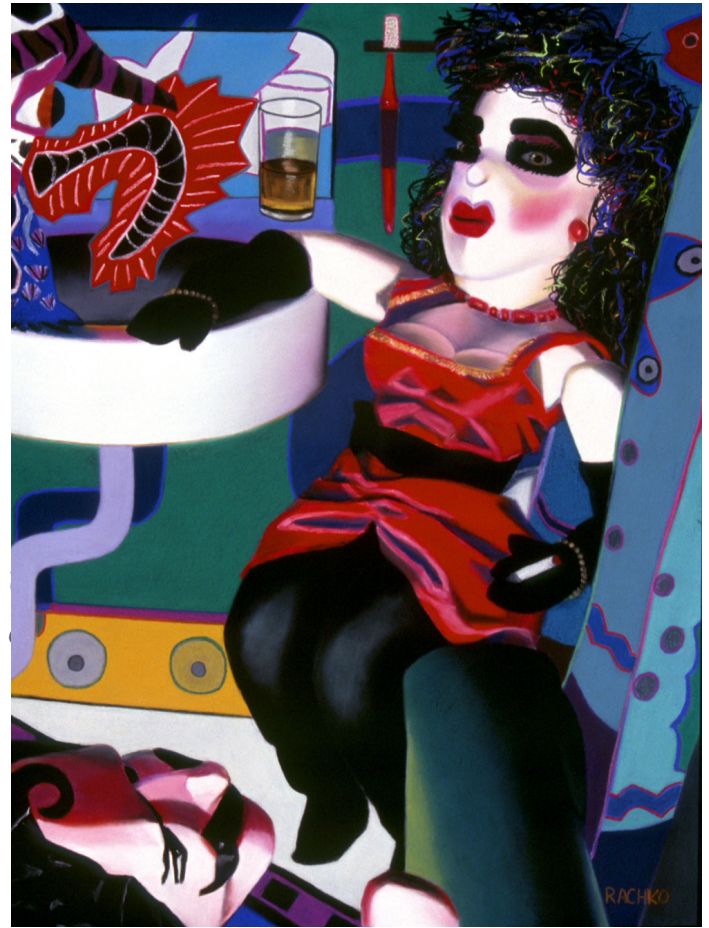
Broken, 2013

Soft Pastel on Sandpaper

my ability to draw and depict just about anything in soft pastel.

What I got from my time in the Navy is more nuanced. I used to think that the 7 years I spent on active duty were wasted. During those 7 years I should have been working on my art. Now I see things differently.

The Navy taught me to be disciplined, to be goal-oriented and focused, to love challenges, and in everything I do, to pay attention to the details. Trying to make it as an artist in New York is nothing BUT challenges so these qualities serve me well, whether I'm creating paintings, shooting and printing photographs, or trying to understand the art business and keep up with social media.



Scene Thirteen: Bathroom, 2002

Soft Pastel on Sandpaper

I enjoy spending long solitary hours working to become a better artist. I am meticulous about craft and will not let a work out of my studio or out of the darkroom until it is as good as I can make it.

Needless to say, I believe developing excellent technical skills is paramount. Artists can, and should, go ahead and break the rules later, but they won't be able to make strong work, expressing what they want, without a firm foundation. Once you have the skills, you can focus on the things that really make your work come alive and speak to an audience.

Before starting to elaborate about your production, would you like to tell to our readers

something about your process and set up for making your artworks? In particular, what technical aspects do you mainly focus on your work? And how much preparation and time do you put in before and during the process of creating a piece?

My process is slow and labor-intensive. First, there is foreign travel – often to Mexico or Guatemala - to find the cultural objects - masks, carved wooden animals, paper mâché figures, and toys - that are my subject matter. I search the local markets, bazaars, and mask shops for these folk art objects. I look for things that are old, that look like they have a history, and were probably used in religious festivals of some kind. Typically, they are colorful, one-of-a-kind objects that have lots of inherent personality.



Scene Fifteen: Living Room, 2002

Soft Pastel on Sandpaper

How they enter my life and how I get them back to my New York studio is an important part of my art-making practice. My working methods have changed dramatically over the nearly thirty years that I have been an artist. My current process is a much-simplified version of how I used to work. As I pared down my imagery in the current series, "*Black Paintings*," my creative process quite naturally pared down, too. One constant is that I have always worked in series with each pastel painting leading quite naturally to the next. Another is that I always set up a scene, plan exactly how to light and photograph it, and work with a 20" x 24" photograph as the primary reference material. In the setups I look for eye-catching compositions and interesting colors, patterns, and shadows.



Stalemate, 2013

Soft Pastel on Sandpaper

Sometimes I make up a story about the interaction that is occurring between the "actors" (as I think of these folk art objects). In the "*Domestic Threats*" series I photographed the scene with a 4" x 5" Toyo Omega view camera. In my "*Gods and Monsters*" series I shot rolls of 220 film using a Mamiya 6. I still like to use an old analog camera for fine art work, although lately I am rethinking this practice. Nowadays the first step is to decide which photo I want to make into a painting (currently I have a backlog of photographs to choose from) and to order a 19 1/2" x 19 1/2" image (my Mamiya 6 shoots square images) printed on 20" x 24" paper. I get the print made at Manhattan Photo on West 20th Street in New York.



