

O ther than out at sea, the Island was the only place I had ever felt at home. It made sense. Boats and islands have much in common, and whatever quirks and peculiarities made me fit for, and happy with, a life on the ocean would quite naturally be requisite for me to thrive as an Islander.

from The Lobster Chronicles

BARBARA ERNST PREY

WORKS ON WATER

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Essay by Sarah Cash

Works on Water: Barbara Ernst Prey

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Too warm to fall and hug
the ground, yet too cool
to rise, the steam hung in
the air, a condensed mist as thick
as melted pearls. “Pea soup,”
that’s what old-timers would call
this wet, raw oyster world of fog.
No, I thought, as I made my way
down the dock, this was not Carl
Sandburg’s fog that came in “on
little cat feet.”

from The Lobster Chronicles

PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

WORKS ON WATER BY BARBARA ERNST PREY

Water. Fishermen. A life of the sea. These subjects, the focus of Barbara Ernst Prey's most recent body of work, took on new meaning to the world during the weeks I first came to know these paintings shortly after a deadly tsunami slammed into the shores of South Asia in late December 2004. Rather uncannily, just hours before I first visited the artist's studio to view the *Works on Water* series, I was captivated by a photograph on the front page of the *New York Times*, a poignant photograph of three Sri Lankan fishermen returning to their work for the first time since the disaster.¹ Poised in a simple canoe and silhouetted against a vivid January—sunset not unlike the multi-hued dusk portrayed in *The Long Haul* (pg.37)—the figures had an otherworldly, ghostly presence. Despite obvious differences in medium, size, and focus on the human figure, there seemed an affinity between the elegiac yet tentatively triumphant photograph and Prey's light-filled compositions detailing elements of the lives, work, and habitat of the St. George, Maine lobster fishermen who are her neighbors during the summer months. It is a powerful sense of human presence—despite the absence of the figure—infused with a compelling aura of place and history that, above all, characterizes this group of Prey's exquisitely conceived and rendered watercolors.

A strong grounding in the history of art, disciplined field and studio practice characterized by intense and exacting study of subject, color, and light, as well as a rich accumulation of life experiences have shaped Prey's development as an artist. Although our lives have intersected only briefly over the years since our paths in the art world diverged, I have been privileged to come to know her work and the influences that have formed it. She and I first met as art history students at Williams College, surrounded not only by the natural beauty of the

Berkshire mountains but by masterful landscapes and seascapes by the likes of Winslow Homer and John Singer Sargent. More than twenty-five years later, our lives converged again on several occasions in Washington, D.C., where the artist has traveled for prestigious exhibitions, government commissions, and awards. Collaboration on the present catalogue has revealed that our careers have been informed by common experiences beyond our long-ago encounters in academia. Both of us were raised not far from New York City, where we often enjoyed the cultural resources available there with our mothers, both accomplished artists. We both have enjoyed spending parts of many years in Maine, where we each have strong personal histories and family roots (though I in the western mountains and she on the coast).

Prey's exposure to the history of art and architecture, her personal background, and her travels to Europe and Asia as the recipient of distinguished grants have played critical roles in her technical and stylistic development. However, it is the academic direction she pursued following her undergraduate study that most powerfully informs these watercolors. The artist's exposure to Medieval, Romanesque, and Baroque art and architecture as an undergraduate inspired her to pursue divinity studies at Harvard, where she probed more deeply into the ecclesiastical history and belief structures that inspired those monuments. Her intense interest in buildings and objects, their adornments and surroundings, and in the people and functions for which they were designed is keenly felt in this series. Her sharply observed, painstakingly rendered portrayals explore the built environments most important to the lobster fishermen—their homes, boats, and buoy-filled winter workshops—all situated in the context of their natural surroundings of land and sea. The carefully detailed, majestic *Apple House* (pg.23), for

example, is not only the present home to one of the artist's seafaring neighbors, but also surely has housed fishermen throughout the centuries of its existence. Its traditional New England architectural form of connected farm buildings, the so-called "big house, little house, back house, barn" still so ubiquitous in rural Maine, is an institution in and of itself.

