

2010

Polyphonic Abstraction: Paintings and Maquettes by Bill Barrett

Bill Barrett

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Polyphonic 3, 2006-2009

POLYPHONIC ABSTRACTION

Paintings and Maquettes by Bill Barrett

Christian Petersen Art Museum
University Museums
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
January 12 through August 6, 2010

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
Christian Petersen Art Museum
UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS AFFILIATE

Exhibition Statement

The Christian Petersen Art Museum, the Byron and Elizabeth Anderson Sculpture Garden and the Art on Campus Collection synergistically function to create an aesthetic campus where the contemporary visual arts are intellectually and physically accessible. As new public art is commissioned by Iowa State, the sculpture garden and this museum bring enlightenment, enjoyment and understanding about the art and artists to the campus community.

The sculpture of internationally acclaimed artist Bill Barrett was first acquired for Iowa State's Art on Campus Collection in 2007 for the Gerdin Building. A selection of Barrett's sculptures was the inaugural exhibition in 2007 in the Anderson Sculpture Garden with the intent of expanding understanding and campus access to Barrett's artistic expression. That exhibition, *Exquisite Balance*, will remain on view through August 2010. In the Christian Petersen Art Museum, the exhibition *Polyphonic Abstractions: Paintings and Maquettes by Bill Barrett* continues that same aesthetic and educational goal of increasing knowledge and understanding of Barrett's humanistic expressions. By viewing the sculpture and paintings of Bill Barrett, the University Museums' intent is to have campus experience an artist and his work as fully as possible, and thus place in context *Bravo III*, which is part of our permanent Art on Campus Collection at the Gerdin Building.

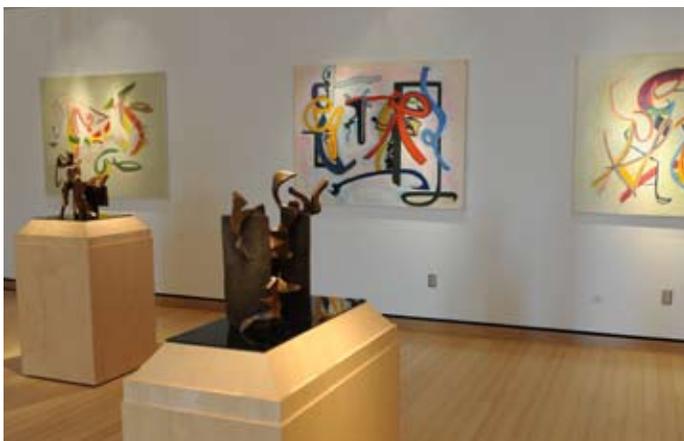
Known primarily for his sculptures of fabricated aluminum, bronze and steel, Barrett is also an accomplished painter. This exhibition juxtaposes his expressive canvases with his sculptural maquettes.



With lyrical calligraphic gestures, Barrett's art explores the interplay between positive and negative space with grace, elegance and exquisite balance. Fluidity, celebration, and effortlessness are ideas that are delicately balanced with form, line, color and content while invoking a minimal aesthetic with humanity. *Polyphonic Abstractions* refers to the idea that several things are being experienced linearly and simultaneously, with complexity and density in imagery.

Support

This exhibition is organized by the University Museums with gracious access to and loans of works of art provided by Bill and Debora Barrett. Dr. John Cunnally, associate professor of Art and Design wrote the publication essay. Major funding was generously provided by Arthur Klein with additional support from the University Museums Membership.



One of the hard things in art is that I want to be elevated in a happy way, a positive way—rather than spend time looking at work that tends to be negative and depressing. I shy away from that work. At my age, I have evaluated all the tragedies in my life and have made a decision—I prefer to go in another direction, both in how I am influenced and how I influence others.

Bill Barrett

Artist Statement



Norway's greatest composer, Edvard Grieg, whose music has been an influence in my life said, "One must first be a human being. All true art grows out of that which is distinctively human." My sculptures are vehicles through which my humanity communicates with the viewers.

In my artwork, I am always striving to incorporate beauty of perfection and emotion, using uplifting forms towards harmony and assertiveness and how they relate to each other. In each new work of art, I am in pursuit of a certain "life-spark" that I might not have achieved in a previous sculpture or painting.

