

Serena Barton communes with ancient souls. *Annunciations and Epiphanies*, her new show of mixed-media paintings at ONDA Gallery, explores the work of four female artists who died centuries ago.

The 52-year-old Portland native grew up in Eugene but returned to her birthplace in 1965. Although she has been a professional counselor for 23 years, she has painted seriously for only about six years.

"I don't consciously connect them, but people say they see a communication between psychology and the looks on the faces in my portraits," she says. Indeed, gazing at these women, you can see the emotional conflicts in the characters staring back at you.

With her rich oils, Barton has depicted the lives of four female artists who lived from the Medieval through the Baroque periods. Our historical knowledge of female artists is scant at best, so her research is welcome.

To what is known about each of them

she applies her artist's imagination to fill in the details and add depth. The result is intriguing visual biography.

Barton enhances her paintings with collage and text from archival record—letters, commentary, images of the artist's work—that add critical information about her subjects.

"Layering collage and text evoke for me the interplay of knowledge and mystery that accompanies our efforts to understand the experience of someone from another time and place," Barton explains. The surprise is the connection each viewer can make with the psyches of the long-dead women.

Barton's subjects are Caterina dei Vigri (St. Catherine of Bologna), Judith Leyster,

Resurrection

Portland artist revives and revisits the lives of four female painters

BY HERON



"A Shipboard Declaration"

Sofonisba Anguissola and Marietta Robusti. "I chose these artists because their work and lives speak to me in spite of the hundreds of years separating us. In my inner world, previous historical periods tend to coexist with the present."

Caterina dei Vigri, 1413-1463, was an Italian noblewoman who joined the Convent of the Poor Clares at age 14. She has many spiritual visions recorded and wrote books of spiritual inspiration. She was a writer, a musician and a painter. Her ideas about self-expression were often in conflict with the teachings of the church, which

directed her to be self-effacing and obedient. "I am interested in the tension between

the artist Caterina and the nun who became St. Catherine. Apparently, she suffered a lot in trying to reconcile these roles," Barton says, "but she was a strong and capable woman and overcame many difficulties."

Judith Leyster, 1609-1699, was a Dutch painter from Haarlem who started selling her work at age 15. Until recently, much of her work was attributed to men. She married another painter and had several children, but only one of her paintings is extant today from the period after her marriage. Did her husband forbid her to paint, or was she too overwhelmed

with the work of being a wife and mother?

Sofonisba Anguissola lived in Italy from 1535 until 1625. She was lucky enough to be educated along with her brothers—an unusual privilege for women of that era. She became

lady-in-waiting and court painter for King Philip of Spain. "I can imagine that going alone to another country's court as she did was a courageous and difficult act," Barton guesses. "She lived to a ripe old age and did pretty much as she pleased."

Marietta Robusti, 1560-1590, was a famous portrait painter and musician known as La Tintoretta. She was invited to go to the court of King Philip of Spain, but her father, the famed painter Tintoretto, forbade her to go, as he needed her with him.

"Emotional dependence? Needed her in the workshop?" Barton ponders. He arranged a



"Sofonisba Remembers"

marriage for her, and she died at age 30 in childbirth. Her father's output greatly decreased after that. "Hmm," Barton muses. "I wonder how she felt about not going to Spain? How did she move from the role of tomboy to the model of female deportment?" At least one of her paintings had been attributed to her father.

Barton's work reminds us that gynophobia has existed for a very long time. We can expect that in centuries past, women's work was undervalued and harshly judged, just as it often is today. Then as now, it would have been judged by men. Subject matter would have been limited, ideas censored. Women with special powers were being burned at the stake in

huge numbers. Women were expected—no, required—to marry or join a nunnery. The idea that some of these women might have been lesbians does not even arise, because that was not even a concept then.

So, how did a woman of talent and self-respect survive? Barton the counselor informs Barton the painter, and the challenge these women endured enter these

insightful paintings. [7]

ANNUNCIATIONS AND EPIPHANIES runs through April 24 at ONDA Gallery, 2215 N.E. Alberta St.

HERON is a Portland free-lance writer and artist.



"Judith and Catherine"

"Sofonisba at Court"

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