



Our Neighbor: Barbara Irwin by Thomas Blom

I spent the morning talking with neighborhood artist Barbara Irwin. The idea was to learn something about her and her art for a short article in the *Flea* which would focus on Barbara The Artist and get the word out about the small duplex on Grayson that houses more interesting and intelligent art than most galleries in town I've visited. I planned to spend an hour interviewing her, come home and write a short article, and get on with the new chicken coop expansion I started. Instead I spent three hours with Barbara, running out of recording media about halfway through, and left with a head full of reflections on life, images of a 41-day trans-Pacific voyage in a home-built boat, renewed inspiration to get back to my own creative pursuits, and a small hand-stitched mouse stuffed with catnip for Luca. Oh, and a mess of jumbled imagery and thoughts on the rather large collection of found-object art I'd just taken in, which I'll try to sort out in the coming paragraphs and weeks. If your interest is piqued, read on; if not, ask yourself if that "Keep Austin Weird" bumper sticker really belongs on your car. Just kidding, sort of...

Barbara landed in Cherrywood about 4 years ago. Born in Houston, she grew up in Texas, leaving the state to study design, and coming back to work various grown-up jobs as interior designer and buyer. Ultimately destined for new adventure, she went back to school and headed for Austin to teach at Austin Montessori School. She met her former husband, sailed to Hawaii via Rockport, Belize, Panama, Costa Rica, and spent 18 years on the Big Island. It was in Hawaii that Barbara did her first "found-object" art at the request of a friend who wanted her to enter a "Recycled Art Show" (previously and since an early age her preferred medium had been collage, which she still enjoys). By the looks of her densely packed but immaculately organized studio, she hasn't stopped finding objects (or organizing them) since.

Barbara's home is not the typical scene one imagines when an artist you've met invites you to their house to look at their art — when perhaps you're a little uncomfortable because you don't really know this person and aren't sure you want to go examine their living quarters in detail just yet. Most people will have furniture. But not Barbara; her main display room features a long wall of solid brick, a clean tiled floor, and nothing but piece after piece of wonderfully provocative art. Today this room held many pieces from the "Confinement" series — all featuring uniquely interesting smallish cages (many of them antique and valuable in their own right) with interior objects depicting comic, spiritual, or metaphysical scenes. In one corner of the room the floor is covered with a neat layer of gravel from which grows a bed of welded metal flowers, each adorned with uncommon objects organically melded with their host making for some kind of Mad Max Japanese Zen Garden. The room is a bit more crowded than usual: Barbara tells me some of the pieces are headed for the Scarborough Building downtown where they'll live in the lobby windows for the spring. Some of her work is also on display at Austin City Hall this year.

Back in the work room are the "Head Trip" pieces — doll heads of various origin whose heads sprout with all manner of craziness...but which are safely contained for your viewing pleasure under glass domes and bell jars of the variety seen in scientific labs. Also here are some of the "Roadside Attraction" pieces, each consisting entirely of objects found on the sides of roads, many presumably from the bus rides to and from South Congress where Barbara has a couple of part-time jobs at (surprise!) stores dealing in unique and antique objects. At a small table where we sit talking are two of my favorite pieces. One is some sort of vintage electrical metering device that sits upright on three machined legs and on top of which is attached a glass capsule containing a miniature wedding couple. Another is from the "Magic Lamp" series, pieces so-themed by an elevated glass globe filled with some dream or machination.

And this is to barely scratch the surface...Jennifer said 350 words I think; I'm at twice that and counting. How can I summarize? This is good art; it feels sacred and somehow familiar to me — filled with iconic shapes and motifs — and so weathered, as if the pieces have always been somewhere, waiting to be discovered. And unlike much "found object" art I've looked at, Barbara's is immediately accessible, on one level or another, and completely refined, signaling the work of a mature artist that knows what she likes. None of it is creepy or trying hard to be obscure or edgy or otherwise provoke emotional response via base shortcut. This is conscious art fabricated with positive intention.

Says Barbara, "I'm an old hippy...love is the answer."

You can see Barbara's work at the aforementioned downtown locations, as well as upcoming shows at Texas State University (May-June) and the Austin Museum of Art (a Fall collective show of miniature chairs featuring artists selected by sculptor Damian Priour). Better still, check out her website, get the phone number, and give her call for a viewing in her home/gallery. You won't be disappointed. ☺

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