



BARBARA STRASEN

Layer by Layer

November 20, 2015 - February 21, 2016

Long Beach Museum of Art

2300 E. Ocean Blvd., Long Beach, CA 90803

Introduction

The Long Beach Museum of Art is proud to present the innovative work of San Pedro-based artist Barbara Strasen. With this exhibition, *Barbara Strasen—Layer by Layer*, it is our pleasure to present twenty-four works and two installations, all produced since 2005. I was first entranced by Strasen's *Glimpse and Flow*, a large installation of lenticular work for Terminal 2 at Los Angeles International Airport.* This was a particularly appropriate and evocative art installation at the Airport that served to greet travelers with multiple images of Southern California. The images appeared to shift and flow as travelers walked past and caught glimpses of iconic Los Angeles elements. Visiting Strasen's studio further confirmed for me her extraordinarily creative and prolific output and made limiting the selection of works for this exhibition challenging. Barbara Strasen has a passion for image-making and interest in "all manner of things." She has demonstrated an equal interest in the viewer and the act of looking. Strasen wants to give viewers "lots and lots to look at, unfurling over time." I hope that Museum visitors will enjoy the experience of discovery in her complex imagery, layer by layer. Many thanks to the contributors quoted in this brochure, and to the Museum Board of Trustees, and staff who also contributed to the success of this exhibition: Sue Ann Robinson, Seija Rokhea, Candice Reichardt, Rody Lopez along with the highly skilled installation crew. And many thanks, especially, to the artist for sharing her work with the community.

Ronald C. Nelson, Executive Director



Detail *Ironwork and Trees*, 2009, Acrylic on lenticular print, diptych 47 x 31-1/2 inches

* "Strasen created a cohesive art space within a challenging, voluminous space by visually stitching the walls together with lenticular panels. It also capitalizes on an important element of the space: a captive and mobile audience moving through security screening. Barbara's creative and collaborative approach resulted in an artwork that appropriately addresses the scale of the site, enriches how people experience the terminal, and creates a welcomed diversion for passengers." -- Sarah Cifarelli

"My work is about finding beauty and harmony in the turbulence and complexity of apparently unrelated and contradictory images."¹

The exhibition, *Barbara Strasen—Layer by Layer*, includes 24 works and two installations, all created in this century. Since her study of painting at the University of California, Berkeley, Strasen has a long career of installations and exhibitions worldwide. The imagery she explores reveals the vast scope of her curiosity, interests, travels and enthusiasms. Decade by decade she has combined images of places and people, events and archeology, and the connections between nature and technology in highly complex, colorful, layered, and evocative artworks. Strasen involves viewers in multiple ways that depend on the viewer's point of view. She is interested in providing multiple perspectives from across the room and down to "nose-to-paper" closeness. Her imagery ranges from natural history—birds, animals—to contemporary micro and macro images of vegetables, anatomy, fireworks, and figures diving through space. Considering the complexity of Barbara Strasen's artworks, and the many possibilities for descriptions of her imagery and media, it is appropriate to provide more than one voice in this essay. Professionals from a variety of walks of life share their views resulting in multiple perspectives in response to Strasen's art. Just as Barbara weaves multiple images together, so this essay weaves multiple views together. Imagine, if you will, a group of visitors and Barbara talking animatedly in the galleries about her artwork. Join the conversation.

It loves to happen. It all happens at once.

"Strasen's thoughtful and often whimsical selection fascinates and entertains."²

In *All manner of Things: The Art of Barbara Strasen* by Virginia Maksymowicz and Blaise Tobia³ the authors recount how the quotation, "It loves to happen," is one of Strasen's favorites, and they add that in the artwork that Strasen creates, "it all happens at once." Looking at her work, we are in the moment when everything might be present. Look to the left. Look to the right. Look closely. Walk away and turn around. Look from a distance. What is on the surface? Dig deep and uncover an accumulation of visual elements in this contemporary version of an archeological dig.