Both Plato and Aristotle believed there was beauty in man and that man could achieve happiness in art. I believe the quality of life can be elevated by the sense of beauty in art.

Beauty can be reached by using proportion and the rationalization of relationships of form. Volume and mass when arranged with formal relationships can achieve these ends, or "beauty." Positive and negative space adds to the interpretation. Too much of one or the other adds to the expression of emotion; heavy or light, sharp, round, straight, rippled angles, light and dark, forward and backward, symmetrical versus asymmetrical, loud versus quiet, sharp versus round, chaos versus calm, balance versus unbalanced. These combined with content, idea and meaning are not decoration, but beauty.

In establishing a rapport between the artist and viewer, the artist appeals to man's inner self, his ideas and his expressiveness. Trying to capture the essence of a work of art depends on the mood of the viewer. Sculptures in the round should be beautiful from all angles, challenging in an asymmetrical balance. The viewer has to be open to the creator of the artwork, and suppress prejudices when evaluating a work of art in order to understand the artist's intentions. Being esthetically pleasing does not make a work good art. Merely being beautiful or creative doesn't make art great.

Creative change is always important for me, from one shape to the next. The element of surprise is also important. Taking a chance while searching for truth is a condition that I strive for when starting a new work of art. It is the beginning of the journey and my obligation. You take a chance and you never know where the journey will take you.

Art can be a life-giving force enriching one's senses and refreshing one's visions. A right brain-left brain tension exists between order, regularity and refinement on one hand and intoxication, turmoil and euphoria on the other. Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), traces the origins of this distinction. The Apollonian represents the intellect, the rational and scientific. The Dionysian represents the mystic-artistic conception, originating from humankind's subconscious. Nietzsche believes both elements are present in any work of art with one or the other usually dominant. In periods of acute stress and social tension, as in our own times, the two tend to erupt in conflict.

Important sculptures are sculptures the public can live with, grow with, and keep going back to physically, mentally and emotionally.

Bill Barrett, 2010

Being esthetically pleasing does not make a work good art. Merely being beautiful or creative doesn't make art great.

Bill Barrett

Polyphonic Abstraction

Paintings and Maquettes by Bill Barrett

Dr. John Cunnally, Associate Professor
Art History, Iowa State University

“All art constantly aspires to the condition of music,” wrote the English aesthete Walter Pater long ago, when Victoria was Queen and the British Pre-Raphaelites were the cutting edge of the avant-garde. Bill Barrett’s rhythmic and lyrical paintings, visual choreographies of abstract forms, appeal to our sense of synesthesia, a willingness to “hear” a painting and let it “move” us as if we stood in a ballroom rather than a gallery. Barrett’s synesthetic style can boast a distinguished pedigree in the mainstream of modern art. Wassily Kandinsky, first master of abstract painting, regarded himself as a musician playing a palette instead of a keyboard, with shapes and colors taking the place of notes and chords. Pablo Picasso’s Cubism echoed the ragtime and Dixieland jazz popular in the Paris bistros of his day, while Jackson Pollock moved to the bebop trumpet of Dizzie Gillespie to create those convoluted drips and splatters.

Best known for his large public sculptures of welded steel, aluminum, and bronze, including *Bravo III* installed in front of ISU’s Gerdin Building, Barrett reveals himself as a prolific, vigorous painter in this show of 26 recent oils and acrylics. These display a multitude of influences from the classic modern tradition, especially the broken fragments of Cubist composition, the dream-like floating forms of Surrealist abstraction, and the swirling calligraphic energy of Abstract Expressionism. Visible here too are shapes which invoke the American Western landscape—mountains and deserts—and the Eastern cityscape of towering buildings and manic traffic. This dichotomy should not surprise us since Barrett divides his life between a studio in New York City and one in Santa Fe, locations that span the spectrum of American cultural stereotypes: the world of the gangster and tycoon, jazz and glitter, versus the cowboy and Indian, cactus and cattle. “When I’m in Santa Fe I work like this,” says Barrett, spreading his arms like a desert horizon, “and when I’m in New York I work this way,” raising his hands to suggest imaginary skyscrapers.