Scene Twenty: Living Room, 2006

Soft Pastel on Sandpaper

Typically I have in mind the next two or three paintings that I want to create. Once I have the reference photograph in hand, I make a preliminary tonal charcoal sketch on a piece of white drawing paper. The sketch helps me think about how to proceed and points out potential problem areas ahead. Then I am ready to start making the painting. I work on each pastel-on-sandpaper painting for approximately three months. I am in my studio 7 to 8 hours a day, five days a week. During that time I make thousands of creative decisions as I apply and layer soft pastels (I have thousands to choose from), blend them with my fingers, and mix new colors directly on the sandpaper. A finished piece consists of up to 30 layers of soft pastel.

My self-invented technique accounts for the vivid, intense color that often leads viewers of my originals to look very closely and ask, "What medium is this?" I believe I am pushing soft pastel to its limits, using it in ways that no other artist has done before.

Now let's focus on your art production: I would start from Domestic Threats, an extremely interesting series that has been evolving for more than a decade and that our readers have already started to get to know in the introductory pages of this article. I would suggest to visit your website directly at http://barbararachko.com/gallery_paintings/web/gallery_paintings2.htm in order to get a wider idea of it... In the meanwhile, would you like to tell us



A Promise Meant to be Broken, 2007

Soft Pastel on Sandpaper

***something about the genesis of this project?
What was your initial inspiration?***

In 1991 my future sister-in-law sent, as a Christmas present, two brightly painted wooden figures from Oaxaca. One was a large, blue and white polka dot flying horse, the other a bear, painted with red, white, and black dots and lines. At this time I was looking for something new to paint with soft pastel, having found portraits deeply unsatisfying.

I had never seen anything like these Oaxacan figures and was intrigued. I started asking artist friends about Oaxaca and soon learned that the city has a unique style of painting, the self-titled Oaxacan school.



Sometimes He Still Tried To Restrain Her, 2005

Soft Pastel on Sandpaper

The painter, Rufino Tamayo, and husband and wife photographers, Manuel and Lola Alvarez Bravo, were from Oaxaca. (Manuel Alvarez Bravo founded an important photography museum there). I already had been a fan of Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and other artists associated with Mexico, and had a long-standing interest in pre-Columbian civilizations. I knew some Spanish from classes in high school. I began reading everything I could find about Oaxaca and Mexico and soon became fascinated with the Day of the Dead. In 1992 my then-boyfriend, Bryan, and I made our first trip to Mexico, spending a week in Oaxaca to see Day of the Dead observances and to study the Mixtec and Zapotec ruins (Monte Alban,



Scene Fourteen: Kitchen, 2005
Soft Pastel on Sandpaper

Yagul, Mitla, etc.). We spent another week in Mexico City to visit Diego Rivera's murals at the Ministry of Education, Frida Kahlo's Casa Azul, and nearby ancient archeological sites (the Templo Mayor, Teotihuacan, etc.).

I began collecting Mexican folk art on that first trip. I still have fond memories of collecting my first mask, a big wooden dragon with a Conquistador's face on its back. Bryan and I found it high on a wall in a dusty Oaxacan shop. The dragon was three and a half feet long and three feet wide. Because it was fragile, I hand-carried it onto the plane and was able to store it in the first class cabin (this was pre-9/11). I chuckle to remember that we covered its finely carved toes with rolled up socks to prevent them from breaking.

I have been back to Mexico many times, most recently in March when I visited the Gulf coast area to study Olmec art. I travel there to study pre-Columbian history, archaeology, mythology, culture, and the arts. Mexico is an endlessly fascinating country that has long been an inspiration for artists.

As you have remarked in your artist's statement, the imagery is autobiographical and very personal, but has universal associations: I have been always fascinated with the re-contextualizing power of Art, and with the way some objects or even some concepts often gain a second life when they are "transduced" on a canvas, or in a block of marble... so I would like to ask you if in your opinion personal experience is an absolutely indispensable part of a creative process... Do you think that a creative process could be disconnected from direct experience?

Personal experience is an indispensable and inseparable part of the creative process. For me art and life are one and I suspect that is true for most artists. When I look at each of my paintings I can remember what was going on in my life at the time I made it. Each is a sort of veiled autobiography waiting to be decoded and in a way, each is also a time-capsule of the larger zeitgeist. Everything finds its way into the work.

By the way, I'm sort of convinced that some informations & ideas are hidden, or even "encrypted" in the environment we live in, so we



Trio, 2010

Soft Pastel on Sandpaper

need -in a way- to decipher them. Maybe that one of the roles of an artist could be to reveal unexpected sides of Nature, especially of our inner Nature... what's your point about this?

I agree. Artists in general are more sensitive to these sorts of hidden ideas, feelings, emotions, etc. in ways that most non-artists are not. It's a cliché but it's true.