"Strasen was educated as an artist at the time that 'less is more' was more or less the rule. . . . But Minimalism could never be her thing. Barbara is fascinated by the stuff of the world—material and social—and has always been driven to make art that looks at, comments upon, and re-presents this stuff."⁴

Over the span of 35 years, Strasen has explored a multitude of natural environments, images and historical events in her artwork. Peeling back her work, layer by layer, images from history, science, nature (i.e. fish, antelopes, zebras), human anatomy (see *Sandwich Thymus*, 2011), food (cabbages), places (East LA and Las Vegas), pop-culture and advertising icons in unconventional relationships present us with a world view that is wide, deep, vibrant, and full of possibilities for visual enjoyment. Susan Eley describes Strasen's artworks as

"visual musings on the complexities of daily life. . . . The choice of images, their size, color and order in which they appear is designed to contrast and conflict, arresting the viewer with juxtapositions as surprising as splashing water and tattooed flesh."⁵

Strasen has always favored a maximalist approach, piling appropriated image upon appropriated image until the visual field groans with information. . . . all jostle for attention, but not for space, as Strasen has figured out how to organize this steady downpour of images."⁶

She began using Tyvek to create images and cover entire walls. We think of wallpaper for our homes, but the tradition of covering walls throughout the ages has resulted in remarkable art works like tapestries, murals, and ancient cave paintings. All of these visual expressions offer insights into their historic times and cultures, as well as expressing artists' individual visions. In the '70s, when Strasen trained as a painter, she was aware of the Pop artists, the Minimalists, and current of "pattern painting" at the time. POP artists were known for lifting the images from television and print advertising in their paintings. Today images are everywhere and on every kind of platform.

"Barbara brings that misunderstood aesthetic of ('70s era pattern painting) into the digital age and seems thus to make sense of the Internet's imposing abundance."⁷



At first glance, Strasen's artwork looks too complex to untangle. As Maksymowicz and Tobia note,

"Barbara's work is about the potential beauty of complexity, of crowdedness, of apparent chaos—if seen from the right vantage point or with the right attitude But the key term is 'apparent' chaos. Because it's not really chaos at all. . . . (she presents) from a God's-eye view, deeply sensing the interconnectedness of all things and joyfully disregarding any sense of linear time."⁸

In her most recent work, *Multiplex LA* (with thanks to Peter Paul Rubens), completed with a City of Los Angeles (COLA) Artist Fellowship, Strasen looked at east Los Angeles and photographically plucked out images of tires, lamp posts, fabric bolts, and fire escapes as she walked through the neighborhoods. She was intent on finding raw material for *Multiplex LA* in the overlooked and non-glamorous regions of Los Angeles. Strasen utilizes multiple technologies in this artwork by photographically capturing images, collaging them in her computer into a mix that roils, leans, and twists in a swirling compositions suggesting running, leaping figures that viewers can sift

through, sort out, and savor. By composing them with an eye to the composition and size of Baroque artist Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), Strasen creates beauty and harmony from seemingly unrelated mundane things. She then combined the images into a seamless archival inkjet print. When she was working on *Multiplex LA*, the Getty Center had a Rubens exhibition and Strasen began to notice how “Rubens was a genius at the overlap and ‘weave’ of images together.”⁹ Strasen recalled seeing four over-sized paintings by Rubens at the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida. She remembered thinking that

*“if you took out the people, animals and monsters, that the fabrics and their gestures would carry the paintings more than well enough. So . . . east of downtown LA fabric neighborhood with all their bolts of cloth on the street, already in human gestures—slouching, flying, loitering, falling, sleeping—all the bits clicked in my mind and I decided to make lots and lots of digitally cutout components to assemble into a Rubens-style composition of a contemporary nature.”*¹⁰

Multiplex LA is a celebration of the fabric of life on the streets of Los Angeles. As in all of her work, Strasen celebrates the multiplicity, variety and richness of contemporary experience.