As he does with the sculptures, Barrett creates his paintings in series, often working on several at once. The *Century* series (1999) consists of large canvases whose abstract shapes resemble flags, banners, and airy fireworks, a joyful celebration welcoming the new millennium. The *Cular* paintings (2009) are smaller and more densely composed, reminding us of the complex cubist still lifes of Picasso and Braque a hundred years ago. Their abstract forms suggest glassware, crockery and food piled on a tabletop, cuts of meat, fowl, and fish (perhaps the title alludes to a world of culinary delights). In the *Matrix Series* of 2005, the curvilinear shapes are reduced to slender ribbons and swirling lines, like the afterimage tracks of colored flashlights

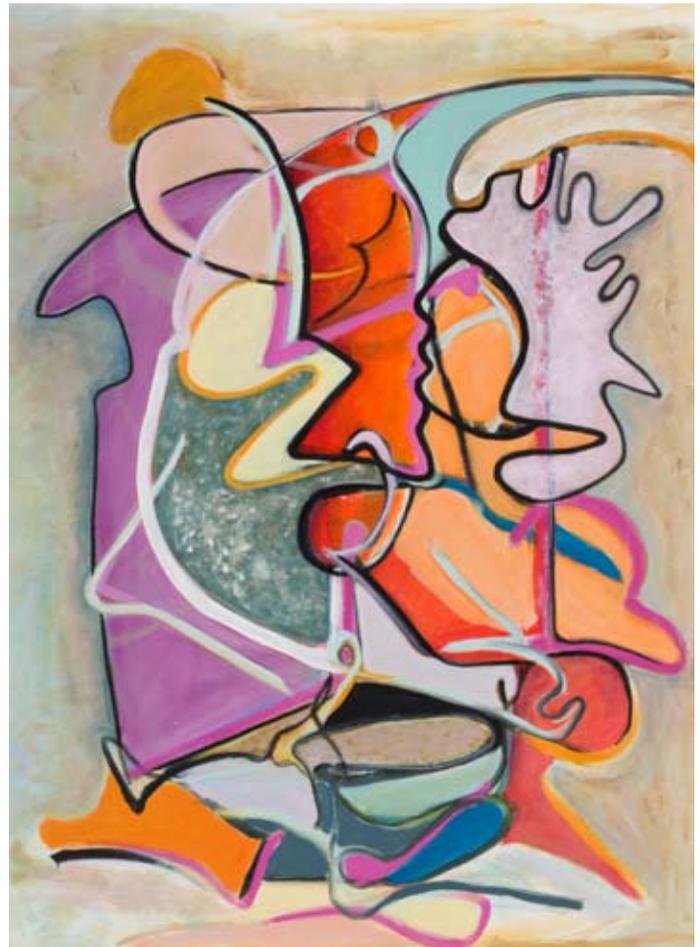


Century Series #11, c. 1998-1999

swinging and spinning in the night. Most explicitly musical are the *Polyphonic* paintings of 2006-2009, whose shapes and lines are reminiscent of notes and scales, G-clefs and the contours of violins, pianos and saxophones. I am certain the elegant red loop in the middle of *Polyphonic No. 1* is that famous trumpet of Dizzie Gillespie that Pollock loved.

The most complex of the lot are the *Memory Series* of 1999, where the soft organic shapes are enriched with painterly brush strokes to provide shading and texture, and share their densely packed space with severe geometric forms that seem to poke, prod, and pierce them. In *Memory No. 4*, for example, a long black rectangle invades a big red crescent, like an iron bar impaling a giant kidney. We are not surprised to learn that these paintings were created soon after Barrett suffered a near fatal health crisis involving cancer, surgery, and all the attending horrors of modern medical technology.

