



Left, *Columbia Tribute*, one of a series of four paintings Barbara Ernst Prey did for NASA; above, *Family Portrait*, a painting done in honor of her mother, who had Alzheimer's disease; below, *Waterlilies*.

Evocative Realism

Prey's Art Plumbs the Depths of her World

TEXT By Joseph Montebello

PORTRAIT by Deborah Feingold



It's easy to understand why Barbara Ernst Prey has been recognized as one of the most significant American artists of this century. Her work is at once realistic and evocative of her surroundings and, with studios in New York, Williamstown, and Clyde, Maine, she is constantly inspired by what she sees.

"Each studio's location affects my work in a different way," Ms. Prey said. "I've been painting in Maine for almost 40 years and have found such great inspiration there. I went to school in Williamstown [Mass.] and my gallery is there. In addition, we have a home there and my daughter is a student at Williams. I always want to go back and revisit the water and the landscape. As for New York, I grew up just outside the city and it will always be my home. I am always looking for new ideas and they all provide ample subject matter for me."

It was apparent, even as child, that Ms. Ernst had an artistic bent. Her mother, Peggy, was an artist and head of the design department at Pratt Institute. Given that, Ms. Ernst was surrounded by creativity. Her mother encouraged her daughter's interest in art by exposing her to the worlds of the Whitney, the Metropolitan, and the Museum of Modern Art.

"My mother was very important to my career," Ms. Prey explained, "and I wanted to be just like her. When I was growing up my mother had this huge studio where she would paint. I would go with her, painting and drawing alongside her as we listened to opera. I just thought this was normal. My mother painted in oils and so I chose to use watercolors."

Hence her reputation as one of American's most important watercolorists, with a style that is distinctly her own. One sometimes equates watercolor techniques with soft, impressionistic subjects, but that is not what Ms. Prey creates.



Above, left, *Field of Dreams*; right, *Meeting House II*.

She had her first juried show when she was 9 and sold her first painting at the age of 17, to none other than the then governor of New York, Hugh Carey. Not a bad way to start out.

After earning a bachelor of arts degree in art history from Williams College and a master's degree from Harvard University, Ms. Ernst worked in the Modern Painting department at Sotheby's and interned at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her strong grounding in art history courses helped her tremendously during that time and then came a turning point in her fledgling career: she was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship which enabled her to spend two years in Germany.

Then followed a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation, which got her to Tainan, Taiwan, where she was a visiting professor in Western Art and had the opportunity to work in a unique atmosphere.

"Working side by side with a Chinese master painter, using Chinese inks and papers and learning a new technique was something I could never have experienced on my own. Not only painting, but visiting every museum and constantly being inspired by something wonderful."

Over the years she has been inspired by not only her mother but other artists whose work she has studied and admired. "When I was at Williams I studied with Lane Faison, dean of Williams' Art Mafia, so I learned at the feet of a master. I would say I was certainly influenced by the works of Winslow Homer, Edward Hopper, and John Singer Sargent."

She also admired woodcuts done by the German school of artists, which became the inspiration for her own line drawings. In fact, for many years she created line drawings for *The New Yorker* and *Gourmet Magazine*.



Ms. Ernst's work has been exhibited throughout the world, but her shows in Maine are especially important to her. This year's exhibition in Maine entitled "East Meets West" opened at Blue Water Fine Arts and refers back to the time she spent in Taiwan as part of the Luce Scholar Program, one that helps young people understand how important Asia is to our country. In juxtaposition with her new work, the show is an example of the breadth of her extraordinary talent. It is interesting to see the similarities in the early paintings and her newest ones.

She is the consummate perfectionist and expends a great deal of time assembling her shows. "Putting together an exhibit is an exhaustive and exhausting undertaking. Creating the body of work, selecting a theme—so many things go into the final exhibit. Even titling the paintings for me is important—I have spent days trying to come up with the right title for some paintings," she explained.

Ms. Prey's subjects cover a wide range. Because all three of her studios afford a great deal of light and, in the case of Maine and Williamstown, a view of the water as well, her work includes subjects such as a close-up of a fisherman mending his net, colorful boats gathered at the shore, pine trees silhouetted against a blue and yellow sunset, the simplicity of a cluster of water lilies, lovingly worn white clapboard houses, the simplicity and impact of the American flag.

Her work is world-renowned; her paintings are in numerous private, corporate and museum collections, including the Brooklyn Museum, The Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Farnsworth Art Museum, and the Kennedy Space Center. She was the subject of a major retrospective exhibition in Paris curated by Sarah Cash, curator of American Art at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

She was appointed by the president of the United States to the National Council on the Arts, which is the advisory board to the National Endowment of the Arts.

"To be appointed to the NEA by the president is my most treasured commendation," Ms. Prey said. "My colleagues are these amazing American artists and to be part of that tradition is incredible."

The 14 members are chosen for their knowledge of the arts and their record of distinguished service or achievement in the arts. She is in excellent company; previous council members

include Marian Anderson, Leonard Bernstein, John Steinbeck and Isaac Stern.

She is passionate about her involvement with the NEA and a great advocate of arts education. She is very concerned when she hears about arts programs being cut in schools, believing it shortsighted to deprive children of any age of opportunities to express themselves creatively, to explore new horizons, and encourage young minds. She works closely with children, many in depressed areas, to develop their talents and to open up new worlds for them.

A few years ago Ms. Prey was chosen to do the painting for the White House Christmas card, a piece that automatically becomes part of the White House's permanent collection. But that's not all.

She was also one of 60 artists to be commissioned by NASA to do four paintings for its collection: the X-43, the world's fastest aircraft; "The Columbia Tribute," a commemorative work for the anniversary of the space Shuttle Columbia tragedy; a rendition of the International Space Station; and a painting of the space shuttle Discovery. This was an honor she shared with the likes of Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and Norman Rockwell.

She is also proud of her involvement with the world embassies. There are a number of her paintings at the Paris Embassy, one of the only living artists to her work included there. She is also represented at several other embassies, including Prague, Oslo, Athens, Cairo, Rangoon, Mexico City, Baghdad and Bogotá.

"Many ambassadors own pieces of my work as well. I have worked with the embassies and spearheaded cultural programs sponsored by them. The State Department recently used one of my images for the invitation to a special July 4th event that went out to every single ambassador and embassy in the world."

But it is still the excitement of creating a new piece that is important to Ms. Prey. This year, in addition to the show in Maine, she mounted a new show at her gallery in Williamstown: "Peak Season: The Colors of Barbara Ernst Prey." The new gallery space affords the opportunity to see a large body of her work with some never before exhibited paintings, including the 9/11 iconic painting "Patriot," studies for the July 4th embassy card and prints of her NASA work. It also includes a piece to which she is emotionally



Maple Sugar, a painting done in watercolor and dry brush technique.

attached: a vibrant painting of a group of red Adirondack chairs called “Family Portrait,” now in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum. It is meant to celebrate the memory of her mother, who had Alzheimer’s.

Ms. Prey paints every day and she is never without new ideas and inspirations.

“I always have a sketchbook with me. I constantly see things to connect to my work—a line, a color, an object. Sometimes I’ll see something I need to paint but don’t have a chance to do it right away. So, many times I’ll return to something years after I first discovered it. I sometimes think I have too many ideas and not enough time to paint them all.”

Given her involvement and commitment that’s quite understandable.

“Peak Season: The Colors of Barbara Ernst Prey.” is on display through Nov. 30 at Barbara Prey Gallery, 71 Spring St., Williamstown, Mass; 413-886-6184, gallery@barbaraprey.com.