As the artist has noted, these structures connect their inhabitants and us, as viewers, to the land (and the sea); these scenes link us to place, history, and elemental human pursuits in the face of our frenetic, technology-dominated lives. "The architecture," she muses, "tells a story of Maine."² By extension, the fisherman's boats and buoys—the other "structures" in her work—also play important roles in telling the story of the state's coastal inhabitants and their traditions. *The Simple Life* (pg.69), whose proud subject, stark composition, and crisp handling betray its title, is—both because of and in spite of its evident straightforwardness—emblematic of that story. (The same might be said of that painting's nautical equivalent, *Wayfarers* [pg.29]). It is the successful realization of her desire to connect her images to history, tradition, and the land that aligns Prey with earlier American painters whose work has influenced her own.

The pristine landscapes and seascapes of this series suggest the power and permanence of nature in contrast to the relative transience of human life, beliefs so central to the Hudson River School painters of a century and a half ago. *The Long Haul*, for example, calls to mind the sensibilities of Fitz Hugh Lane's tranquil harbor scenes such as *Shipping in Down East Waters* (c. 1850, The Farnsworth Art Museum).³ It does so not only in subject and masterful handling of atmospheric effects and reflections, but in the suggestion of the enduring presence of nature

and its spiritual associations. The distant fisherman's home in *Meadow Breeze* (pg.47), set on a sweeping hillside detailed with the subtle greens and browns of fall grasses, recalls the diminutive mountain cabins in many of Thomas Cole's operatic landscapes that symbolized the ultimate insignificance of man relative to God's presence in nature.⁴

While vastly different from those American Impressionists active in the northeast a century ago, Prey shares these painters' exultant yet historically aware approach to subject matter as described in a recent exhibition catalogue:

In this part of the United States [New England], rich not only in historical associations but also in personal significance, painters found subjects that enabled them to express ideas and sentiments that appealed to an audience that cherished tradition and continuity in the face of change.⁵

While the changes testing the resolve of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Americans primarily involved increasing immigration and urbanization, those faced by the U.S. (and Maine in particular) one hundred years later are the opposite. Rather than flocking to the cities to pursue work and the "American dream" in increasingly developed surroundings, many post-September 11 Americans are retreating to Maine and other rural environs seeking a simpler lifestyle. The irony of this influx of people "from away," of course, is that the resulting increase in property values and real estate development in Maine imperils precisely that which is so eagerly sought: the pristine and history-laden character of the landscape and the traditional *modus vivendi* nurtured by it. In turn, this reversal

will seriously challenge the "tradition and continuity" treasured by the longtime Maine residents whose lives and livelihoods are the subjects of Prey's paintings. Ironically, these very ideals may be endangered by the lobster fishing industry itself. While Port Clyde ranked among New England's major fishing ports for the first time in 2003, that same year the western part of Penobscot Bay elected to reduce the number of lobstermen in this lucrative area (which encompasses Port Clyde). Some fisherman fear that this resolution will jeopardize their younger compatriots and those inhabiting smaller islands and towns, as well as the operators of smaller boats.⁶ As the artist muses, "I am chronicling a way of life that may not always be."⁷

The sense of place and its history, both natural and human, is intensified and universalized in these works through the absence of the figure. In Prey's terms, a figure or figures would "stop the viewer" and assume the focus of attention, become the provider of a bounded narrative as do the men in the Sri Lankan photograph.⁸ Instead, the observer's response is open-ended. The landscape, seascape, structures, and boats may be valued either for their considerable aesthetic appeal and technical mastery (belying the often difficult lives of their occupants), or for their evocation of something deeper, more spiritual or personal; we often yearn to know more about the lives of these families. In this way, the works find their closest parallel in the paintings and watercolors of Edward Hopper, who, according to his fellow painter Guy Pène du Bois, "never stopped . . . preferring to portray houses and steam engines to men."⁹ His paintings of Maine and Cape Cod farmhouses, boats, and landscapes share with works such as *Early Risers* (pg.43) a weighted, nearly mystical character and the invitation to imagine human presence, rendered in an unaffected representational

style.¹⁰ Charles Burchfield's eloquent 1933 comments on Hopper's approach could as easily describe Prey's own:

Hopper's viewpoint is essentially classic; he presents his subjects without sentiment, or propaganda, or theatrics. He is the pure painter, interested in his material for its own sake, and in the exploitation of his idea of form, color, and space division. In spite of his restraint, however, he achieves such a complete verity that you can read into his interpretations of houses . . . any human implications you wish; and in his landscapes there is an old primeval Earth feeling that bespeaks a strong emotion felt, even if held in abeyance.¹¹



fig. 1

The absence of evident navigators in *The Optimist* (pg. 39) or of laborers in *Winter Workshop* (pg.71), then, allow the viewer to contemplate the seafarers' hopes, dreams, and livelihood, and thereby to sense their presence, their activity, and the spaces they occupy. While there is no comparison between the ultimate, unseen meaning of these images and the tragic occurrence memorialized in *Columbia Tribute* (fig.1), the artist's observation on her choice of subject for the latter commission resonates with her carefully chosen Maine themes. She has stated that she wanted to capture the spirit of the astronauts by portraying the vessel that embodied their hopes and dreams, the marker of a place and an activity so important in the lives of its unseen protagonists.¹²

Our imaginations are enticed not only by the houses, boats, and sheds themselves, but also by the exquisitely wrought details that animate the compositions: the

particular shape of a hull that bespeaks a boat's place of origin, the vibrant paint colors chosen by the fisherman to distinguish their trap buoys. One wonders about the resolute women, living or dead, who painstakingly sewed the quilts drying on clotheslines in *Early Risers*; the personality who inscribed his favorite beer brand on the rafters of his workshop; or the family member who so sensitively arranged starfish on a window sash above a blooming geranium, just as sensitively rendered by the artist with a hint of *japonisme* in the delicate apple tree limbs that complete the composition.

These details are nowhere more densely worked or meticulously rendered than in the group of winter workshop interiors, the most innovative compositions in this series and an entirely new subject for Prey. Inspired in part by her work on the 2003 White House Christmas card (fig.2), these intricately composed works also testify to her predilection for strong color and her interest in probing beneath exterior appearances. "I've always been fascinated with what is inside, from the outside looking in," the artist admits, voicing the innocently voyeuristic desire present in most of us.¹³ The two most ambitious watercolors in the sub-series, for example, *Winter Workshop, Study* (pg.55) and *Winter Workshop*, provide glimpses into these bright and congenial havens for the off-season work of trap repair, buoy painting, and line cleaning, as well as socializing.¹⁴ The tiers upon tiers of painstakingly drawn and painted buoys—still lives, as the artist notes¹⁵—provide a stark contrast to the windows betraying the cold, foggy coastline beyond. Together, these elements comprise a perfect case study of Prey's mastery of the unforgiving medium of watercolor (seen to completely different, but just as compelling, effect in the masterful *Ghost House* [pg.63]). Since not a single element may be changed after it has been painted, the artist



fig. 2

prepares methodically for the final compositions. Repeated visits to steal glimpses of these workshops yielded photographs for study and, later, luminous sketches carefully squared off for eventual enlargement.

Like the lobster fisherman's hardscrabble, tradition-laden work so easily overlooked by the tourist who sees only the romanticism of the seafaring life (or the price per pound), the rigors and complexities of Prey's own work may, to some, be eclipsed by the peacefulness of her images. Pure form and hue are here judged on their own considerable merits, but the viewer is simultaneously challenged to question existing assumptions about the appearance of watercolor; these are, after all, more paintings than works on paper in their edge-to-edge color and in their many layers of wash, allowing alternating passages of translucency and opacity.