Hidden away in a cranny-like space at the back of the gallery are three charming acrylics of the *Little Poly* series, displaying a Southwestern palette of yellow, red, and turquoise. The organic shapes are interconnected with sticks and circles reminiscent of feather-bedecked medicine staffs and hoops carried by Native American shamans—or the swizzle sticks and straws that Barrett used to play with and manipulate while watching Warhol, Dylan, and Yoko hold court at Max's Kansas City, the trendiest bar in Manhattan during the 1970's. There the young Barrett, fresh out of art school, learned as much about art and being an artist as he did in the studio. In the *Little Poly* paintings, we see once again a favorite theme of this painter, the marriage of urban hipster and desert magician, cool "moves" and mystic ritual.



Cular 2, 2009

Arshile Gorky, tragic refugee from Armenia who helped create American Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s, is Barrett's most obvious inspiration among the old masters of modern painting. Gorky took the "biomorphs" of the Surrealists—undefined organic blobs meant to evoke mysterious life-forms from the Freudian unconscious—and turned them into wild things, frolicking recklessly. Often they bristle with teeth, spikes, and hooks, perhaps reflecting Gorky's own turbulent life, which ended in suicide. Barrett keeps the spirit of frolic inherited from Gorky's amoebas, but dispenses with the hooks and teeth. His biomorphic abstractions are painted with a playful and humorous touch, muppets not monsters from the Id, projecting Barrett's own sense of humor and cheerful character, as well as an optimistic attitude we can trace to his Midwestern (Indiana and Michigan) upbringing. *Century No. 7* is especially jubilant, a microbial mosh pit where the biomorphs leap, bounce and boogie over, under, and through one another in gleeful abandon, each one unique and proud of its bizarre shape.

The paintings in the airy, sunlit gallery are accompanied by 11 three-dimensional maquettes, small models for larger projects or commissions, mostly in bronze. Their titles—*Pinnacle*, *Embrace*, *Arcadia*—reflect the lyrical, ecstatic spirit of music and dance we have already encountered in Barrett’s paintings. In some cases, the works on the pedestals appear to be 3-D cousins of the paintings nearby, enjoying the same exuberant rhythm, dancing the same jitterbug or tango. Barrett’s sculptures are typically assembled with units of complex curving shapes, a result of his method of working first with panels of wax cut into free-form segments like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The soft wax slabs are bent, twisted, and joined together into structures, then cast in bronze as maquettes. Among these are a couple from 2006 where the organic biomorphs mingle with rectangular panels reminiscent of tablets or pages from books, an association encouraged by their titles, *Lexicon* and *Libretto*.



Especially remarkable among the maquettes is a project submitted for a competition for New York City’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982. Barrett proposed a sculpture consisting of three 30-foot high letters spelling NAM, rising above a fountain. A mixture of organic and sharp-edged geometric forms, the bronze letters remind us of bones and body parts as well as mechanized weapons of modern warfare, and suggest both the valor and the vulnerability of those who take up arms for their country. From another direction the letters, of course, spell out MAN, and Barrett explains that the word Nam also means water in Vietnamese, “a universal symbol of life and death,” hence the fountain. The memorial commissioners, convinced that a Vietnam memorial must be a wall (like Maya Lin’s in Washington), selected instead a long glass slab for the monument, which unfortunately goes unnoticed by tourists to the Big Apple. Barrett’s colossal letters, which display a Pop Art fondness for the concrete reality of words, like Robert Indiana’s famous *LOVE* sculpture, would not have suffered the same fate.



Pinnacle XIV, 2009

In any conversation with Barrett, the theme of dance comes up: he is a great fan of the classical ballet as well as modernist movements made famous by Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham. His compositions, both 3-D and 2-D, suggest individuals and partners engaged in swinging, leaping, kicking, and reaching out and up. Barrett’s biographer, Philip Palmedo, calls our attention to the centrifugal “phallic thrust” of many of the sculptures, which appears in the paintings as well. When I half-jokingly suggested that a protruding shelf-like bar in *Pinnacle XIV* would be a good spot to rest a glass of wine, Barrett said “Why not? When this

was in the studio I used to hang my safety goggles there.” To a dance critic, the exuberant kicks, thrusts and stretches that we see in Barrett’s works would recall less the graceful leaps and pirouettes of classical dance or even the sweeping gestures of Martha Graham, and more the vivacious pop ballet of Twyla Tharp. Tharp incorporates many vernacular dances, including swing, rock, disco and hip-hop, into her performances, as well as athletic movements from boxing and baseball. She too was a regular at Max’s Kansas City in the 1970’s, and the titles of her most famous numbers, *Push Comes to Shove* and *Movin’ Out*, might fit many of Barrett’s pieces as well.

