

BARBARA ERNST PREY COMES HOME IN 'VANISHING POINT'

BY MICHELLE TRAURING



Watercolorist Barbara Ernst Prey sketches an hour before liftoff of the X-43.

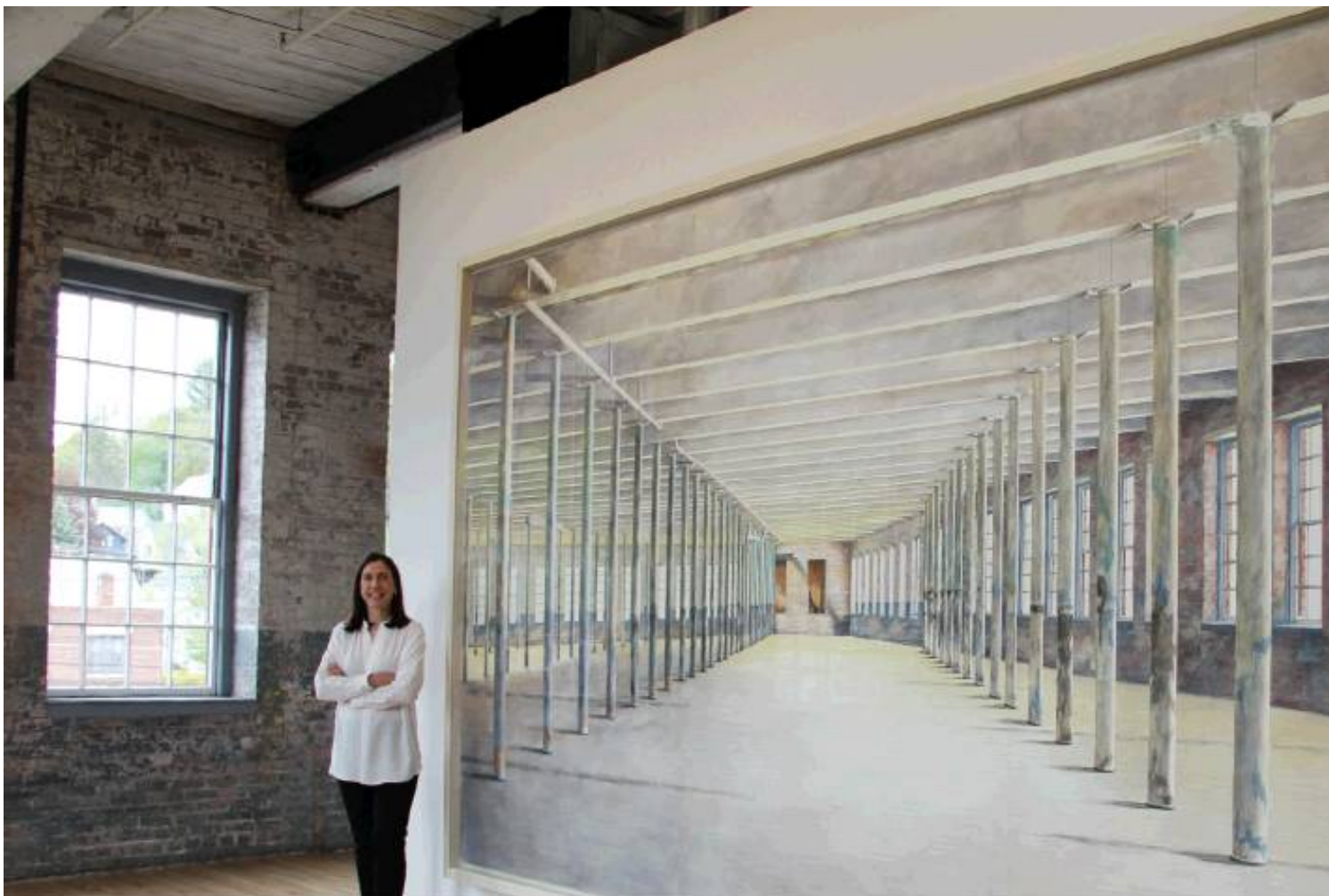
COURTESY BARBARA PREY

Montauk Highway, setting up their materials side by side, taking in the ocean, umbrellas, chairs, lighthouses and people. And here, with the sun shining and salty breeze blowing, the young girl learned how to “look.” In time, she chose to express what she saw through watercolors, drawn to its lightness and translucency — a medium notoriously precarious and unforgiving of even the smallest mistake. But, even further, she was one of the few women to enter a male-dominated tradition, and then push its bounds.

“I think it was just the challenge of doing something really different,” she explained last week during a telephone interview.

When weather and time allow, Barbara Ernst Prey packs her paints, canvas and easel into the back of her car, hops behind the steering wheel and drives due east from her home in Oyster Bay — a ritual that transports her back to her childhood, riding shotgun next to her mother.