Moreover, we are provoked to think more deeply about their subject matter; to imagine beyond the vessels and buildings, venturing in our mind's eye deep into the lives and spirits of their unseen occupants, into the story of Maine.

Sarah Cash
Arlington, Virginia
February 2005

(Endnotes)

¹ Photograph by Sriyantha Walpola for The New York Times, *The New York Times*, Saturday, January 15, 2005, A1, accompanying David Rohde, "In a Small Fishing Boat, Looking to Make Peace with a Punishing Sea," A5.

² E-mail message from the artist, January 27, 2005.

³ Reproduced in Pamela J. Belanger, *Maine in America: American Art at the Farnsworth Art Museum* (Rockland, Maine: The Farnsworth Art Museum, 2000), 56.

⁴ See, for example, Cole's *Notch of the White Mountains (Crawford Notch)*, 1839, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., reproduced in Earl A. Powell, *Thomas Cole* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990), 95.

⁵ Doreen Bolger, David Park Curry, and H. Barbara Weinberg, with N. Mishoe Brennecke, *American Impressionism and Realism: The Painting of Modern Life, 1885-1915* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), 66.

⁶ Ben Neal, "Maine's Most Lucrative Lobster Zone Considers Limited Entry," *The Working Waterfront* [web edition], October 2003 and Nancy Griffin, "Port Clyde Joins List of 'Major' New England Fishing Ports," *The Working Waterfront* [web edition], December 2004.

⁷ Conversation with the artist during a visit to her home and studio in Oyster Bay, New York, January 15, 2005.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Guy Pène du Bois, *Edward Hopper* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, c. 1931), as quoted in Belanger, *Maine in America*, 132.

¹⁰ Among Hopper's Maine works are four watercolors done in Rockland, including *Haunted House* (1926); see Belanger, *Maine in America*, 132-135. A particularly notable Cape Cod painting is *Mrs. Scott's House* (1932), Maier Museum of Art, Randolph-Macon Woman's College, reproduced in Ellen M. Schall, John Wilmerding, and David M. Sokol, *American Art, American Vision: Paintings from a Century of Collecting* (Maier Museum of Art, Randolph-Macon Woman's College, 1990), 107.

¹¹ Charles Burchfield, "Edward Hopper, Classicist," in *Edward Hopper Retrospective Exhibition* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1933), 16; quoted in Belanger, *Maine in America*, 132.

¹² Televised interview with the artist by Carol Lin, CNN Sunday, February 1, 2004.

¹³ E-mail message from the artist, January 27, 2005.

¹⁴ Paradoxically, these confined spaces apparently may contribute to respiratory ailments sometimes exhibited by the fishermen. Paint, chemicals, smoke from the burning of Styrofoam buoys and rope ends, and bacteria growing on dry rope algae are just some of the toxins which, combined with dust and poor ventilation, have been linked to poor respiratory health in a study conducted by Vinalhaven's doctor and the Harvard School of Public Health. See Ben Neal, "In Lobstering, Not All the Hazards are at Sea," *The Working Waterfront* [web edition], March 2004.

¹⁵ Conversation with the artist during a visit to her home and studio in Oyster Bay, New York, January 15, 2005.

PLATES

THE MEETING TREE 2004, watercolor on paper, 21 x 28 1/2 inches



THE APPLE HOUSE 2004, watercolor on paper, 27 x 40 inches



STARFISH AND GERANIUMS 2004, watercolor on paper, 28 x 21 inches



WAYFARERS 2002, watercolor on paper, 20 x 29 inches



INTO THE WIND 2003, watercolor on paper, 21 x 28 inches



BUDWEISER, STUDY 2004, watercolor on paper, 12 x 16 inches





I thought ahead to our first hauling day and hoped it would produce enough lobster to begin to pay for the fuel and bait. I hadn't looked at the balance of the boat account's checkbook since last winter, and I hoped we would not be operating in the red while waiting for the lobsters.

