

STUDIO VISITS

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ARTIST AND MAINE NATIVE BARBARA SULLIVAN lived in South Solon for over 30 years before settling in the artists' enclave of Lincolnville. Known for her bas-relief frescoes, her recent work combines wall paintings and drawings which act as evocative backdrops for her shaped frescos. While fresco is an age-old medium, often murals depicting and commemorating religious scenes, Barbara's have contemporary themes with a more playful purpose. She considers each object she creates to be part of an extensive "vocabulary" she may subsequently fit into larger tableaux. If the settings look familiar, her singular perspective sets them askew, animals wander indoors and objects, even people, float, fold, and fragment. Often featuring domestic scenes and household objects in imaginative scenarios, there is a humorous pathos to much of Barbara's work, a serious artist who refuses to take herself too seriously. Capturing life in its smallest and largest moments, her work is tactile, surprising, and despite its ancient roots, the opposite of stuffy or static.

TACTILE VOCABULARY: ARTIST BARBARA SULLIVAN CREATES FRESCOES THAT ARE BEYOND WORDS

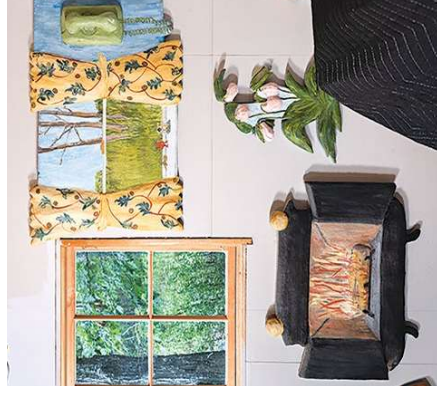


Image courtesy of Emille Stark-Menneg and John Bisbee.

Barbara was the subject of a 2022 retrospective "Forty Plus Years" at Emery Arts Center at the University of Maine at Farmington, where she taught for 22 years. Her work has appeared in many exhibitions, several biennials at the Portland Museum of Art, at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockport, and in galleries around the country. She is represented by Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland. On a late summer afternoon, over a homemade lunch of chicken salad, she kindly answered my questions.



Barbara Sullivan's *Sleep Tight: My Loves*. Painted Mylar with Shaped Frescoes attached. A site specific installation for the home of artists Emille Stark-Menneg and John Bisbee.
OPPOSITE: Barbara Sullivan beside her studio in Lincolnville.



TOP: Frescoed windows create a trompe-l'œil effect on the studio wall.
BOTTOM: Two upholstered chair frescoes hang below a fresco chandelier.



AP: You grew up, one of nine children, on what you call a "gentleman's farm." How did you develop your artistic practice?

BS: When I was a kid, I used to tell my parents that I wanted to be a Renaissance person. I wanted to learn to make anything and everything. My father said, "Oh, for God's sake. You don't even know what the Renaissance is!" My dad was a physician and would use the word "practice" sometimes. "Well," he'd say, "as you move along, you learn things by practicing, observing and doing; they don't call it practice for nothing." My mom did interior design work, way before she had nine children, I have many of her fabric scraps. I often put three or four together and make a combined design I'll use in my work.

AP: I understand that you first began experimenting with fresco when you were the cook at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

BS: I was an artist before I got that job. I had run a little French restaurant in a ski resort town and had done a lot of cooking. They came down to the kitchen one day from the office and said, "Hey, we hear you're an artist." They offered me a very small studio near the fresco barn. I was feeding like 85 people three times a day, so I didn't have a lot of time on my hands, but I would go up there at night to my little studio and make oil paintings and just kind of unwind. Walter O'Neill, the fresco instructor, asked me if I wanted to try fresco? I never liked working flat, but I loved the physical making, so that winter I began to make shaped fresco pieces. I began art school as a sculpture major and came out a painter; now I make painted sculptures. I do some oil paintings here and there, but fresco is my medium of choice now.

AP: Your most recent solo show, *Segue* at Calbeck Gallery, featured large wall paintings inspired by cyanotypes and shaped frescoes. How did you land on this combination?

An assortment of shaped frescoes hang on the east wall of the studio.

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BS: I wanted to do something that honored two old mediums that had similar properties. I made drawings for the show that were painted using Prussian blue, to suggest the color of cyanotypes, an old medium that relied on water, light and chemical reaction.

They are not cyanotypes, but I wanted them to feel like cyanotypes because of the color, and I wanted to combine them with fresco. Originally, I drew on large paper using Sharpies attached to a stick, like Matisse did in his elder years when he drew on the ceiling from his bed. I was interested in how drawings are in and out of perspective, like life is, physically and metaphorically. Fresco is one of the early painting mediums. Then as Masaccio, artists were starting to make paintings that appeared dimensional on a flat surface. I'm thinking, "Huh, I'm using this medium, fresco, and my work is a little bit off-kilter." I wanted to figure out some way to give my work a real narrative. Prior, I had used the wall as a ground, juxtaposing bas-relief fresco objects. The wall paintings and drawings began, for me, to give the work a new context.

AP: There are two types of fresco, *buon fresco*, the process of applying pigment to wet plaster, or *fresco secco*, applying it to dry. You specifically work in *buon fresco*. Are there many preliminary sketches or prototypes before you create the final work?

BS: I actually sketch on plywood, then I cut out my forms and make a sculptural armature underneath, on the wood. I stretch the architectural lath over the armature and staple it into place. Then I apply the *arriccio* coat, which is a rough coat of plaster. After that sets up for a day or so, the *intonaco* is applied, which is painted into while wet. I grind my pigments with water. Eventually, once I've painted the surface, the plaster becomes the vehicle for the pigment; the plaster and pigment integrate and become one.

AP: There is humor and pathos in your work. In the self-portrait frescoes, particularly, the frenetic pace of a woman juggling things is palpable, as in *Cooking While Chatting* or even fragmenting, as she does in *Running Late*. Do you know the narrative arc you're creating, or does it come later, in the assembling?

BS: Sometimes, but mostly, I make vocabulary. And I don't know how I'm going to use it. I might wake up in the morning and think, "I'm going to make a lamp that looks like that." Because it has a certain maybe nostalgic feel to me. I just keep these things, and I use them somehow. I'm very interested in the domestic because I feel like it's something that binds us all together across socioeconomic lines and racial lines. We all have to eat, to tidy-up, and take care of ourselves. I do think it's an important commonality between people. So, I look at making these things and I think, oh, people can look at the common every day and be voyeurs looking back at themselves, because it's all so ubiquitous.

AP: What are you working on currently?

BS: This summer I've been making flowers because I've been interested in the romance of the beautiful, and what is all around me. The first ones I made were these lady slippers. Then I thought, well, I make domestic, mundane stuff, so I should make the dandelion, maybe the ones that everyone wants to get rid of, the so called "weeds," but the bees love them. I have also been making light fixtures and chairs. People have to sit somewhere!

AP: Thank you for sharing your studio with me, Barbara, and for making me lunch! ■



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Barbara prepares pigment in the studio. Details from *One Room Efficiency Installation*; *Night Sky with Horn Chairs by the Campfire*; "Steps of the fresco medium" is an illustrative tool Barbara Sullivan uses when teaching; Barbara Sullivan in her dining room in front of fresco *Stopping Cart*. Her work often explores the domestic realm, making tactile and three-dimensional quotidian, unsung objects; Grinding pigment with a glass muller; The barn door of Sullivan's Lincolnville studio is painted, fittingly, a cyanotype blue.

