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11

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Melissa Barbieri

A very 'fresh' take on ancient Fresco methods

by PHILIP ELIASOPH, Senior Arts Editor

Chimerically garbed in an unpredictable wardrobe from paint-splattered denim to a silk and cashmere *haute couture* ensemble, artist Melissa Barbieri is stretching out a mural sized canvas. Stepping out of her studio, she's a vision of Jackie Kennedy with some of Georgia O'Keeffe's earthiness. Converging her autobiography and boundless creative energies – she's on a jet-fueled, art-world romp. She's tearing up any boundaries between the



imaginary and reality creating a sensation.

With her "cowgirl à la Grace Kelly panache", her autobiographical narrative is a sprawling fresco like the ethereal ceilings of a Baroque villa. But instead of missionary saints or cherubs floating up into the heavens, every brushstroke confirms Barbieri's delicate touch is the invisible subject. An encapsulating title for this epic painting is: "My Big Life."

Classically trained and romantically inspired by 19th-century poets, she reminds us that art generates power when technical skill merges with passionate vibrancy. "All art is autobiographical," said film maestro Federico Fellini. "The pearl is the oyster's biography," he concluded.

There's plenty of attitude, spunk, and febrile intensity. And from the likes of her sizzling string of successful mural projects and new easel paintings, a clear vision emerges. Often tart, this sassiness is lathered in degrees of a brash, Annie Oakley-esque capability. "I can do anything better than you" is the admirable self-confidence it takes to pull off painting every square inch of an palatial dining room for one of her celebrity clients. Covering an entire surface allows no room for a "do over."

She's labored too hard and logged too many hours engaged in backbreaking labor to pass off her off as a lightweight. Preparing a fresco is no walk in the park. No wonder it took an entire squad of athletic young apprentices - *garzoni* - to flex their muscles to prepare surfaces for masters like Masaccio and Michelangelo. We can't be anything but simply dazed by her fortitude.

Barbieri exudes the frisson of a good uncorked champagne, while her sheer physicality as

an industrious painter deserves a blue-collar, late afternoon, domestic beer. Retreating to her library, she curls up with authors such as Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Babe Paley with background music provided by Shirley Bassey and Lucinda Williams.

With increasing recognition, her clients and collectors are delighted to see the next aquatic fantasy. In these marvelous compositions, mollusks, star fish, turtles, sharks, and art nouveau-inspired jelly fish dance within the illusionistic realms of two dimensional renderings and three dimensional spaces. Myriad forms of marine life swim within her phantasmagorical fresco paintings. They remind us of antique Minoan palaces and Roman villas while exuding a contemporary beat. Look carefully – the surfaces sparkles in the light.

Mastering the organic elements of lime, plaster, and water-based pigments, Barbieri has achieved unsurpassable proficiency in a painting medium that only the most daring – or "pazzo" – would even attempt to master: "buon fresco." In the footsteps of Giotto, Fra Angelico, and Raffaello, she transforms rooms, walls, and framed easel paintings, into realms of wonder.

Unless you were living during the Florentine golden age or Rome under Papa Giuliano II, one cannot just go to the Yellow Pages and look for



a "Fresco Master." I'm not sure how Cosimo de' Medici or Francesco Gonzaga would have found her number. Certainly not living in Connecticut in the here and now. But if, by chance, you find Barbieri's cell phone – consider yourself lucky.

VENÜ Magazine – Interview with Melissa Barbieri

A successful muralist designs her new life as a studio fine artist:
Lessons learned and new challenges ahead

VENÜ – In the last three years or so your artistic focus has moved towards a greater intensification of your fine art studio work. You achieved so much success as a muralist, what's happened now?

MELISSA – I've painted what I call "fine art murals" for over 25 years, for a very sophisticated clientele coast to coast. And it's important to state that I think the term "muralist" just means the ability to translate art on a grander scale. To me, because I like to paint large, many of my fine art paintings could be considered murals, and vice-versa. A muralist has to have an innate sense of design, scale, and proportion as well as an understanding of architecture. Two of the most amazing artists I can think of who had that are Diego Rivera and Antoni Gaudi - one a muralist and one

an architect in the strictest sense, but the excitement I feel looking at their work in the drama of layers and color and emotion is every bit as profound as the most tightly executed easel painting.

For 15 years, I had this studio set up like a Renaissance workshop, with apprentice assistants and a huge amount of space. Now that I've put my two sons through college and with that phase of my life behind me, I've scaled down. I'm able to be totally dedicated to my important work now, which requires total concentration.

VENÜ – When did you first realize that your career path was to become a self-sustaining artist? What is it about your persona – your balance of mind, spirit, and creativity – that put you on this pathway?



MELISSA – Well, I had always known I wanted to be an artist. I was in art school at the age of 19 in Florida when I decided to leave and run off with the captain of a crewboat in the Gulf of Mexico! I was married and had two babies by the time I was 23, so when I left for Texas I had to make a living somehow for myself and 2 small boys. Everyone on the coast of Texas is either a cowboy or a surfer, so that's what I painted. I made enough to get by for a couple of years by painting billboards for surf shops, boatyards, and even a cattle ranch.