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THE LONG HAUL 2004, watercolor on paper, 19 x 25 inches



THE OPTIMIST 2002, watercolor on paper, 21 x 28 inches



BAIT HOUSE 2004, watercolor on paper, 27 x 21 inches



EARLY RISERS 2004, watercolor on paper, 22 x 28 inches



REMINDER 2004, watercolor on paper, 14 x 11 inches



MEADOW BREEZE 2004, watercolor on paper, 21 x 28 inches



FAMILY PORTRAIT 2004, watercolor on paper, 20 1/2 x 26 1/2 inches



I measured, cut, spliced, and replaced carefully as my father brushed bright orange paint over last year's coat, buoy after buoy..... The buoy color printed on my Maine State Lobster License is "orange, yellow, white." The orange I use is "blaze orange," and the type of paint is Day-Glo. It's quite bright and shows up better than some others in the fog.

At the end of the day, fifty buoys hung from the rafters drying, and forty traps, with warps perfectly coiled and neatly tied, waited to be set.

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A WINTER'S PROJECT 2005, watercolor on paper, 28 x 39 inches



WINTER WORKSHOP, STUDY 2004, watercolor on paper, 15 x 11 inches



FORMATION 2004, watercolor on paper, 25 1/2 x 40 inches



WINTER WORKSHOP 2005, watercolor on paper, 21 x 28 inches



Nonfishermen often express a notion of what they imagine commercial fishing to be, which is ultimately romantic. But the truth is, the fun, adventure, excitement, and beauty that you do experience make up a fairly small percentage of the whole. Admittedly, that tiny percentage leaves such a feeling of awe that it more than compensates for the fatigue, monotony, sweat, and frustration....

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GHOST HOUSE 2003, watercolor on paper, 21 x 28 inches



LIFELINE 2005, watercolor on paper, 12 x 15 inches



THE HOMECOMING 2004, watercolor on paper, 28 x 22 inches



THE SIMPLE LIFE 2004, watercolor on paper, 28 x 39 inches



BLUE NOTE 2004, watercolor on paper, 21 x 27 inches



REMINISCENCE 2003, watercolor on paper, 17 x 27 inches



BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES, COLLECTIONS & BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1957 Born in New York City
- 1979 B.A., Williams College
- 1986 M.Div, Harvard Divinity School

Awards and Fellowships:

- 1998 Artist in Residence, Westminster School, Simsbury, CT
- 1996 Best of Show, Westmoreland Museum of American Art
- 1986 Henry Luce Foundation Grant
- 1979 Fulbright Scholarship
- 1974 San Francisco Art Institute, Summer Grant

Listed:

- Who's Who in the World
- Who's Who in America, 50th Anniversary Edition
- Who's Who of American Women
- Who's Who in American Art
- 2004 New York State Senate Women of Distinction Award

Selected Exhibitions:

- 2005 The White House
 - United States Arts in Embassy Program, U.S. Embassy, Oslo, Norway
 - United States Arts in Embassy Program, U.S. Embassy, Belarus
 - United States Arts in Embassy Program, U.S. Embassy, Liberia
 - Kennedy Space Center, NASA Commission
 - Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY
 - Blue Water Fine Arts, Port Clyde, ME
- 2004 The White House
 - United States Arts in Embassy Program, U.S. Embassy, Oslo, Norway
 - United States Arts in Embassy Program, U.S. Embassy, Belarus
 - United States Arts in Embassy Program, U.S. Embassy, Liberia
 - Kennedy Space Center, NASA Commission
 - Observations*, Harrison Gallery, Williamstown, MA
 - Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY
 - Blue Water Fine Arts, Port Clyde, ME
- 2003 The White House
 - An American Portrait*, Arts Club of Washington D.C.
 - United States Art in Embassy Program, U.S. Embassy, Prague
 - United States Arts in Embassy Program, U.S. Embassy, Oslo, Norway

