

## **Barbara Rogers**

### ***Natural Facts/Unnatural Acts***

Tucson Museum of Art

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*“The sublime moves, the beautiful charms.”* -Emmanuel Kant, 1764

In his collection of essays, *The Invisible Dragon* (1993), noted critic Dave Hickey proclaimed that beauty, long considered a negative element in serious contemporary art, was once again allowable. Following his lead, other critics and some curators began to re-think the importance of beauty after decades of relegating it to the domain of the market place and decorative concerns. During the moratorium on beauty, of course, artists passionate about their personal vision valiantly braved critical scrutiny and continued to address their subject matter, striving for a level of emotive and visual response that embraced beauty and all that it entails. Barbara Rogers has charmed and moved the viewer with her exquisite canvases and works on paper for over thirty years. “Natural Facts/Unnatural Acts,” a series of new works, is a continuation of her investigation into nature in its raw, sublime state and nature in its manipulated, controlled state. Her paintings in oil and encaustic are a testament to the power of color and composition in the exaltation of nature in all its glory.

Barbara Rogers’ deep affiliation for the essence of nature had its naissance in the environment where she grew up. Born in 1937 in the small Ohio farming community of Newcomerstown, she understood the symbiotic relationship of humankind and nature. In addition to her exposure to the land and all that was associated with it was a keen sense of drama, glamour and fantasy derived from the widespread Middle American pastime of going to the movies. These two experiences were to become ingrained in her creative sources. Shortly after receiving a degree in Bachelor of Science in Art Education in 1959 from Ohio State University, where her training was based on life drawing classes and Renaissance perspective, she felt the lure of the West Coast and left her home for the buzz of artistic activity that was centered in the Bay Area. First attending the San Francisco Art Institute, she studied with such important Bay Area artists as Richard Diebenkorn and Elmer Bischoff, and briefly with Nathan Oliveira at the California College of Arts and Crafts, whose work centered on figuration. Under their guidance she learned about the importance of composition and structure and ways to engage the viewer. Under the tutelage of Frank Lobdell at the San Francisco Art Institute, she learned about his style of organic abstraction and how to glean information from nature to invent forms. Transferring to the University of California-Berkeley, she worked under Karl Kasten, John Haley, and Felix Ruvulo, all of whom impressed upon her the power of spatiality and emphasis directed away from subject matter. This wide-ranging background—from traditional studies in perspective and life drawing to figuration and finally to abstraction—gave Rogers the foundation to find her own technique and vision. After completing a Master of Arts in Painting at Berkeley in 1963, she embarked on a personal journey of artistic investigation and commitment to teaching art. After a year of teaching in New York state, Rogers returned as a faculty member to her alma mater in Berkeley and created a highly successful series of paintings that were to become her signature style during the 1970s.

In a style reminiscent of the Magic Realism of the 1930s, Rogers used acrylics and an airbrush during this time. In these paintings, shown in a solo exhibition in 1973 at the San Francisco Museum of Art, she arranged colorful birds, props, nudes and costumed people in artificial jungle settings. Among her cast of characters and images were voyeuristic clowns; glamorous, jeweled females in broad-brimmed

hats and turbans; handsome, top-hatted magicians; lush orchids; and tropical foliage, both real and imagined. While the compositions had psychological and aesthetic appeal, the subtler effects of sharp focus and soft edges with the accent on detail and abstraction caught the attention of critics, curators, and collectors.

Considering her paintings “strong and beautiful,” writer Charles Shere said that Rogers’ work showed how “wit and clarity can redeem the clichés of the psychedelic visionary realists, and how vision and intelligence can redeem those of the New Realists.” Her blend of mystery and exoticism with a focus on realism and figuration placed her among the important California realists of the 1970s and 1980s, as evidenced by the inclusion of her paintings in such exhibitions as “New Realist Painters” at the University of California-Davis; “Twelve Painters of the Human Figure” at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art; “Contemporary American Realism: Works on Paper” at the University of Pittsburgh; “Northern California Realists Painters” at the Redding Museum in California; and “Tropical Visions by California Artists” at the Chevron Gallery in San Francisco. Still, while placed within the realm of realism, Rogers made the distinction of altering the depth of field to suit her dramatic purposes and chose to depict what many believed to be an escapist scene rather than the traditional Realist’s insistence on portraying reality in all its banality. To Rogers, however, it was not escapism that she was trying to achieve, but a sense of transformation--using realistic images and figures to raise the “ugly and the ordinary” to the “beautiful and the gorgeous.” The resulting paintings were intriguing, alluring scenes of an erotically charged other world of romance and exoticism.

