

In Conversation with Molly Barker

“Barker’s distinctive drawing style not only captures her likeness but also invites us to ponder the deeper questions of identity and existence. What drives her to represent herself in such a unique manner, and why choose these forms to encapsulate her being?”

by Nagi Lee

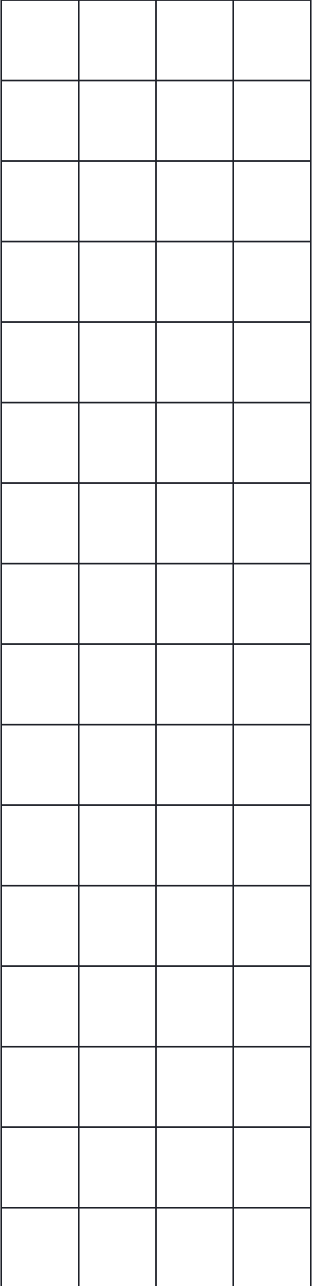


Molly Barker, *Self portrait 3 6 2023 1* (2023).
Acrylic on canvas, 72" x 60."

Photo courtesy of Megan Kelly

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In the work of Molly Barker (MFA Fine Arts 2024), a fusion of abstract figures and direct gaze draws the viewer into a profound exploration of self-expression. Barker's distinctive drawing style not only captures her likeness but also invites us to ponder the deeper questions of identity and existence. What drives her to represent herself in such a unique manner, and why choose these forms to encapsulate her being? These questions lie at the heart of her work, igniting curiosity about the intriguing world within.



Molly Barker, Installation view of *Self portrait 12 29 2023 1* (2023), CCA 2024
MFA Thesis Exhibition at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts
Photo by Molly Barker.

Nagi Lee: How did you come up with the idea for your self-portraits?

Molly Barker: I reached a time in my life when I learned more about myself and began experiencing unknown aspects of my being. It felt natural to begin painting, and that's when this series began. I've been making them for several years now. When I work on these, I am working from a kind of internal sound, an essential being, and I translate that to movement. My movement is what makes the painting. The self portraits emerge from strong internal senses. What I see in them are internal senses of self. They contain an internal energy and at the same time they are also facing out. It's an encounter.

NL: Most of your self-portrait works feature white or blank backgrounds and colored lines. How did you start this specific style?

MB: These evolved naturally. I am interested in allowing art to hold both the known and the unknown. This means I give the painting a lot of space to breathe. So regardless of the amount of paint I use, each painting needs to convey this flow of emptiness. To me, color and line can resonate. They carry sounds. This sensation deeply influences how I work with color. My choice of colors is often quick, to keep the flow of my movement and decision-making.

NL: Regarding your mention of the need to convey emptiness, do you think white or blank backgrounds can be defined as emptiness?

MB: The blank space may be a way of creating space for what I don't fully perceive or understand. It could be similar to the space you might not notice when you're looking at objects, the space between. It can be about allowing that space to exist, letting life flow through it, letting space permeate being. It could be a sense of potential or of something lost or promised.



Molly Barker, *Self portrait 9 3 2023 1* (2023). Oil on canvas, 72" x 60."
Photo by Graham Holoch.

NL: Most of your paintings feature a white background, but one painting is unique in that it has a strong blue background. Is there a special reason for this?

MB: Not especially. It's what the painting needed. I often work in such a way that I am responding in the moment to what the work needs to create depth, translucence, presence, structure. The painting you mentioned has many layers, and at some point I felt it needed agitation and depth, and I also needed to get more physical with it, to bring it to completion.



Molly Barker, *Self portrait 3 15 2023 2* (2023).
Oil on canvas, 72" x 60."
Photo by Graham Holoch.

NL: It seems they have similar facial expressions, as if they are going “oh.” Can I ask what the meaning behind that expression is?

MB: Many of these paintings do have an open mouth. To me it has many possibilities. It can be a voice. It can be speaking and it can be singing, crying, calling. It embodies an openness, a human soul. The shape also has its own existence, a circle or an oval that resounds in its own way.

NL: How do you hope people will respond to your work?

MB: I hope that my work may be received in a way that is unique and consequential. I hope that people may find something new and unfolding. Maybe it can reach ways of being or perceiving that we don’t know about, or haven’t spoken about. It’s about fostering connection, a genuine sense of being connected.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Nagi Lee (MFA Fine Arts 2025) specializes in painting and enjoys writing about art. Her current works feature expressionless figures, capturing the complex stories and emotions within. She hopes to communicate with many people through her unique perspective in both her writing and artwork.