

Barbara Rachko: Journey to Finding Success as an Artist

by Erica Fortwengler



Photo credit: Renee Phillips, Manhattan Arts International

For many artists, success in the art world seems elusive.

Barbara Rachko, New York and Alexandria-based artist and former Art League student, smartly perseveres. She does so by combining her talent and creativity with sharp focus and determination. Once she decided she was going to devote her life to her painting, she would not be deterred from achieving success. Rachko can credit herself for the good fortune that has come her way. She has made it happen.

Rachko became immersed in classes at The Art League School in the late eighties and continued through the early nineties. With an aptitude for drawing, she took classes during the day to balance the tediousness of working the night shift at the Pentagon as a Naval officer. She studied intensely with Lisa Semerad and Diane Tesler, both her most influential instructors and mentors, to set the foundation for her art career. "I would not be where I am today without them. From Lisa I developed a strong foundation of drawing skills. She is terrific, strict and honest when you need a teacher to be. Diane has a way of bringing out your innate talent, and she doesn't push her style or subject matter on her students like so many instructors do. She is just a wonderful person and a wonderful teacher. I have never thanked them, and I should."

She resigned from active duty in 1988 (retiring from the Naval Reserve as a commander in 2003), deciding to devote herself to becoming a full-time artist. Focusing on portraiture, Rachko took classes where she needed to acquire the necessary education. She studied anatomy at Georgetown University Medical School and the New York Academy of Art, color theory at the University of Maryland, and she studied drawing with Semerad and pastel painting with Tesler at The Art League.

Rachko first exhibited her work and won recognition at The Art League Gallery. Continuing to advance, Rachko wanted to challenge herself beyond the Washington, DC art scene. She sent slides to a prestigious Manhattan art gallery, and the director decided to represent her. Around the same time, she serendipitously reconnected with an agent she had met in Washington, who had just moved to New York, who also wanted to represent her. She and her future husband decided it was time to relocate to New York.

"To be a successful artist you have to also be a business person. You can't be afraid to put yourself out there, think creatively, and try new things to get your work seen." Rachko is currently represented by six galleries across the United States, has had more than 30 solo shows and has been a part of over 150 group exhibitions. She researches galleries and sends information along to those who she thinks would be interested in representing her. She's developed catalogs and marketing materials to send to dealers and gal-



leries. Some ventures have been met with success, others, have not. Almost every gallery that she's gotten into has been a result of her sending in slides without a personal connection. Rachko is also part of a professional artist network with more than 500 members in New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut. "It's great to have a resource of other artists in New York—a built-in network of people you can go to when you have a question about a venue, or when you want advice, information, or feedback. We're all working towards the same goal. It's so important to help each other out."

Of course it doesn't hurt that Rachko's work is compelling, distinctive, and innovative. The "Domestic Threats" series, which she has been working on for fifteen years, combines objects from Mexican folk art, such as masks, carved objects, and figures, and places them in a modern setting to create a thought-provoking narrative. Rachko's work is extremely large for a pastel artist, some of her pieces reaching as large as four by six feet. "I can't imagine working in any other medium than pastel. I love to draw, I love to get my hands into the piece and use my fingers to blend. I love doing something so unexpected with the medium—people expect pastel to be pale, soft, and wispy, but my pieces are bold, vibrant, and saturated with color." From 2002-2006, Rachko studied photography at the International Center of Photography in New York. Her self-printed photographs have resulted in a new pastel series, "Black Paintings," that she began last year.

"There are so many talented artists that are deserving of success and gallery representation. What are the New York galleries looking for? If I only knew." Rachko continues to send out images, contact new galleries, and think of innovative ways to get her work seen. Rachko's unwavering work ethic has allowed her to gain the exposure and accolades so many artists seek, and most importantly, the ability to continue her career as a full-time artist. ■