Detail *Multiplex LA* (with thanks to Peter Paul Rubens), 2015

*“As you get to know someone or learn about some domain, things get more complicated, (than they first appear) and yet more understandable (with time and deeper knowledge). That’s what the world is like, that’s what people are like—you develop a sense of multiple layers and multiple views, but, rather than being contradictory, the complexity all fits together and doesn’t fly apart. It’s part of its beauty. . . . Some of Strasen’s artworks are so heavily loaded with nuance and incredible novel associations, and yet her exquisite compositional skill keeps them from flying apart. And a process of powerful encounter is created.”*¹¹

Twenty-First Century Collage

*“Barbara Strasen has always explored the possibilities of complex patterns and colors in her art. Not only have her works been visually satisfying for the viewer, they have been ahead of more recent developments in complex patterning in contemporary painting and collage.”*¹²

Many artists have linked unlike images together in painting and collage. Strasen activates the static tradition of collage with her combinations of media. *Fire and Flowers*, 2012, is created with acrylic pigment and collage on an archival pigment print. Strasen has tinted photographs sandwiched between layers of Plexiglas

or used Mylar to create images that would cast shadows. In the four *Natural History* images, Strasen paints on Plexiglas and combines that with prints, expanding her choice of media to more fully realize the layering she wishes to embrace. An accomplished painter, as evidenced in *Iguana and William Morris*, Strasen never abandoned painting on canvas, but, as she describes it, “evolved into primarily a kind of freewheeling collage.” Strasen has embraced a multiplicity of techniques and image-making processes moving beyond traditional paint on canvas. And, even though the process of printing and photography and digital media is once removed from the artist’s hand, Strasen manages to exude the warmth of the handmade and establish a direct connection between her artistic intention and the viewer.

To achieve greater layering of images, Barbara moved to the more complex process of lenticular technology. This allows multiple images to appear or disappear as if animated as the viewer moves and changes his or her angle of sight, as in *Ironwork and Trees*, 2009. Further, Strasen adds more complexity to some of her lenticulars, by painting over them as in *Chinese Pillow*, or combining a lenticular central image with a print as in *Asian Cabbage* and *Large Chandelier*.



Asian Cabbage, 2010-2011

*“I visited Barbara in her studio and was struck by some of the lenticular images. Lenticular images are especially interesting in the way in which they reveal multiple images in a single artwork. Her work, the Asian Cabbage, is beautiful, and captures the viewer’s attention with its morphing beauty.”*¹³

Memory and Perception

*“Memory is an ongoing process of perception and re-perception, interpretation and reinterpretation. It is not static and fixed. Images become juxtaposed both in our perception through time and in our memory.”*¹⁴

In both her choice of visual elements and the layering of them, Strasen asks us to see the world from many viewpoints, and consider how memories—our individual memories and our shared cultural memories—are attached to events, places and images.

*“In Ironwork and Trees, the theme of a ‘gate,’ such a primal image, evokes memories—her own memories and then viewers’ memories. When she chooses a primal image like a gate, or a bird, she invites viewers to share in all the human reactions to such imagery, that is, if they slow down to observe deeply, going beyond surface presentation.”*¹⁵

Checklist of the Exhibition
All artworks are courtesy of the artist.
Photographs courtesy of the artist.
Height precedes width in inches.

Multiplex LA (with thanks to Peter Paul Rubens), 2015
Archival inkjet print, 82 x 212 in.

SuperMegaMultiplexorama, 2004-5
Inkjet on Tyvek with 26 lenticulars
98 x 318 in.

Iguana and William Morris, 2011
Acrylic on canvas, diptych
48 x 72 in.

Sandwich Thymus, 2011
Acrylic on canvas, diptych
60 x 40 in.

Red Blue Cabbage, 2010-2011
Acrylic and mixed media on archival pigment print with center lenticular, mounted on Dibond
Frame dimensions 50 x 50 in.

Asian Cabbage, 2010-2011
Acrylic and mixed media on archival pigment print with center lenticular, mounted on Dibond
Frame dimensions 50 x 50 in.

Large Chandelier, 2010-2011
Acrylic and mixed media on archival pigment print with center lenticular, mounted on Dibond
Frame dimensions 50 x 50 in.

