



Albrecht Durer, *Stag Beetle* (1505)  
Watercolour and gouache, upper left  
corner added, with tip of left antenna  
painted in by a later hand, 14.1 x 11.4 cm  
credit: The J Paul Getty Museum

all other images courtesy The Estate of  
Barbara Howard (416) 203-0847



*Lobster*, wood-engraving by  
Barbara Howard for *Locus* by  
Richard Outram.  
Toronto: Gauntlet Press, 1974.  
3 1/2" x 3 1/2"



*Mating Frogs*, wood-engraving by  
Barbara Howard for *Creatures* by  
Richard Outram. Toronto:  
Gauntlet Press, 1972.  
3 1/2" x 3 1/2"



*Snake*, wood-engraving by  
Barbara Howard for  
*Creatures* by Richard  
Outram. Toronto: Gauntlet  
Press, 1972. 3 1/2" x 3"

## Drawing Attention: Barbara Howard's Ecologies

by Martha Fleming for Canadian Art, Summer 2006

Not long after I moved out to this little market town in Suffolk I had my first encounter with a stagbeetle. Running to catch the train to London in the twilight I had to cross the tarmacked car park of the supermarket. As I sprinted towards Brook Street something stopped me dead, something that I felt before I really saw it. There before and below me, barely discernible from the tarry crust smeared with old engine oil underfoot, was an almost prehistoric looking insect about four inches long. Its consciousness was so vast and so commanding that I had no choice but to come to a halt and marvel.

Four inches is long for a stagbeetle, even a male one. Officially endangered right across Europe, there are still enclaves of them throughout East Anglia. Like cicadas, the larvae nest underground for long stretches -- seven years -- before miraculously answering a call no entomologist can yet explain and bursting out full blown as they have done for tens of thousands of years to follow each others' scent along paths somehow known to cell memory alone.

This one, a king of his kind, threw all he knew out to greet me, and, waving the deep purple brown of his chitin-covered antlers, he immediately knew more of me from what he took in at that moment than I do myself even now. I looked around at the gauntlet the beetle, intoxicated by pheromones, had yet to run on the tripod points of toes entirely unsuited to the paved surface. I picked him up on a piece of card and tried to



*Dragonflies*, wood-engraving by Barbara Howard for *Creatures* by Richard Outram. Toronto: Gauntlet Press, 1972. approximately 3 1/2" x 3 1/2"



*Fish*, wood-engraving by Barbara Howard for the broadside poem "Shiner" by Richard Outram. Toronto: The Gauntlet Press, 1976. approximately 3 1/2" x 3 1/2"



*Tawny Owl*, wood-engraving by Barbara Howard for *Locus* by Richard Outram. Toronto: Gauntlet Press, 1974. 3 1/2" x 3 1/2"

take him to safety. As I stepped away toward the greenery a car with a sullen couple in the front pulled in to park on the darkened spot where he'd arrested me.

I don't remember if I told this story to Barbara Howard when last I saw her in the Spring of 2002. Her untimely death at the age of 76 came in December of that year from complications following a fall. Unbeknownst to me, that visit would have been my last chance. It is a story she would have understood: it not only echoes experiences at the core of her own prodigious life as an artist, but also tells another story about her legacy to me. For Barbara Howard was my godmother.

Doubtless the first time I saw sustained attention paid to anything as infinitesimal as an insect, it was in Barbara's meticulously drawn articulations of living things. Durer's astounding watercolour of a Stagbeetle and its shadow may have been made 500 years ago, but it was Barbara's wood engraving of dragonflies I would have seen first. In this, she trained me to look closely at nature, she prepared me for the blinding genius of Durer, and she showed me what hard work and discipline was involved in being an artist. She was not alone in this guidance -- my brother and sister and I were brought up with an embarrassment of artistic riches in the home of a leading cultural and creative light in the 60s and 70s -- our father, the designer Allan Fleming.

