



## Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson

# Robert Barber

11 January – 31 May 2015

### Great Hall

In the Great Hall, you will find a range of work in a variety of media, representing a 50-year span. From the maquettes to the large abstract expressionist canvases from the 1960s to the relief sculptures to the lyrical color block works, one can witness the great diversity of Robert Barber's practice since the 1940s up to today.

### Freeway Paintings (*north side of North wall, Great Hall*)

The Freeway Paintings were inspired by a trip Barber and his family took to San Francisco in the early 1970s, where he became inspired by transportation infrastructure—highways, underpasses and overpasses. These banal, yet monumental constructions provide the inspiration for these geometric abstractions, with bold colors in elemental, constructivist verticals, horizontals and diagonals. The grey and black and white paintings are the most closely identifiable with their subject matter, while remaining resolutely non-representational. Barber investigated these forms in dozens of paintings and countless sketches (see drawings in case) from the early to mid 1970s. These works are part of a longer Modernist tradition of artists becoming captivated by the industrial built environment, beginning with the Impressionists' depictions of factories, bridges and tunnels, and continuing through the photography and painting of Charles Sheeler and more recently Bernd and Hilla Becher.

### Maquettes (*pedestals and glass case*)

In 1980 Barber took a sabbatical from teaching to develop his sculpture practice. Over the next few years, he realized medium-scale abstract painted steel sculptures, with strong Constructivist leanings and a reduced red, black, and white palette reminiscent of Kasimir Malevich. From 1981 to 1985 he also realized many small cardboard and wooden maquettes, made with the intention of having them fabricated in steel on a much larger scale. These are all pigmented and emblematic of Barber's practice of examining letters and numbers for their formal, rather than symbolic qualities. Barber inverts, twists and entwines the forms in ingenious and surprising ways, rendering their origins as characters and numerals mute, in favor of examining their pure and simple forms. The juxtaposition of the *Sevens* maquette and *Sevens* painting shows this tendency at a cross-media pinnacle. The relief sculptures on the tiled east wall of the Great Hall demonstrate his interest in the relationship between 2-D and 3-D work, and play with the liminal space in between flat work and sculpture.

### Abstract Paintings (*seen throughout Great Hall*)

Earlier works demonstrate the strong influence of previous generations of artists—Matisse, Gorky, Kline (as seen in the Southeast Gallery)—but it is with this body of gestural abstract works from the 1960s that we see Barber emerging with a significant individual style. The gridded blocks of color are worked out in numerous smaller (20x20) paintings, and, most interestingly, in numerous collages (see case in Central Gallery for examples). A variety of palettes are employed, again, unique to Barber, and demonstrate an interesting and counterintuitive use of pink and brown, showing his wide range of investigations into color theory. These works also demonstrate an interesting and evolving relationship to the edge, an often challenging place for paintings to reconcile, with some employing an "all over" field, and others leaving the colors to float on a canvas field.

### Mountain Forms (*Northwest wall, Great Hall*)

In the late 1980s and through the 1990s, Barber worked out a series of lyrical color block abstractions he calls

*Mountain Forms*. Clearly inspired by the ring of gorgeous basin and range “block faulting” mountains that surround the valley of Tucson, the works are both “landscape painting” and entirely abstract (please note sketches in the case, two of which show the figurative origins of the abstracted forms). This calls to mind early art historical trends and debates about “non-objective” versus “abstract” painting, debates that seem rather quaint now, but still beg semiotic questions about the relationship between figure, form and meaning. These works also demonstrate Barber’s skills as an accomplished colorist, exploring a wide variety of palettes and color juxtapositions.