When I moved back North I opened my studio in Greenwich, Connecticut where I received my first commission to paint a mural for a wealthy French family who had a home here.

Through the years I've had some amazing opportunities to create art for some pretty exciting residences; a notable 5th Avenue apartment, a home in Gloucester, England, and a commission to do a painting that was presented to Prince Rainier of Monaco.

VENÜ – Let's talk for a moment about your remarkable rendering and compositional abilities. How much of this did you learn in art school versus how much is some instinctive talent in your DNA?

MELISSA – My grandmother was an artist from Southport, Connecticut, and she was the biggest influence in my young life, taking me to the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a girl, to the beach and harbor to paint al fresco. She enrolled me in the Covino Academy



of Art at age 14 where I studied for 4 years. There I learned all the rigors of classical academic oil painting, which was the foundation for everything I knew about art. And I learned from my mother that you can't wait for inspiration if you want to be a success - your inspiration will come from sheer hard work.

When I was young I was uncultivated, like a young person should be. I was always getting reprimanded in school for either laughing or talking or drawing caricatures of certain teachers, and I still have that side to me in full force. But as time went on I became very serious and totally consumed with my art. It's lovely and exhilarating at the same time, but it's all about the work.

VENÜ – So often people misunderstand the aesthetic basis of “realism.” They might mistake “realism” for something that has almost a photographic resemblance to actual objects. You are a very romantic realist painter. What's your take on the ageless topic of “art versus illusion?”

MELISSA – I think for me it's the old adage, “Art for art's sake”...not to record or idealize nature, but to make art ‘out’ of nature... a very Baudelairean philosophy. I'm really concerned with the sensuousness of beauty in the work I do. In my paintings and frescoes, I'm looking to capture a feeling, a deep impression. Philip Roth wrote a line that said somewhere “from miles down and eons back.” I admire technicality and detail, and although there are some photorealist painters whose work I admire very much, the genre as a whole is too sterile for me. The detail I'm after is in layers and in trying to evoke a very strong or very subtle mood... trying to capture the essence is how I'd describe it.

VENÜ – Your clients and collectors seem to click with you and your art. They magically seem to “get it” when commissioning you to create a mural or when purchasing a fine art painting. How do you describe that special “Melissa” quality – that really connects you to your appreciative audience?

MELISSA – I'm very confident in my abilities to connect with my collectors, because there's a mutual respect for the client who really wants to own a piece of my work, or who has the trust when commissioning me to create a piece of art specifically for them.

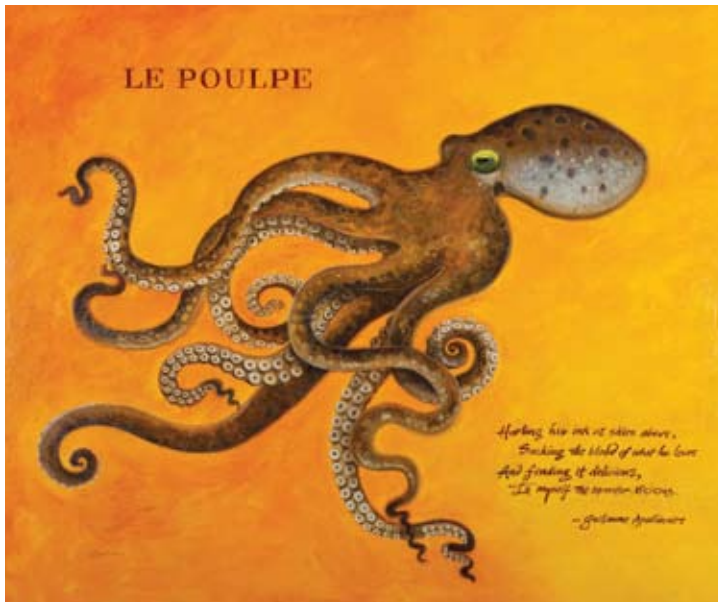
I do a substantial amount of custom pieces. I first invite a client to see where I virtually live three quarters of my life. Anyone who walks through the door can probably feel the intensity or electricity of what's going on in this place by sheer volume and the layers of paintings, drawings, sketches and frescoes in various stages all over the walls and floors.

I think people want to feel there's a truth in an artist's convictions, and collectors are looking for a high, high degree of quality in what they're purchasing. I think both of those credos are a big part of my success.

VENÜ – Let's take a stroll down memory lane a bit to review your training and early work as a professional. What inspired you to attend the Ringling College of Art in Sarasota, Florida? What did you find out there about yourself?