What was unique to Barbara, however, was the transmission of the integrity of these lessons: the conviction that there is a direct link between the arenas of art, nature and daily practice. She was an

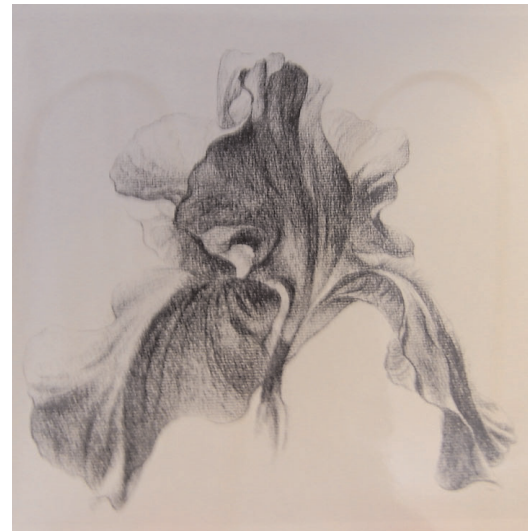
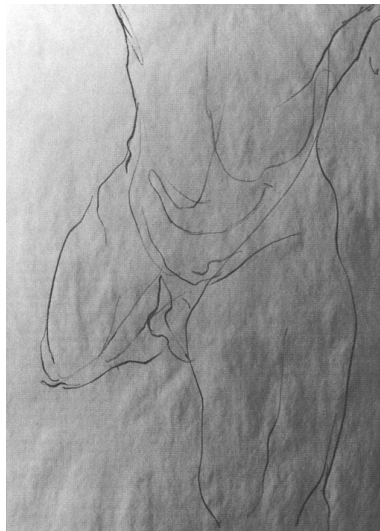


The wedding of Barbara Howard and Richard Outram, Toronto 1957. From left to right: Allan Fleming, Richard Outram, Barbara Howard, Frances Gage. photo credit: Jean Gainfort Merrill

environmental artist *avant la lettre*, and the ecologies which she herself practised extended clearly into domains of intellectual, social and spiritual health the importance of which is only now beginning to be acknowledged -- perhaps most notably in the writings of Felix Guattari.

Barbara Howard was born in Long Branch, Ontario (now part of Toronto) in 1926, and graduated a Drawing and Painting medallist from the Ontario College of Art in 1951, having studied under Jock MacDonald and Will Ogilvie. The following years were spent travelling and studying in Europe, with the longest sojourn spent in London. This is where she met her husband to be, the poet Richard Outram, and where she met my parents. On her return to Toronto she was given her first solo exhibition by Douglas Duncan, and so in 1957 her work followed that of Emily Carr, Fred Varley, Lawren Harris, David Milne and others into the legendary Picture Loan Society. Richard and Barbara married that year and his utter devotion to her is evident in the photograph of their wedding which shows my father as best man, and as bridesmaid the beautiful Frances Gage -- an accomplished sculptor who has outlived all three.

Frances and Barbara met at OCA, and along with Rosemary Kilbourn, these three women, their work and their friendships were important role models for me as a child and into my teens. They were independent and autonomous, intelligent and deliberate, productive and tender, amusing and mysteriously attractive. An opening of an exhibition of Kilbourn's wood engravings at the Sisler Gallery in 1972 was also the occasion for Rebecca Sisler to launch her book about Frances Loring and Florence Wyle, and for that occasion there was a mini-screening of Christopher Chapman's film about "The Girls".