Chinese Pillow, 2006
Acrylic on archival lenticular print
Frame dim. 25-1/2 x 25-1/2 in.

Cosmos Las Vegas, 2005
Acrylic on archival lenticular print
Frame dim. 25-1/2 x 25-1/2 in.

Anansi The Trickster, 2006
Acrylic on archival lenticular print
Frame dim. 25-1/2 x 25-1/2 in.

Carhood with Animals, 2006
Acrylic on archival lenticular print
Frame dim. 25-1/2 x 25-1/2 in.

Two Fish Mystery Fish, 2005
Acrylic on archival lenticular print
Frame dim. 25-1/2 x 25-1/2 in.

Bonjour Rene 2005
Acrylic on Plexiglas and archival lenticular print
Frame dimensions 13 x 13 in.

Big Bang One, 2007
Acrylic on canvas
48 x 48 in.

Starting Up, 2009-2011
Acrylic and transfer on canvas
48 x 48 in.

Fire and Flowers, 2012
Acrylic and collage on archival pigment print
Frame dimensions 25 x 31-1/2 in.

Natural History Antelopes, 2013
Acrylic on Plexiglas with archival pigment print
Frame dimensions 26 x 26 in.

Natural History Zebras, 2013
Acrylic on Plexiglas with archival pigment print
Frame dimensions 26 x 26 in.

Natural History Jaguar, 2013-14
Acrylic on Plexiglas with archival pigment print
Frame dimensions 26 x 26 in.

Natural History Bear, 2013-14
Acrylic on Plexiglas with archival pigment print
Frame dimensions 26 x 26 in.

Microbio and Jewels, 2005
Acrylic on archival lenticular print
Frame dimensions 13 x 13 in.

Birds Four Sides, 2006
Acrylic on archival lenticular print
Frame dimensions 13 x 13 in.

Moon, 2006
Painted lenticular
Frame dimensions 13 x 13 in.

High Up Deep Down, 2005
Acrylic on Plexiglas and archival lenticular print
Frame dimensions 13 x 13 in.

Orchids and Insects, 2007
Acrylic on archival lenticular print
Frame dim. 13-1/4 x 13-1/4 in.

Big Bang One, 2007
Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 in.

Ironwork and Trees, 2009
Acrylic on archival lenticular print, diptych
47 x 31-1/2 inches
(Detail on the front cover.)

Strasen's intention with both *SuperMegaMultiplexorama* and *Multiplex LA* is to "slow people down by giving people lots and lots to look at, unfurling over time."¹⁶ Strasen calls her wall-sized works, "wallpaper for the 21st century." *SuperMegaMultiplexorama* combines photo-derived images, lenticular panels, and many small "contempo-heraldic" motifs, or what Strasen calls "heraldry for the rest of us." She wants viewers to be able to enjoy it from a distance, but also be drawn to the details for up-close observation.

*"It is the element of time, the tactic of slowing down the viewing process, that matters most. As the eye sorts out the imagery, rich and fascinating images (emerge) . . . Because of its complexity and rich range of imagery, it is also a work of art with staying power; it rewards repeated viewing."*¹⁷

One of the joys of a museum experience is contemplation—to look with continued attention. Strasen provides a wealth of material and memorable moments for our delectation. Her work has been described as "*visually and mentally stimulating. . . as well as a whole lot of fun to see.*"¹⁸ Roni Feinstein

Strasen's art evokes comparisons with lyric poetry and choral music in its evocative power to recall individual and cultural memories. Strasen manages to meld multiple elements into a cohesive whole without relying on a linear narrative or dualistic views. Strasen suggests we "look. The world is full of marvels." There is much to explore and absorb while realizing "it all happens at once." But like music, a time-based medium, her work reveals itself through continued observation. In her compositions, like music that swells in volume and changes melodic lines, her images appear, then submerge and reappear with time and viewer's changing vantage points.

— Sue Ann Robinson
Director of Collections and Exhibitions