MELISSA – Well, I found out I loved the beach, swimming, a Corona Light and a golden tan and none of those was conducive to studying! ... Really, I was too young to take full advantage. Remember, I was classically trained at a young age - at 14, I was learning to mix paints from Leonardo's paint recipes, so when I





came to Ringling in the early 80s, figurative realism wasn't *de rigueur*. After my classical training I found a year of art school hadn't taught me much so I left... What taught me was to take all the early training I'd had, and then the freedom to take all that knowledge and expand it into my own style.

VENÜ – One of your unique qualities is an uncanny ability to apply “fresco secco” with remarkable flexibility. Tell us about the demands of this medium? How did this ancient method – used in Egyptian tombs and Roman villas – survive as a painting medium in the 21st century? Why is it so ‘tricky’ – and how have you come to master it?

MELISSA – I adore the sound of the word “Fresco” – it must be the Italian in me. Who isn't captivated by the enigma of a fresco painting? Who even knows how to do it anymore? It's virtually a lost art. There's an Italian text written during the Renaissance by Cennino Cellini called “*Il Libro delle Arte*.” It was translated in the 1920s by Daniel V. Thompson. I'd been so immersed in the classical techniques of oil painting, and I was intrigued with the idea of being able to paint in fresco. So I began reading.

The fascinating thing for me is the fact that one of the components in this lime putty is the skeletal debris of marine organisms and coral beds – and that fresco as a medium is organic and green. It's from the earth, from the sea. The plaster actually breathes. I wanted to be able to create paintings with that soft tactile quality. It really lends itself to a style of painting that I consider very modern. You can run your hand over a fresco panel and feel 600 years under your fingertips. It's pretty amazing.

VENÜ – What's the most difficult part about being a practicing, serious, and highly dedicated artist in today's culture?

MELISSA – There's a balance so coveted that you're striving for... the need to work and make a living vs. the time you're left with to create what you consider your real art. Most serious artists I've known seem to have one thing in common: a very shy and sensitive core on the one hand, and yet a ferocious ego and will on the other. As an artist you spend countless hours in solitude, and there's a lonesome quality to it. It's like being in a small boat on a still sea. I've been very fortunate in my career to have been able to make a living solely from my art for 25 years, and my trusted assistant, Ann

Rechtermann, an artist in her own right, by my side for 19 of those. I rely on her set of eyes and her criticism to keep me focused.

What's missing in today's culture is a place like Paris in the 1920s where artists and writers were coming out of the woodwork – how amazing to be able to congregate in cafés discussing philosophies, having a camaraderie of intelligent conversation, and feeding off the energy of what was blazing up around them.....

VENÜ – You are so deeply engaged in literature – taking inspiration from so many classic and contemporary novels. There's a very 19th century spirit in your life – devoted to romantics such as Byron, Keats, and the Bronte sisters. How do these literary adventures translate into your artistic vision?

MELISSA – For me, after a day of say 6 or 7 hours painting, I'm pretty fatigued and need to take a break before my night starts. I have my music and my books. A lot of evenings I'll go to the library which for me is an adventure. To prowl the aisles on a hunt for a book and leave with an armful is the greatest thing.

I find the poets and writers and artists of the last decades and centuries so captivating – their lives and struggles and what made them who they were. I read all the biographies and classics and philosophy I can, and pour over books on every subject imaginable.

When I read about Lord Byron galloping his horse over the Lido in Venice in his cape and open collar, it's very potent to my imagination... I can't help it – he's so “alive”! The written word has a very erotic and sometimes sensuous quality to me that's always fueled my imagination for being creative.

VENÜ – When all is said and done – let's face it – you finish a major painting, and you just can't put down your brush and say: “now I am satisfied.” What is that inner drive which challenges the very essence of your artistic spirit?

MELISSA – As soon as I finish a painting, I have two more started and usually half a dozen ideas as well as notes and sketches for another series. I'm insatiable with ideas, and sometimes that's the hardest part of being productive – harnessing my own mind!

I equate painting to that feeling you get of being in love – that sensation when you can't wait to start working in the morning, and then it's the last thing you're thinking of when you close your eyes at night. “A painter's brush consumes his dreams.” That's a quote I love by Yeats.

I was reading this interview with Grace Kelly from the 1950s when she told the interviewer, “I love being in love. It puts the lights in my eyes.” And that's exactly what it's like for me painting.

VENÜ – Finally, as one who has frescoed so many wonderful navigational maps and charts of coastal New England – I wonder if you can tell us what's your direction for the future? Where will the winds of fate steer you – as you seek higher and distant horizons?

MELISSA – I'm preparing to begin a series I call “*Under Glass*” for a residence in Miami, and I'll be returning to Martha's Vineyard to work on some frescoes I'm painting for a client who has this beautiful rugged sea captain's home on the ocean.

Those things keep me excited and fresh. The rest of the time, besides a much-needed trip to the Amalfi Coast with my husband to get some rest and inspiration, I'll be in my studio painting and getting prepared for my next show. I do like to attend an occasional sparkling cocktail party to break up the monotony, but painting in my boots and jeans is where I'm happiest. □