A pivotal time occurred in 1982, however, which in time marked a dramatic change in the artist’s style and direction. Visiting Hawaii to gather visual material and ideas for her paintings, Rogers traveled to Oahu just before the force of hurricane Ewa slammed into the island, destroying homes, businesses, and even lives. The awesome force of nature upon a lush, peaceful paradise deeply affected the artist and her thinking about nature and what it represented in her work. After seeing the tropical detritus all around her--the ravished jungles, beaches, and gardens, she changed her thinking about jungle foliage as tropical paradise and nature as a source of peaceful beauty and abruptly stopped painting such compositions. Still, she wasn’t ready to tackle the subject of the storm--no matter how much the catastrophic, near-death experience had influenced her.

Continuing to work with the airbrush, Rogers created a series of paintings that eschewed elements from nature to explore details and ideas based on architectural design and principles. She saw them as suitable because they depended on composition and order, techniques that her focus on nature had betrayed. Trying out a device common to architects, Rogers started to make drawings refined with an electric eraser. With this tool, she found that she could not only place objects within a composition, but she could singularly take them out. One work in particular, created by moving the electric erasure across a graphite-covered ground, is *Hideout*, 1986. This work on paper suggested the feeling of water rushing into an enclosed space. The visual sensation of its force reminded her of the storm that she had encountered years before and inspired her in significant ways. With a newfound direction motivated by personal experience, she slowly replaced the airbrush with acrylic paint and traditional artist’s brushes and began a series of works that spoke of the sensations and emotions associated with the terrifying nature of the storm.

Over the next few years, Rogers returned several times to Hawaii to photograph and gather information. During this time further changes occurred in her work. By 1987 she replaced acrylics

with oil because it allowed her more time to manipulate the surface, painting such works as “Hurricane” which revealed abstracted elements, a continuation of her expression of the effects of the force of nature. Two years later, she included collaged photographic elements in her paintings instead of rendering them realistically. Rogers had long used the camera as her “sketchbook,” recording details and information to use later in her paintings. Realizing that these photographs were more than just inspirational aids, she adhered the photographs to the paper with an application of beeswax, a precursor to the encaustic paintings she would develop later on. The collage elements combined with a stronger sense of abstraction and objects took on a more fleeting, iconographic form than grounded realistic depiction. With a deepening appreciation and acceptance of the power of nature, she replaced her lush tropical scenes and lighthearted fantasies with new, abstracted references to the nearby Muir Woods in compositions of floating icons and framed delineations of leaves, fossils and random markings. Darker and more dreamlike than earlier paintings, she coaxed from the work a stronger sense of primordial forces, and with it a brooding sense of reverence for the power of nature’s forces.

Throughout her artistic development, Rogers had concurrently taught at several institutions. Leaving the University of California-Berkley in 1973, she subsequently taught at various times at the San Francisco Art Institute, the University of Washington in Seattle, and San Jose State University. At last, in 1990, she settled in Tucson, Arizona, where she continues to teach painting and drawing in the School of Art at the University of Arizona. The shift from the vegetation and terrain of the West Coast to the Southwest had implications in her art. She began to apply thicker layers of wax to her photo-collages. This medium, in addition to oil paints, allowed Rogers to create more depth and texture to her canvases and works on paper. She also began to include the actual detritus found in the desert--new and unusual dried plant forms and seed pods were now embedded in the surface of the composition, which by now was becoming more reliant on distinct fields and planes of color to hold the abstracted composition. One critic noted about her work in an exhibition in Atlanta, Georgia:

If paintings are special representations of time and presence, then these are like long lazy summer afternoons when one is not moved to pass on, but to stay and observe the gradually emerging patterns of the moment. . . .Great slabs of color, dripping, encrusted, torn, and worn away, pull the viewer into a long extended meditation upon the detail of experience.

Paintings from this body of work reveal a mysterious duality of present and past, image and experience, and emerging and receding references to exotic plant and sea forms. While before her plant forms were carefully rendered, her images were now becoming more ambiguous and layered, seemingly to float in a dense, yet translucent, ethereal space.

