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Stephanie Barber
by Laura van den Berg



Stephanie Barber. Lawn poem (detail), Little Wolf, Wisconsin, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

Stephanie Barber lives in Baltimore where she is an artist-in-residence in the MFA program at Maryland Institute College of Art. In addition to her latest book, *All the People* (Ink Press, 2015), Barber is the author of *Night Moves* (Publishing Genius, 2013) and *these here separated to see how they standing alone* (Publishing Genius, 2010). She also has an extensive body of work in film and various media. Recently her first feature, *Daredevils*, screened at The National Gallery of Art in DC, and for *jhana and the rats of james olds*, Barber moved her studio into the Baltimore Museum of Art where she created a new video every day, with museum visitors acting as both spectators and collaborators.

The art I most admire creates its own world. I can remember visiting Stephanie at the BMA and being so wholly absorbed by the world she was creating—isolated, collaborative, lonely, joyful. I remember wanting to stay and stay. To me, that experience is characteristic of her body of work: whether she is operating in film or installation or poetry or prose, she constructs worlds that are kinetic, strange, and stunningly beautiful, worlds that are wise and scary, that hit you in the head and in the heart.

Laura van den Berg What were the origins of *All the People*? There are forty-three very short stories in the collection, and I was curious to know if you wrote them right around the same time or if they built on each other more gradually?

Stephanie Barber I began about two years ago, just writing these whatever-they-weres. Soon I thought of them as miniature prose pieces, and after I had written a bunch I began to think of them as portraits, writing them in a more focused way. So, fumble, fumble, dribble, shoot?

LVB I'm interested in the way certain "microstructures" at the word level—the use of "cuz," for example—helped create a sense of unity between these voices and worlds. They feel at once self-contained and interconnected, in a beautiful way. Thoughts on that?

SB I was not aware of doing this, or very deliberately thinking of connecting the stories through this devious subliminal messaging, though I love the idea of words waving at each other through texts or serving as threads or I-beams. Some of the word choices are simply second nature; some are used a lot because they are words I think people use regularly. But also I think it's like a miracle of dialog, or character development through voice—how not saying anything or being incredibly unclear can make a very distinct mark. Like the girl in "Sunglasses"—she's not the most clearly expressive: "Like, cuz, it just doesn't matter." But in that *not saying anything* we get such a clear image of this girl, or at least I do and hope someone reading would as well.

I'm also interested in using a sort of generic vernacular, particularly when what I am writing about is potentially too precious or heavy. There's a desire to balance the depth of the concept with a light—or degraded?—handling. Mostly I was thinking about *how* something is being said as "the portrait," not *what* is being said.

Recently the *New York Times* had a short article on a new neurological disorder that doctors have dubbed "aphantasia." This is the inability to create a visual in your mind of something being described—whether in written or spoken descriptions. Somehow this seems interesting as connected to these stories. Again, I've been thinking of them as portraits, like the miniature Edwardian portraits hidden in pocket watches. But I am also interested in how portraits portray who is doing the looking. In *All the People* this is evident in varying degrees. One very clear example is the story "Fat," which I feel a bit squeamish about—not wanting to seem a bigoted person mocking another person's body—but which I think is a really interesting portrait of the speaker. He is so obsessed with the girl's body and so limited in expressiveness that he becomes a character of great and baffling pathos. This may or may not be separate from word choice, but it speaks to one of the structures that bind these pieces together.

LVB Another interesting thing that kept coming up is a kind of anxiety about how to organize and understand time—the ticks and things that help us move through the days, like from “David Huebner”: “‘David Huebner, US ambassador to New Zealand and Somoa.’ Mary got to where she had to say this a hundred times a day. It got up to that number.” Or this, from “The Woods”: “Well, I mean, it’s still that way, just without the woods, so I shouldn’t say these times. Or, I’m not sure how that works grammar/time wise.”

Anxiety, time, coping—were these things on your mind?

SB Time—and how to organize it, and what happened to it, and what is going to happen in it—is one of the things I like to think about a lot. The story “Ghost Time” is another, and “Coupe,” too. I like the awesome and baffling immateriality of this thing that so tightly entwines our understanding of our existence—both the smallnesses and largenesses it touches. How old are we? When should we meet up? How long ago was that? We all engage in the most abstract and conceptual game with each other, but treat it as something so actual as to be almost banal.