### **The Stacked Canvases** (*Passage to East Wing*)

The so-called “stacked canvases” of the early 1970s demonstrate Barber’s facility in both painting and sculpture, and a continued affinity for the space between 2 and 3 dimensions. They also bring about a new palette deeply embedded in the era and indicative of a “vintage” palette. We can relate these works to a range of shaped and relief canvas investigations by other artists of this era, examined in key exhibitions. In 1964, *The Shaped Canvas* exhibition curated by Lawrence Alloway at the Guggenheim focussed on paintings with a continuous smooth surface, but a later exhibition (1965) at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery (*Shape and Structure*, curated by Frank Stella, Henry Geldzhaler and Barbara Rose) examined stacked and sculptural canvases that further pushed the destruction of the painting-sculpture dialectic and moved toward more of a sense of artworks as “specific objects” that transcend the boundaries of their medium.

### **The Figurative Paintings** (*video room*)

In the late 1980s Barber embarked on a serial suite of paintings that first appear to be a radical departure from all his previous work. These figurative works feature clowns, skulls, masked faces, ominous hands and damaged dolls (with a strong, though perhaps purely fortuitous connection to Hans Bellmer’s explicitly erotic *La Poupée/ Die Puppe* photographs published in 1935, but only revealed to a wider audience in the 1980s). They depict a variety of objects—IV drips, surgical tools, belts, stirrups and scientific lab instruments—that may evoke his time in the operating room as a surgical nurse during the war. Dream-like on the nightmarish side of the spectrum, their inception was instigated by the artist seeing an old pair of gloves and thinking, in his words, “Those look more interesting than anything I can make up,” carrying on a tradition of artists animating quotidian objects with symbolic provocations, from Dutch still life to Van Gogh’s now-iconic shoes. He notes, “I didn’t think about surrealism or anything, I just thought of interesting shapes and contrasts, like the eyeglasses, I modeled those after what I saw at the ophthalmologist office” (Interview with artist, 18 December 2013). Barber studied with Phillip Guston in 1950 and he expressly states that Guston’s almost revolutionary figurative (ashtrays, cigarettes, books, brushes) break with Abstract Expressionist at the end of the 1960s was a major influence, as well as a reaffirmation of an ongoing interest in Picasso’s draftsmanship.

What is especially impressive and intriguing about these works relative to his oeuvre is that these seemingly anomalous paintings are not at all a rupture, but rather an evolutionary continuation that brings together elements and styles from all his previous art resulting in some of his most daring, confounding and remarkable work. Behind the discarded bike parts, prosthetics and grimy doctor’s office interiors are all the hallmarks of Barber’s work: the scumbling, the gestural brushwork, and the accumulation of collapsed planes indicative of the Modernist painting project he had been developing since at least 1950. Allusions to George Grosz, Otto Dix and most assuredly Max Beckmann are there, but we can also read (again, perhaps accidental, perhaps the zeitgeist, a la the relationship with Bellmer) a grotesque and macabre “punk” aesthetic at work, reminiscent of both Gee Vaucher’s visual work as part of the hugely influential English anarchist band CRASS and the general MAD magazine aesthetic that ruled pop culture in the 1980s. Whether Barber was aware of these currents or not is immaterial. What is significant, however, is that their brutality, anger and pain come across with a bracing and occasionally shocking forcefulness, while their pop palette and occasional undercurrent of dark humor present a piece of the larger artistic puzzle that lends narrative, psychological depth and gravitas to his more formal investigations in color and composition.

### **Abstract Landscapes & Drawings** (*Central Gallery*)

The two stratigraphic color block paintings hanging in the Central Gallery are unlike any others in Barber’s oeuvre, but indicate a highly original expression and are marked by counterintuitive palettes, unrelated to each other, but curious in their distinctiveness. Numerous drawings and sketches (some found in the gallery’s case) demonstrate another landscape connection, where we see the stratigraphic Western landscape abstracted into stunning pictorial form through simple horizontal bands of color.