- United States Arts in Embassy Program, U.S. Embassy, Belarus
 United States Arts in Embassy Program, U.S. Embassy, Liberia
 2003 Kennedy Space Center, NASA Commission
The Valley Viewed: 150 Years of Artists Exploring Williamstown
 Harrison Gallery, Williamstown, MA Curated by Katherine Carroll
 Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY
 National Arts Club, NY
25 Years of Painting Maine, Blue Water Fine Arts, Port Clyde, ME
 2002 United States Arts in Embassy Program, U.S. Embassy Prague
 United States Arts in Embassy Program, U.S. Embassy Oslo, Norway
Obsession, Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington, NY
American Art in Miniature, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK
 Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY
Patriot, Blue Water Fine Arts, Port Clyde, ME
A Trace in the Mind: An Artists Response to 9/11, Hutchins Gallery, C.W.
 Post College, Brookville, NY
 2001 *Lightscares*, Jensen Fine Arts, New York City
 Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY
American Art in Miniature, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK
Recent Watercolors, Blue Water Fine Arts, Port Clyde, ME
 2000 *American Art in Miniature*, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK
 1999 *Recent Watercolors*, Jensen Fine Arts, New York City
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 1998 *American Art in Miniature*, Gilcrease Museum, OK
Express Yourself, Portland Museum of Art, ME
 1997 Museum of the Southwest, Midland, TX
Recent Acquisitions, Farnsworth Museum of Art, Rockland, ME
 1996 The Westmoreland Museum of American Art, Awarded *Best in Show*
 1995 The Philadelphia Museum of Art
 1994 Farnsworth Museum of Art Benefit Auction Exhibit, Rockland, ME
 1993 Blair Art Museum, Hollidaysburg, PA
 Johnstown Art Museum, Johnstown, PA
 1989 *Women's Art*, Williams College, Williamstown, MA
 1988 Museum of Fine Arts, Nassau County, NY
 1986 Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

Selected Collections:

- President and Mrs. George Bush
 President and Mrs. George W. Bush
 The White House
 The Farnsworth Art Museum
 Williams College
 Williams College Museum of Art
 The Taiwan Museum of Art
 Mellon Hall, Harvard Business School
 The Henry Luce Foundation
 Reader's Digest Corporation
 Prince and Princess Castell
 Prince and Princess Johannes Lobkowitz
 Prince and Princess Michael Salm
 Mrs. C. Robert Allen
 Mr. Herbert Allen
 Mr. Sam Bronfman
 Governor Hugh Carey
 Mr. and Mrs. Chris Davis
 Senator and Mrs. Judd Gregg
 Mr. Henry Luce III
 Mr. and Mrs. Dan Lufkin
 Mr. Richard P. Mellon
 Mr. Roger Milliken
 Ambassador and Mrs. John Ong
 Mr. and Mrs. Peter O'Neill
 Mr. and Mrs. Howard Phipps, Jr.
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Artwork Commissions:

NASA Commission – 2005 Shuttle Relaunch
NASA Commission – 2005 The x-43
NASA Commission – 2005 International Space Station Print
NASA Commission – 2004 Columbia Commemorative
NASA Commission – 2004 International Space Station
White House Christmas Card, 2003

The path of my existence became the flight of a bumblebee. Around and around and around we went, in clockwise circles, hesitating at every blaze-orange bloom and hovering over it just long enough to pollinate a trap with fresh herring. Endless loops of mindless, monotonous work; the rest of the world—sky, water, trees, boats—whirling by in the opposite direction, giving me the feeling of swimming perpetually against the tide. Again and again and again, I reach over the starboard side with my gaff and hook an orange buoy.

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