LVB One of the many things I so admire about your body of work is your ability to work in many different mediums and modes. *Night Moves* is a seventy-five-page poem constructed from YouTube comments on the Bob Seger song of the same title. And you’ve done a lot of work with installation art and film. How do you know what shape a project will take, what medium to reach for? Is it largely intuitive?

SB I don’t like the word intuitive for a working method because it seems always to be set against a deliberation inseparable from a certain cogent approach necessary to making a piece of art—or rather, the way I make a piece of art. *Intuitive* sounds too effortless and stream-of-conscious-y.

Sorry, now all I want to do is think about why that word *intuitive* bugs me. Although, of course, I did own up to this already by saying I just sort of began writing these stories and then recognized their shape—morphological ghost stories.

But perhaps *intuitive* suggests something of a successful product soon to be discovered, and I guess I start a lot of things that do not take a shape I find pleasing, and if I start those intuitively, but then leave them by the side of the road, was my intuition off? Or did I not actually begin them intuitively at all? Another thing about intuition is that it seems to deny years and years of rigorous work and study of other’s work, as if one were some sort of blithe and innocent child, stumbling through flowers.

I really don’t like this word, but I shouldn’t be coy and deny it’s role.

X



X



Stephanie Barber's *All the People* (Ink Press, 2015), the covers of which are printed on cereal boxes.

As far as what medium a something will take—this comes about in a number of ways. I always write and am usually working on a film or video, though my videos are often a lot more about the writing than the image.

The way these different media are received by audiences is so incredibly different. Their places in my imagination are firmly separated. I don't think I've ever been working on a poem and thought: "Oh, this should be a film," or vice versa. They stick to their corners and suggest themselves as films or poems or stories.

I'm not sure how it happens that ideas present themselves to me. One thing I love is the assignment. I love getting assignments, like the photo essays for *Art21* magazine I did in the fall, or a show, or themed screening. I love the game-playing, gymnastic element of this way of working. When very specific constraints are chosen—like Renato Umali needs five beer haiku for the Umali Awards—I'm presented with a concern perhaps outside of what I've been thinking about for a while, and that is a refreshing intellectual alteration. I also have about a million projects on deck, so at this point there is very little fishing around or true *tabula rasa* beginnings.

But also, as regards media, I feel very strongly that I am simply making pieces of art. I don't think a painting is a poem, or a film is a song, but I do think they can be received and created and considered as simply emotional or philosophical offerings made somehow sensorially manifest. I like the Buddhist word *ayatana*, which includes the mind as a sense organ.

LVB I think you have succeeded in turning me against the word *intuitive*! I'm with you in disliking the stereotype of artist as a childlike entity blithely spilling their unconscious onto the page. Even when we might be operating on an instinctual level, that mode is certainly being informed and shaped by years of work and study, as you say. And yet! Although I could explain a lot of the choices in something I write as things I have spent a lot of time thinking about, there are some things—a line, a moment—that I just couldn't. It's not that I didn't think about such instances, but it seems like a different kind of thinking was happening. That's where I got *intuitive* or instinctual from, but perhaps there is a better, more precise word.

SB Yes, I absolutely agree that the ineffable is an important part of art, art making, art's reception, and art itself. The Marxist Ernst Fischer uses this Cocteau quote at the beginning of his book *The Necessity Of Art*, though I don't know where he found it: "Poetry is indispensable—if I only knew what for."

I like the way you have described these "x" moments as being a different way of thinking. My distaste for *intuitive* is probably mostly aesthetic—the way overuse has reshaped how the word looks and sounds to me, recasting its aesthetic resonance. You poor, quite accurate word... cast aside for being too apt!

LVB Hearing you talk about assignments reminded me of this Donald Barthelme quote: "Without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention." The beauty of an assignment is that the constraints can force us to think in new and previously unanticipated directions, to puzzle over new puzzles. What's your favorite assignment of all time? Did you ever get one you couldn't do?

SB Favorite is difficult. For the last five years or so, I have written a haiku every day and posted it on Facebook. That started out as a one-year game, but I have not stopped playing. There are so many things I enjoy about that assignment, one of which has been the realization that shame is a non-fatal occurrence! Because some days I need to post a something that might not be as strong as I'd like it to be, but the daily meditation on form and the memorial aid are pretty great elements, too.

I also did a project called *jhana and the rats of james olds* at the Baltimore Museum of Art, where I moved my studio into the museum for six weeks and had to make a video every day. That project came with similar pains and epiphanies to the haiku project, but maybe on a little more risky scale.