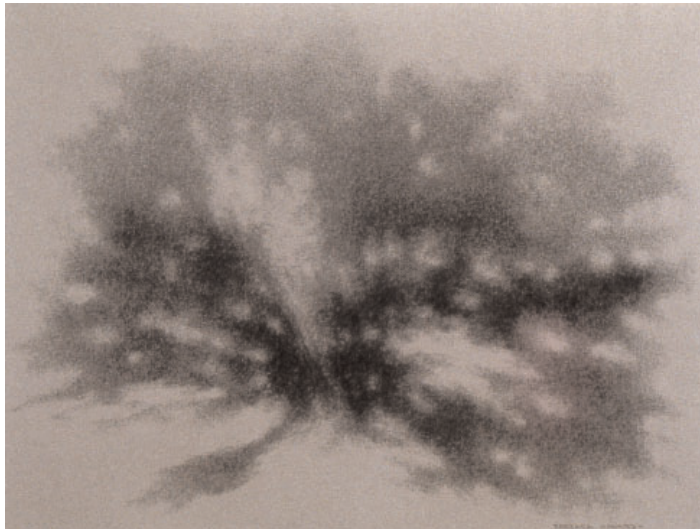
Barbara Howard, *Leaping Man* (from *Twenty-Eight Drawings By Barbara Howard*, Toronto: Martlet Press, 1970)  
pencil on paper, 26" x 20" (private collection)

Barbara Howard, *Iris* (1980)  
conté on paper, dimensions unknown  
location unknown

Attending at the age of 14, I was transfixed by the candlelit dinner scene, in which I could discern these three friends -- women I knew -- among the guests of the formidable and magnetic Loring and Wyle, who by then had passed away into legend.

I am trying to tell art history here as much as personal history: the distorted genealogies of influence that artists are often obliged to give as shorthands to our development rarely convey the truly formative moments. A similar hubris coupled with misplaced insecurity has occulted a clear history of environmental and ecologically concerned art in Canada. Is it the result of the dead weight of all those homogenising tourist images of the country, the insufferable lionising of the Group of Seven, the denial of the masterly abstraction of a pre-colonial culture?

In 1990, *Canadian Art* published an amazing portfolio issue almost entirely comprised of reproductions of works by artists -- the only text was a short editorial which began with the capitalised words WE ARE IN DANGER. Some extremely good eco-work appeared in this issue, most of it from the preceding five years. But a visual interrogation of the ambivalent signification of landscape, the disruption and resilience of biosystems, industrial carnage, and the spirit of place was not new to Canadian art -- as art historians like Johanne Sloan are beginning to point out with considerable skill. It is in part that some work has gone unrecognised as being environmentally concerned, mistakenly confused and conflated with a collective embarrassment about wildlife painting, a baby thrown out with the bathwater of schlocky daubings of maples. I sometimes think that the profile for an intellectual milieu in Canada has in part been constructed in high relief against the depreciation of representations of nature,



Barbara Howard, *Tree in Moonlight* (date unknown) conté on paper, 19" x 25" location unknown

complex representations which crumble under often unfounded charges of essentialism and romanticism. It has been an error to imagine that all landscape is a priori apolitical and uniquely representational, an error to think that animals are always only instrumentalised in images.

Differentiating historically between serious investigations of what it means to be part of Gaia in Canada or elsewhere and those works intended to create a comfort zone of nature porn will require looking closely at work that has not yet been the subject of critical attention. In the immediate, it means not only looking at generations of artists trained and working prior to -- and through -- the design and conceptual boom of the 60s and the emergence of support structures of the 70s, but also looking at the contexts and techniques of those artists. Barbara Howard's work is an important place to begin such a project.

What we are doing when we look at animals, how we look at them, and what we do with those observations has in the last decade been a subject of sustained critical inquiry in visual culture and in history of science, from the work of Nigel Rothfels on zoos, to Steve Baker on contemporary art, and Lorraine Daston on attention to nature in the Enlightenment. The relationship between technique and looking, between eye and hand, between what one chooses to look at closely and long and what one is consequently ignoring are all as important as what is in the centre of the final image. Barbara's work in wood-engraving throughout the 1970s, which was mainly focused on living creatures, is a case in point: drawing attention to something is the first step towards exploring the big picture which surrounds it.