## The Black & White Work (*Northeast gallery*)

Throughout his practice, Barber has consistently investigated the reductive palette of black and white, in lyrical abstract expressionist gestures and hard-edged op art styles. The b&w room at MOCA shows a range of explorations employing this simple palette. The reductive black & white palette is a useful framework for artists—from photographers to painters to graphic designers—one that allows them to more closely consider elemental qualities of form and composition without the distractions of color. What is deceptive, however—especially as seen in the abstract expressionist canvases from the 1950s—is the wide range of tones seen in underpainting of the supposedly reduced palette. Greens, blues, reds, pinks, yellow—all glow through the surface and the luscious impasto of the glistening oil paint. In some cases, where there has been surface pigment loss, you can see the richness of the palette that was covered up with subsequent layers of black & white. Contrast that to the stark, hard-edged constructivist relief sculptures and the strips of canvas on board in the highly illusionistic work on the north wall. (Please take special note of this work's relationship to the metal sculptures in the Great Hall, and you will see how Barber weaves his compositional investigations throughout media and throughout time). The limited display of calligraphic drawings in b&w (seen in the "Spring" room) are a mere fraction of the hundreds of works on paper documenting decades of exploration through this reduced palette. The south wall offers a range of media and practice, from the painted canvas strip relief sculptures to the line painting and the two highly constructivist cardboard relief sculptures, which represent but a fraction of his total output in black and white. The later "milk carton" still life on the west wall is a perfect transition into the "pop" room, where you will find a riot of color and a range of influence, from Wayne Thiebaud to Jean/Hans Arp.

## The Pop Works (*Northwest Gallery*)

This is Barber at his most exuberant and even vivacious, working in an outwardly Pop vein while staying true to his overriding formal concerns. From the early 1960s through the end of the decade, certainly not immune to currents in popular culture and art, he took milk cartons and his children's objects (toy planes, trucks, and ballet shoes) as a starting point, rendering them in bright tones, combining basic graphic elements (stars on wings, stripes on bodies) in intricate overlapping patterns with a deceptively playful manner. In the two *Tailscales* he isolates the fins of the plane in a triumph of pictorial economy. A palette of ice-cream and candy colors of lavender and violet vie with primary blue, reds, and yellows in a garishly beautiful way, demonstrating his profound confidence and mastery of color theory. Robert Indiana, John Wesley and Tom Wesselman all come to mind, but Barber's look is his alone. His is a hand-crafted Pop absent the kitsch and the mass-produced appearance, with evidence of the artist's *facture* always present and celebrated. One compact painting of toothbrushes points to his later interest in household objects and the infinitude of variations of structure they provide as subject/object matter. Exploring the universe of mundane household articles close at hand, he later, particularly in his current ongoing beer carton sequence, has found a staggering multitude of possibilities available in the quotidian. The sculpture in purple, yellow and orange, an interlocking spatial puzzle, is jazzy in an almost comical M.C. Escher fashion, with "holes," and curvy and sensuous contours, kept in check by those qualities that contrast with visible wood texture and salient scraping marks.

## The "Spring" Room (*interior gallery off of MOCAs shop*)

This room has paintings, collages and sketches from the late 1950s and gained its name colloquially from the fresh palette of pastel colors. The early collages on board on the east wall, in addition to being preciously scaled and jewel-like in their beauty, are perhaps the best examples where one can witness Barber working through painterly gestural forms through collage and papier collé techniques. The small, medium and large paintings (and preparatory sketches in the case) demonstrate gestural brushwork that is seen across his drawing and painting practice in the 1950s, in dozens of black & white studies and a series with a predominantly green-based palette.

## The Early Work (*Southeast and Southwest Galleries*)

In the Southeast gallery, we find some of the earliest examples of Barber's work, demonstrating both the influence of earlier masters such as Matisse and Gorky and the emergence of an original style that marks Barber's evolution from student to artist. The two works on board (Masonite, south and east walls) are particularly stunning, as paintings on board often exude a sheen and solidity that demonstrates the extreme smoothness of their support material, unlike the natural play of fabric that canvas provides. As the critic and art world demimonde Rene Ricard once remarked, paintings on hard surfaces (board, metal, etc) don't "suck up the paint" and thus present themselves boldly projecting from the surface of the support.