Still from the “The Party,” part of *jhana and the rats of james olds*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.



Still from “For WG Sebald (travel without travel),” part of *jhana and the rats of james olds*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

I once had a poetry professor who assigned our class scavenger hunts, like: “Go to the library, follow the first person wearing red to the stacks, find the last book on the shelf they first perused...” From this, we eventually generating lines, titles, and content. They were intricate and fun. I remember some of the other students complaining, upset at the childish nature of this game.

But as far as getting assignments I can’t do—I’m sure I’ve weaseled out of a something here or there, but I mostly see them through.

LVB You teach at MICA, and I'm wondering how your overarching views on process inform the work you do with students there. Sometimes, at least in fiction workshops, I feel there's a disconnect between how fiction is discussed and how it is usually written, so process being part of the conversation is something I think about.

SB Yes, I wind up speaking with my students about process quite a lot—both in terms of the processes employed for a particular project, the seen and unseen moves, as well as the larger process of developing a life as an artist. The latter consideration is maybe a bit too daunting for undergraduates, though in many ways they are the ones who most need to begin to explore their ideas about what it means to “be an artist” and how that really happens. It's tricky because, of course, they have scant “process” to regard and no fear that they might accidentally fall off their practice.

Our media portrays artists in the most goofy and untenable ways—drunken, emotional nights and montages of paint splattering, followed by gallery exhibitions and what? Madness? It's hard to see how someone might begin to construct a life as an artist.

I feel conflicted about art education in general—the overall *square-ifying* of the steps artists take toward their “careers” seems a daunting turn, but I am also downright evangelical about people being artists. About the political, spiritual, and philosophical importance of artists in our societies. Undergraduates are more up for considering a localized process, which is project or line or edit, and get a bit overwhelmed when I get up on my “our society needs artists” pulpit. Younger students are harder to teach in general—I guess everyone knows this—but one of the main reasons is this very interest we as artists have in considering the more nebulous, philosophical aspects of art and art making. I am aware of a constant cautioning—of myself—as I engage in teaching undergrads, and really it is a bit of a shame, like riding the breaks down a hill that ought to be so fun and frightening.

LVB So here's something that's been on my mind. I have been in Paris for the last few weeks and went to the Palais de Tokyo, where there was this Korakrit Arunanondchai installation that exploded my heart and set my eyeballs on fire. Which is to say: I loved it. One thing I find fascinating and compelling about installation and some time-based art is that ephemeral quality: it exists in the Palais de Tokyo in this one way, but when the exhibit ends it will be taken down and packed up and moved elsewhere. And, I would imagine, by virtue of each museum/gallery having their own specific dimensions, light, and so on, it can never exist in *exactly* the same way again. I don't mean to suggest at all that this diminishes the work for me. On the contrary, the literal temporariness almost deepens the power of the experience, or encourages me to pay a slightly different kind of attention. But with most kinds of writing, once it's published it pretty much always exists in that same form—a book on someone's shelf, a story or essay online, and so on.

I love what you said earlier about feeling “very strongly that I am simply making pieces of art,” regardless of the medium. But that question of physical permanency—does the act of publishing poetry or prose ever feel different to you, because there is that quality of permanence, the lasting artifact? Or do you see all forms as being equally fluid?

SB Oh, this is such a beautiful thought, Laura. I feel like I am 100% one way and 100% the opposite way. A while ago, I wrote an essay called “For A Lawn Poem,” which was a sort of infomercial for lawn poems—poems set into grass, site-specific text-based installations I was “pitching.” It speaks about the shifting context and consequent, experiential responses to reading. So, on the one hand, I too have this very romantic response to installation, almost tender or protective: “You're just here for a little while, aren't you? Me too.” It's due to this spatio-temporal ephemerality, but reading a poem on the Orient Express, or reading it at the Department of Motor Vehicles, or near the ocean... that also changes it—like, maybe truly changes the content, the pacing, the internal voice with which you read.

But, yes, I hear you, it's so poignant—this deadline. I'm not even *that* crazy about life, and yet I am struck mute at the thought that it will end. I guess, all the paintings and sculptures and books we humans pour our sad little souls into will, too.

Laura van den Berg is the author of the novel Find Me and the story collections What the World Will Look Like When All the Water Leaves Us and The Isle of Youth. The recent recipient of the Bard Fiction Prize, the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and an O. Henry Award, she currently lives in Brooklyn.