*Monarch Butterfly*, wood-engraving by Barbara Howard for *Locus* by Richard Outram. Toronto: Gauntlet Press, 1974  
3 1/2" x 3 1/2"

Wood-engraving is a demanding process, and Barbara was a virtuoso. She also took courses in invertebrate biology: I can imagine that there would have been a correlative between the amount of time Barbara spent studying and sketching -- observing -- the creatures she portrayed and the time she would have spent cutting the vignettes themselves. They echo the floating, frameless engravings pioneered by Bewick in the 18th Century and yet they are startlingly modern. As much about form as they are about anatomical accuracy, they hover on the brink of typology but have nothing of the reduction to taxonomy of the zoological rendering. Her counterintuitive use of colour upholds the monochrome dignity inherent in the technique.

Of course, Bewick might not immediately be recognised as an environmentalist either -- perhaps in part because we mistakenly measure that activity by the level of erosion of the environment at the time, and not by the level of attention paid by the observer. But I don't believe for a minute that his unsurpassed books *A General History of Quadrupeds* (1790), *A History of British Birds* (1797 - 1804) and *The Fables of Aesop* (1818) were uniquely marketing-led projects. These engravings by Barbara Howard were in the main also effected for hand produced books: those of the Gauntlet Press which she and Richard Outram began in the 1960s. Indeed, most of the engravings reproduced here are from one book -- entitled *Creatures* -- a work full of awe yet entirely devoid of sentimentality.

*Creatures* was published in 1972, around the same time that Barbara drew me aside to tell this then barely adolescent girl who might be think-



Barbara Howard, *Manitoulin Pine* (c. 1949)  
media, dimensions and location unknown  
photo credit: Frances Gage

ing about make-up what exactly was involved in the testing of cosmetics on animals, introducing to me the whole idea of animal rights, animal souls. It would only have been only a few years after the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and a few years before Three Mile Island melted down. The rapid and alarming acceleration of visible effects of the degradation of nature into the 80s brought many of us up sharp against the 'big picture.' Barbara wrote this in 1987:

"We must constantly attempt to become more fully human... I am concerned, as we all must be, about what we, through greed and ignorance, are doing to the natural world; to the world and all its life forms including, of course, ourselves. I am not an activist and I am not a preacher... I am an artist and believe in doing what I do best as an artist. To be an artist requires of one the deepest concern allied to detachment, otherwise one cannot accomplish one's work. In my work I am attempting to explore and reveal the essential inter-dependence of all life; to communicate what I have seen, what I love, to engage the viewer in a response of love and celebration and hence deep concern for all that we must treasure or risk losing forever. I must share what I love, to give some insight into what I discover and see as the treasures of existence, which are everywhere to be found, to be seen for the looking."

Barbara's wood engravings for *Creatures* are not illustrations to Richard's poems: they are an integral part of the pages they made together, and lifting them out of that context seems strange but necessary to me now. Because I believe that Barbara's attention to animal life taught Richard to see creatures in turn, and not vice versa. It was a long and fruitful lesson that culminated in his far-reaching poem cycle *Mogul Recollected* (Porcupine's Quill, 1993) about a circus elephant and so much more.



Barbara Howard, *Blue Whale: Feeding on Krill* (1993) acrylic on grommeted canvas, 67" x 168" photo credit: Tom Moore

Mogul was a pachyderm doppelganger to Barbara's whale project of the early 1990s. Because they were not only tree-huggers, but also whale lovers. And why are you laughing? Biologist Sir Peter Scott of the Whale Conservation Institute has said "If we can't save the whales, we can't save anything" and it is this stark truth, allied to questions of scale, form and mammalian simpatico that drove Barbara's sustained work with whales. This is no armchair empathising: regular visits to several oceans of the Americas, and collaborations with Richard Sears at the Mingan Cetacean Study Centre in Quebec and the WCI in Massachusetts over a number of years dovetailed with a lengthy painting retreat at the rural studio of her old friend Rosemary Kilbourn.

In a talk she gave at the Arts & Letters Club over a decade ago, she gave a typically crisp glimpse of what was involved in her extended research: "Many people have been whale-watching -- I have done nothing unprecedented in that respect: but rather from a different motivation and point of view. A small inflatable boat driven by an obsessed marine biologist often at high speeds on rough seas certainly is one of the aspects of that point of view."