At the same time, Rogers remained intrigued by the notion of cultivated gardens and the ramifications of human intervention on nature in its wild, original state. She continued to visit interesting gardens, in particular a 38 acre one in Montecito that reminded her of her early work. Impressed with the shapes, colors and enclosures carefully manipulated with plants and sculpture, she created a series of painted photographs inspired by gardens created by women. The resulting work, “Eccentric Gardens of Eccentric Women,” became an exhibition in 1994 at the Selby Museum in Sarasota, Florida, and later a part of a twenty five year retrospective of her work, “Constructing Paradise,” at the University of Arizona Museum of Art. These works reveal an expanded palette, including rich reds, deep greens, and the warmth and generative associations of yellow umber. Through these works, the artist in essence controls nature by depicting it in a managed, altered state. Like her earlier paintings of fantasy people

and places in settings of comfort and joy, these works revealed in the spirit of life and rebirth at the hand of humankind--in this case, under the careful nurturing of women.

Rogers' focus on the garden as a personal and symbolic Eden continued through the 1990s. Her works shifted back and forth between organized, balanced compositions of formal elements of gardens and more intense, almost microscopic views of seed pods, seedlings, and microorganisms floating in suspended, almost liquid space. Addressing the essence of time and the cycles of life, Rogers continues to make visual statements about the sublime in nature--contrasting its power to its fragility, and its wildness to its cultivated state found in gardens.

Rogers' technique has evolved as both an intuitive process and a studied series of steps to achieve desired affects. In 1995, when she started the *Her Garden: Objects and Sites Remembered* series, she set out to paint 100 works on paper as a personal challenge. She reached her goal by 1999, and during that time she refined her painting technique and style that she still retains. At this time Rogers returned to stenciling, a technique she had perfected twenty years earlier. In her current works on canvas or paper mounted on masonite, Rogers rolls a printer's brayer charged with paint over hand-cut stencils to create repeating shapes and images of seed pods, seeds, curvilinear forms, tendrils and other imaginative, nature-inspired patterns. By blotting and rubbing the paint, she controls the intensity of color and ethereal sense of depth. Further pushing the notion of depth, she scrapes the paint layers away to create receding and emerging images, augmented by darks and lights. No longer of this earth, her paintings, inspired by elements of nature, now occupy space in a more expanded realm.

As the result of her refined technique of rubbing, stenciling, and layering, the spatial elements in the paintings in this exhibition are even more expanded than earlier works, a result of the artist's revelation during a walk through a garden in the night-time fog in San Francisco. For the artist, this sensation was her "first experience of being right on top of something, but the fog veils it. The fog creates a heavy atmosphere that can be illuminated by lights, which causes a man-made atmosphere lighting thousands of droplets of water." In such paintings as *Hothouse Hybrids #1*, 2001--an abstracted canvas of amber, yellow ochre and creamy white sectioned off into geometric planes of color with hints of lush green and punctuated with rich vermilion--the template images are still evident, but the atmospheric quality prevails, replacing the earlier controlled patterning that marked her style in earlier works.

Another painting that relies on the visual tension of a sectioned composition--and the spatial overlapping of fantasy plant forms derived from templates that fade, recede and then emerge again--is *Hothouse Hybrids #2*, 2001. On the left side of the canvas, a distinct area of light peach and yellow tones is punctuated with deep, rich red. On the right, tendrils of green are further engaged with contrasting colors as layers upon layers are exposed through the rubbing and application process. In *Her Garden: Objects and Sites Remembered #141*, 2001, from a series of large vertical paintings on paper, the composition is reminiscent of earlier works, but here the tendrils and plant forms float in a light, ethereal soup. Compelling colors of deep blue greens, pinkish reds, and warm, yellow beiges dance with shades of rich green, dark green grays and black. Says the artist of the intertwining of her styles and images:

I reserve the right to go back to my own history. The real turn on about being an artist is that you really don't know what you are gong to do. That's the wonder of art--that we've taken pictures and heard everything that's ever been said to us--then you go to make a decision and out comes something and you say, "God, where did that

come from?” You own all that knowledge and your own memories and take something from your past and put into the now, and you invent something...a form, but it has its roots in your memory.