They would stop at beach after beach off



Artist Barbara Ernst Prey in front of her finished commission at Mass MoCA, "Building 6 Portrait: Interior," the largest watercolor in the world. COURTESY BARBARA ERNST PREY

Prey has never stopped challenging herself throughout a nearly 50-year career, which has placed her in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Kennedy Space Center and the White House, where she is one of two living female artists represented.

And, with her 8-foot-by-15-foot "Building 6 Portrait: Interior" — a commission from the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art — she holds the title of the largest watercolor in the world.

"I'm really fortunate," Prey said. "I was looking back on my career and I've been painting watercolors for almost 50 years, which I started doing because my mother was such a great oil painter — and that's really what I'm known for, even though I've gone back to painting oil paintings."



"Early Morning Beach Day" by Barbara Ernst Prey.

Both mediums are currently on view in “Barbara Ernst Prey: Vanishing Point” through August 4 at Quogue Gallery, which includes scenes from Westhampton, Quogue, Shelter Island and Montauk.

“You’ll see some really authentic, working waterfront themes that a lot of people don’t see, the true undergirding of the Hamptons,” Prey said, “the farmers, the fishermen, the people who have been doing this forever.”

Many of the places she visits today are the same spots she painted en plain air with her mother, Peggy Ernst, who was the head of the Pratt Institute design department. At their home in Manhasset, she had an impressive, two-story studio, where her daughter would set up a small easel next to her own.

“My mom was so great,” Prey said. “Saturday mornings, we would listen to the opera and paint. You would always walk in the studio and there was a still-life, or there was a painting on the easel. There was something that you could just go and do. I thought that that was normal. That was just such a gift to have her, to grow up with her, in her studio, with her artwork — which was amazing.”

By age 9, Prey had entered her first juried show and, eight years later, former New York State Governor Hugh Carey bought one of her early oil paintings, which he hung in his home on Shelter Island. From there, her collectors only grew — the Rockefellers, the Mellons, actor Tom Hanks, and even European royalty among them.

“I just did this because that’s what my mother did,” Prey said, “and I had no idea this would happen.”

By her mid teens, Prey had pivoted toward the medium that would come to define her as an artist. In 1979, she graduated from Williams College, where she studied with mentor and art

historian Lane Faison, as part of the Williams Art Mafia, before earning her master's degree from Harvard University.

After an internship at The Metropolitan Museum in Manhattan, she was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship that allowed her to study, work and show for two years in southern Germany — returning to New York in 1981, where she turned her focus toward drawing and caught the attention of *The New Yorker*, which bought and reproduced her illustrations for over a decade.

“With watercolor, you need a great underpinning of drawing,” she explained, “so that really helped with my work.”

In 2003, her painting of the Diplomatic Reception Room was featured on the White House Christmas card, and dozens of government agencies and institutions have commissioned her work since, including NASA — which houses four of her paintings in its collection.

But perhaps her most monumental commission came in 2016 from Mass MoCA, she said, which proved to be a culmination of her life's work — from art history to drawing to watercolors.

“I saw the space and it really excited me, and the colors of the columns, and then the architecture,” she said. “It was all right up my alley, and I thought, ‘I could do this, this could be really cool, and then it's pushing me’ — which, as an artist, I always want to be pushed in different directions.”

The project unfolded over the course of two years, explained Prey, who created a series of 48 advance studies — starting small in pencil, then color, and getting bigger until finally drawing a to-scale base sketch before she started painting. “That was such a challenge to do, particularly for watercolor,” she said. “It was just so hard because you start at one end and then by the time you got to the other end, it had dried. And you couldn't make a mistake — but it turned out really well. It's like the big hit at the museum, which is very exciting.”

A smaller, limited edition print of the final piece is on view at Quogue Gallery, she said, as are landscapes that hold countless memories for her, painted in mineral pigments on cotton paper that capture the East End.

“It's my home turf,” she said. “You bring all these memories to a painting, and all the stories that come with it. It's not just a beach chair. For me, it's my story of Long Island summers on the beach. It's iconic.” For the past 10 years, Prey has sat on the National Council on the Arts — the advisory board to the National Endowment for the Arts — as its sole artist, working as an arts advocate and supporter when she is not painting or “looking,” she said. After hanging

the show in Quogue last week, she couldn't help but visit a couple nearby beaches, scanning the horizon for ideas to catch her eye — scenes that will live in her mind for a couple years before she puts them to canvas.

“It's been fun, it's been exciting,” she said of her career. “I'm grateful for the people who have supported me along the way, which is kind of cool coming back to the Hamptons because some of my very early friends, collectors, supporters have homes out there, so I look forward to seeing them — and they've been great, believing in me along the way.”

“Barbara Ernst Prey: Vanishing Point” will remain on view through August 4 at Quogue Gallery. For more information, visit quoguegallery.com .