The cycle of larger paintings, many nearly 16 feet long, numbers some 15 and the scale of these works is indicated by the armature required to mount them for photography in a Toronto warehouse. One of the larger works is permanently installed at the Mingan Study Centre, and I can imagine others in future gracing similar key conservancy institutes. *Blue Whale Feeding on Krill* (1993) shows Howard's unique pointillism used almost as a realist technique, while the krill echo other crustaceans over which the artist has cast her eye.



Barbara Howard, *Summit* (1980) oil on canvas, 25" x 36" private collection  
photo credit: Tom Moore



Barbara Howard, *Chamber Music (Sun and Water)* (1969) oil on canvas, 40" x 40" private collection

This 'mammalian simpatico' is a manifestation of Barbara's exhortation to 'strive to become more fully human' and folds into itself a place for the human animal that can be seen clearly in her figure drawing. The dynamism of *Leaping Man* (1970) which was drawn from life in one minute is also present in the more poised conte and charcoal work also to be found in *Twenty-Eight Drawings*, which was published through the Martlett Press of my father and Ernie Herzig of Herzig Somerville in 1970. It is still a high-water mark of draughtsmanship and sustained observation.

And yet I know of no landscapes Barbara painted or drew in which figures appear. There is to be no narcissistic distraction from the absolute intensity of photosynthesis, no respite from the pyrotechnics of her magic mountains. In a register that spans from the retinally specific to the spiritually transcendent, chromatics in these paintings seem to self-assemble, and demand to be examined as a set of propositions. We've all sped by the flank of a sun-crazed hill in the distance like in *Summit* (1980), but what does it mean about light and meaning that its palette is so closely echoed in *Chamber Music: Sun and Water* (1969)? There is another historical trajectory hidden here, and it is that of two intertwined sublimes in the development of Canadian landscape painting: the transcendental and the apocalyptic. Both would have their place in a chronicle of environmentalism in our art.

There was of course already a received legacy of transcendental landscape when Barbara and her friend Frances Gage cycled up the Bruce Peninsula in 1949, when the two were in their second year at OCA. Like many pilgrimages, it was related to a death -- that of Barbara's mother that year -- and during those six idyllic weeks many works were made, some of which have



Barbara Howard at work in her rented kitchen studio in the old Massey mansion on Toronto's Jarvis Street (1952)  
photo credit: Frances Gage

Barbara Howard at work on *Arlette's Garden* in Frances Gage's Birch Street studio, Toronto (1984)



since vanished. One of Barbara's trees, *Manitoulin Pine* (1949), photographed by Gage much later, is just such a one. It is a sweet thing standing equidistantly between Tom Thompson and what we can see obliquely of *Arlette's Garden* (1984) in a photo of Barbara at work in Frances' studio thirty five years later. Doubling back, the pose Barbara holds as she works intently on *Arlette's Garden* is amazingly similar to that shown in a photo taken in early 1952, giving a clear picture of her sustained and utter commitment to her work over the three decades in between.

The light-filled studio of '52 is obviously a kitchen, one of two rooms she shared with Frances Gage in what had been the Massey mansion on Jarvis Street. It is worth remembering that these years from 1949 to 1951 are those same years in which Vincent Massey headed up the Royal Commission which was to give birth to the Canada Council for the Arts and so much more. Worth remembering too that artists like Barbara Howard did not have such structures behind them when they began -- not because that fact is chastening, as it certainly is, but because we need to think historically and contextually about work we have not yet fully understood. This is not about stylistic genealogies, but about tracing the complex evolution of ideas and attitudes.

Barbara linked 'becoming more fully human' with looking clearly, and with making images of the natural world which draw attention and engage the viewer in a loving response. Barbara's was not an ecology of proscriptions and dogmas, but rather one which produced ethics almost by extrusion from the sustained focus of a daily practice over decades. One of her favourite quotes was from the poet Philip Larkin: "what will survive of us is love." I can attest that this is true.