To Rogers, the connection between the aspect of memory and the compositional sectioning of the canvas relates to the idea of visualizing or encapsulating a thought and about being in two places at once. In her work on paper, *Her Garden: Objects and Sites Remembered #139*, a vertical bar of red and yellow anchors the composition and stenciled patterns dominate, revealing an ornamental ironwork effect reminiscent of Karl Blossfeldt’s close-up photographs of plant tendrils in the early 1900s. While heavier in its patterning than many of the large scale paintings, this work demonstrates the ease with which Rogers can shift from a loose, abstraction to a tighter, compositionally enclosed space.

Other works on paper focus on floating images and rely on a milky void to hold them in the composition. In one such piece, #140 from the *Her Garden* series, delicate, translucent, white blossoms float among burnt orange colored fruit forms, alluding to fertility. The underlying skeletal structure of the flower cups makes vague allusions to animal forms. Colors such as orange, yellow, beige and brownish green further heighten the sense of the abundance of life. Rogers’s ability to merge abstraction with symbol and realistic form through formal ordering of the composition and sensitivity to color allows her paintings to come alive and connect with the viewer.

A new series of small-scale works shows the result of Rogers’ attendance at an encaustic workshop in Santa Fe, New Mexico, last year. There she her knowledge of the medium that she had previously experimented with on her own. This ancient, sometimes toxic, painting technique involving pigmented beeswax and resin applied rapidly to a canvas or board in a molten state, allows the artist to create a different surface than her works in oils and provides a richer intensity of colors that she finds satisfying. Often her encaustics are over-painted with oils to provide a stronger sense of translucence. As a result of this workshop and further experiments, she created *Her Garden: Small Discoveries*, a series of small works on board which reveals a richness of color and a contrast of texture and surface layers.

What remains consistent in Rogers’ work is the garden and her love of and respect for nature. From her earliest airbrushed paintings depicting nature as a pleasurable paradise—to her acrylics delineating nature as sublime destroyer to her oil paintings expressing nature as a submissive participant in the formal garden—to her mature works depicting nature as having won the battle, Rogers continues to revel in the awesome beauty and power of the elements and humankind’s relationship with the life forms that exist within them. Her most recent work in this exhibition gives us a closer look rather than the big picture, but the parallels with human life are abundant. As Rogers muses, “In this show ‘the wild’ has won the battle...the classic literary struggles have to do with man and nature. I think that’s how it will always be. What I find interesting is what we have in common with plants.” Thus, the artist returns to look at the cycles of life and death and the garden as a source of wonderment and an emblem of fertility. As Paul Ivey explains, these paintings “carry the psychological burden of representing the tenuous and the ephemeral nature of human life—its delights and discoveries as well as its disappointments—dramatized by the sometimes surreal fragments of exotic specimens in the oscillating illusion between frontal form and undulating deep space.” Barbara Rogers handily tackles tough subject matter. While depicting the splendors of nature and the garden during a cultural time of mistrust for the charms of beauty, she moves her audience with the sublime aspects of its decay,

reflecting the beauty in all stages of life and death and thus makes fearless statements about the power of beauty in art.

-Julie Sasse

Curator of Contemporary Art

Footnotes:

Further evidence of a return to critical discourse including beauty in the form of decoration and abstraction can be seen in the 2001 exhibition "Ornamentation and Abstraction" at the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, Switzerland. While artists from the beginning of the 20th century onward openly avoided any associations with the idea of ornamentation and decoration, the influences of such elements in their work are now being closely scrutinized and the concept of beauty as a significant element is enthusiastically considered by scholars. See Markus Bröderlin, ed., *Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between non-Western and, Modern and Contemporary Art* (Basel: Fondation Beyeler, 2001).

Charles Shere, "Women's Shows Booming, But No Exploitation Here," *Oakland Tribune*, October 2, 1973, 39.

Donald Miller, "New Exotic Realism at the Berger Gallery," *Pittsburg Post Gazette*, November 1978.

Applying wax to a surface is the encaustic tradition of pigmented wax with resin. Rogers also was exposed to the medium through meeting Richard Frumess, a supplier of encaustic materials, at College Art Association conferences in the middle 1980s. Julie Sasse, interview with the artist, Tucson, Arizona, October 17, 2001.

Laurence Holden, "Barbara Rogers," *Art Papers*, July/August 1993, 4.

Interview, Tucson, Arizona, October 17, 2001.

Paul Eli Ivey, "At the Gates of Eden 'All Thoughts Fly,'" *Barbara Rogers, Dreaming of Eden: Meditations on the Garden* (Scottsdale, Arizona: Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art), 2.