*nb The three works from the early 1950s show considerable age and wear, and have not yet been conserved. This provides an opportunity for the viewer to see the natural aging (and in one case, extensive water damage) that occurs with paintings and the results of poor handling (sigmoid cracks indicated pokes to the verso side of the painting). Despite the less than pristine condition, however, these important works lose none of their exquisite beauty through their highly accomplished composition, color, balance and form.*

In the Southwest Gallery, we find a suite of paintings from circa 1958 that resulted from a rigorous and ongoing formal investigation of room interiors. While the resulting paintings do not readily show the iconic chair, window and easel that populate numerous preparatory sketches, the source interiors can be made out in the drawings and sketches in the case in the Central Gallery.

## **A Note from the Curators**

Opening the door to Robert Barber's studio literally took our breath away. Hundreds of paintings, representing nearly 70 years of art production, were stacked densely in a fairly small and darkened space, indicating a staggering trove of artistic production. Barber has been rigorously practicing his craft for decades, but did not participate in a system of galleries, dealers, collectors and sales, and has had only minimal exhibition exposure. As a result, his oeuvre is largely intact, providing an unprecedented art historical opportunity to examine a nearly complete life of work. The process of curating the exhibition began with the monumental task of taking inventory of the work, a process that remains ongoing. We have examined approximately 70% of the major work, and have tried to include a sample of each of his periods in this exhibition. There is much work still to be done, much scholarship still to be produced and many more exhibitions to come. Additionally, there is much cleaning and conservation work to be done, especially on the early works. We undertook minimal, non-invasive dry cleaning on many of the works, which had been living in an unconditioned studio, and minor restoration (in-painting) under the guidance and direction of the artist. You will notice, especially on some of the earlier works, that the condition is significantly compromised. We chose to exhibit these important works, despite their condition, as they are not only exquisitely beautiful examples of Barber's work, they are also a key to understanding his artistic development, early influences toward the development of key signature styles. We also chose to keep them in their period frames, which will also benefit from conservation and minimal restoration going forward. The most significant challenge in curating the exhibition lay in what you don't see—the dozens of paintings and sculptures, and hundreds of drawings, that were certainly worthy of exhibition. To encounter such a large bounty of exquisite work, and to have to limit our choices to what would fit in our exhibition space, was painful indeed. As a retrospective, we hoped to introduce our audiences to an overview of Barber's life's work, but there are dozens of more focused exhibitions still waiting to emerge. We look forward to watching these evolve as Barber scholarship continues. For now, from the moment we, together, experienced our first Barber painting (a beer carton still life) to the realization of this exhibition, we remain grateful and in awe, inspired and humbled by this extraordinary man and his work.

Anne-Marie Russell & Jocko Weyland

## **A Note from the Director**

I am deeply indebted to, and profoundly grateful, for our amazing crew, from my co-Curator Jocko Weyland to our exhibition design technician, Henry Kerr and our Chief Preparator, Wylwyn Reyes and his assistants Leann Cornelius, Leanne Miller, Zac Giguere, Valerie Sipp, Eli Burke, Christian Ramirez and Mary Griffin. Each of these contributors is also an artist in their own right and thus it is especially generous of them to turn their talents and commitment toward celebrating a fellow artist.

Special Thanks to our exhibition supporters Michael Diesenhouse of Eye Associates of Tucson and numerous Anonymous donors for providing support for the realization of this exhibition.

And of course, our deepest, collective gratitude goes to Robert Barber. This opportunity to discover and engage with a lifetime of Barber's work has been a rare and profound privilege. We are forever indebted to Robert for sharing his life, and for entrusting us with his work and his story and for allowing us to share it with a wide audience. Our gratitude is truly boundless.

Anne-Marie Russell  
Executive Director & Chief Curator