Another interesting series of yours that has particularly impressed me and on which I would



on your choice of "palette" and how it has changed over time?

That is a great question! I think you are correct that my palette has darkened. It's partly from having lived in New York for so long. This is a generally dark city. We famously dress in black and the city in winter is mainly greys and browns.

Also, the "*Black Paintings*" are definitely post-9/11 work. My husband, Bryan, was tragically killed onboard the plane that crashed into the Pentagon. Losing Bryan was the biggest shock I ever have had to endure, made even harder because it came just 87 days after we had married. We had been together for 14 ½ years and in September 2001 were happier than we had ever been. He was killed so horribly and so senselessly. Post 9/11 was an extremely difficult, dark, and lonely time.

In the summer of 2002 I resumed making art, continuing to make "*Domestic Threats*" paintings. That series ran its course and ended in 2007. Around then I was feeling happier and had come to better terms with losing Bryan (it's something I will never get over but dealing with loss does get easier with time). When I created the first "*Black Paintings*" I consciously viewed the background as literally, the very dark place that I was emerging from, exactly like the figures emerging in these paintings. The figures themselves are wildly colorful and full of life, so to speak, but that black background is always there.

like to spend some words is your recent *Black Paintings*. It goes without saying that the pieces from this series are darker than the ones from *Domestic Threats*.

However, one of the features of it that have mostly impacted on me is the effective mix between dark background and the few bright tones, which established such a synergy rather than a contrast, and I daresay that all the dark around creates a prelude to light: it seems to reveal such a struggle, a deep tension and intense emotions... By the way, any comments



Big Wow, 2011 Soft Pastel on Sandpaper

A feature of your works and in particular with these ones (we are referring to the ones from Black Paintings that will be published in this spread of pages) that has mostly impacted on me is your capability of creating a deep intellectual interaction, communicating a wide variety of states of mind : even though I'm aware that this might sound a bit naif, I have to admit that in a certain sense some pieces of this series unsettle me a bit... I can recognize in them an effective mix between anguish and thoughtless, maybe such a hidden happiness... I would go as far as to state that this work, rather than simply describing something, pose us a question: forces us to meditation...

I'm sure you and other viewers will see all kinds of states of mind, like anguish, happiness, etc. in my paintings and I think that's wonderful because it means my work is communicating. Sometimes people have told me that some of my images are unsettling and that's fine, too. I would never presume to tell anyone what to think about my work.

Some of this is intentional, but much of it is not. All of my life experiences, what I'm thinking about each day, what I'm feeling, what I'm reading, the music I'm listening to, etc. get embedded into the work. I don't understand exactly how that happens, but I am glad it happens. This work does come from a deep place, much deeper than I am able to even explain myself. After nearly three decades as an artist, the intricacies of my creative process are still a mystery. Personally I am rather fond of mysteries.

9) During these years your artworks have ben exhibited in several occasions, both nationally and internationally... It goes without saying that feedbacks and especially awards are capable of supporting an artist: I was just wondering if the expectation of a positive feedback- could even influence the process of an artist... and I sometimes wonder if it could ever exist a genuine relationship between business and Art... By the way, how much important is for you the feedback of your audience? Do you ever think to whom will enjoy your Art when you conceive your pieces?

I can't say that I think at all about audience reaction while I'm creating a painting in my studio. Of course, I like people to respond favorably to my work. Generally, I'm thinking about technical problems - making work that is exciting to look at, well-composed, vibrant, up to my exacting standards, etc. When I finish a painting, it is the best thing I am capable of making at that point in time.



Blue Misterioso

I think and look at it so long and with such intensity, that it could not possibly have turned out any differently. There is an inevitability to the whole lengthy process, going back to when I first laid eyes on the folk art figures in a dusty shop in a third world country.

Looking at a newly-finished painting on my easel I often think, *"Of course I was drawn to this figure so that it could serve this unique function in this particular painting."*

Thanks a lot for your time and for sharing your thoughts, Barbara. My last question deals with your future plans: what's next for you? Anything coming up for you professionally that you would like readers to be aware of?

In September I will be exhibiting at the Perkins Center for the Arts in Collingswood, New Jersey. Next year my work is scheduled to be in a group exhibition that will travel throughout museums in Spain. Details are still being worked out.

I have been experimenting with photographing my Mexican and Guatemalan figures using an iPad and one particular app. These photos allow me to take the same subject matter and treat it in a completely new way. Unlike my other work, they are quick and relatively simple images to make. I am intrigued and excited by the possibilities so have been sharing them on social media.

People seem to like them. I invite people to connect with me on Facebook (www.facebook.com/barbararachko) and subscribe to my blog (www.barbararachkoscoloredust.com).

I recently published my first eBook, *"From Pilot to Painter,"* on Amazon. Links to everything can be found on my website (www.barbararachko.com).

Thank you very much for your extremely interesting questions, Dario! I've enjoyed speaking with you.

An interview by Dario Rutigliano, curator

articulaction@post.com