



Ode to Monet, 2022, assemblage found materials, 17.75" x 16.5" x 7.5"

Jerry Ross Barrish: Protagonist

Marianna Stark

Intimate sculptures by Jerry Ross Barrish feature human and anthropomorphic animal figures that are the embodiment of grace. Both humble and exquisite, even his compositions of inanimate objects are imbued with personality. True to his filmmaker roots, every one of Barrish's pieces begs for its own screenplay and close-up; reminiscent of the photography of Diane Arbus, the inner soul of the subject is revealed in cooperation with the artist.

Barrish applies his deft hand to the cast offs of our materialistic consumer society to tell immutable tales of love and loss. Familiar items like umbrella handles, funnels, and toys are transformed when combined with takeout containers, janitorial supplies, and vacuum parts. Each element of these assemblage sculptures is placed in a way that perfectly expresses the universal language of gesture. His figures' mouths are open to the exact right degree to express disbelief, humiliation, ardor. The nearly imperceptible arch of a shoulder conveys grief, self-doubt, hubris.

The genius of Barrish's work is that it is immediately accessible to any audience and needs no interpretation or context from an art historian. And yet it is a mistake to interpret Barrish's work as anything but fine art; despite his chosen materials, he is the antithesis of an "outsider." Barrish is a completely original artist within the canon.

A beneficiary of the GI bill, Barrish received his BFA and MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1974 and 1976, respectively. Professionally, he worked as a bail bondsman in San Francisco for 52 years. He has served as the artistic director of the Sanchez Art Center in Pacifica since 2013, mentoring hundreds of artists over the years. His work has been shown in galleries and museums around the world and is held in multiple museum collections. Barrish was the subject of a 2017 feature length documentary called Plastic Man: The Artful Life of Jerry Ross Barrish. Barrish lives with his wife, abstract painter Nancy Mona Russell, in Pacifica, and works in his San Francisco Mission District studio.

Barrish's art and life are fused with multiple social and political movements in addition to civil rights in the 1960s when he was helping activists make bail: outright refusing the use of non-biodegradable plastic produced by the fossil fuel industry; outrage over human trash killing marine life globally (and our self-created Sisyphean task of restoring Earth's oceans); reform of cash bail to end wealth-inequality in our justice system. While the artist does not cite these cultural phenomena as influences, it would be remiss to examine his body of work without breaking down the fourth wall and considering the historical context of his lived experience in order to, perhaps, find deeper meaning and relevance in our own lived experiences through his art.