The cartoonist Lynda Barry in her graphic novel *100 Demons* tells how as a child she loved dancing of every kind, especially the hula lessons she took. One day an older girl pointed out how ridiculous she looked waving her arms and hips about, “like a spastic,” and Lynda stopped dancing forever. (She still admits, however, to breaking into an occasional “spaz dance” at home, when nobody is looking.) Like Lynda, most of us have the gnawing sensation that we once owned the spirit of dance, but lost it long ago, and must somehow gain it back before we die. With their exuberant choreography, Barrett’s paintings and sculptures summon us to the ecstasy of motion once more, fulfilling the requirement of all serious art according to the poet R. M. Rilke: *Du musst dein Leben ändern*, you must change your life.



Matrix Painting #3, 2005

To a dance critic, the exuberant kicks, thrusts and stretches that we see in Barrett’s works would recall less the graceful leaps and pirouettes of classical dance or even the sweeping gestures of Martha Graham, and more the vivacious pop ballet of Twyla Tharp.

Dr. John Cunnally



Oil Painting #7 from the Century Series, 1999

Bill Barrett

Selected Chronology

- 1934**
Born in Los Angeles, CA.
- 1953**
Graduated from South Bend High School, IN.
- 1958**
Received Bachelor of Science in Design, University of Michigan, MI.
- 1959**
Received Master of Science Degree, University of Michigan. First major show at Indiana Art Center, South Bend, IN.
- 1959-1963**
Participated in group exhibitions at the Detroit Institute of Arts, MI and other major museums.
- 1960**
Received Master of Fine Arts Degree, University of Michigan, MI.
- 1960-1968**
Taught art appreciation, ceramics, and sculpture at Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI.
- 1963**
Taught sculpture at the Cleveland Institute of Art, OH.
- 1964**
Untitled, a welded steel sculpture, won prize in Cleveland Museum's May Show. Sculpture *Untitled I* purchased by the Cleveland Museum through the Wishing Well Fund. Began the *Circle* series of welded steel sculptures in Ypsilanti, MI.
- 1965**
Solo exhibition, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI.
- 1967**
First New York exhibition at the Jason Gallery.
- 1968**
Began making bridge sculpture series while in Ypsilanti, MI.
- 1969**
Taught at SUNY, New Paltz City College of New York, and Queens College, NY.
- 1970**
Began working in Bowery Studio. Included in the Whitney Art Museum Annual, NY, exhibiting *Stan I*.
- 1971**
First major commission, *Tooth Fairy*, University of Michigan Dental School, Ann Arbor, MI.
- 1972**
Included in the "Invited Artists" exhibition at Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York.
- 1973-1975**
Exhibition at Storm King Art Center, "Sculpture in the Fields," *Manhattan Totem IX* and *Arch III*.
- 1976**
Exhibition at the City University of New York.
- 1979**
Scottsdale Center, AZ, commissioned *LVII*.
- 1983**
Kiva sculpture commissioned by Hitachi Corporation in Kanda, Japan. Solo exhibition, Sculpture Center, NY.
- 1985**
First solo exhibition, Kouros Gallery, NY.
- 1985-1987**
Repose shown at the "Fifth Henry Moore Grand Prize Exhibition" at Utsukushi-ga-hara Open-Air Museum, Tokyo. Won the Hakone Open-Air Museum Award.
- 1990**
Purchased Santa Fe, NM property and began renovations and construction of studio. Began dividing time between New York and Santa Fe studios.
- 1995**
Abstract Memories and *Memory* series paintings are completed, followed by *Memory* series bronze sculptures.
- 2000**
"Bill Barrett: Sculpture and Painting" exhibition, Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ.
- 2001**
Wall relief commissioned by Belz Enterprises for Peabody Hotel, Little Rock, AR. Received commission for *Kindred* bronze for the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.
- 2002**
Century Association solo exhibition, New York, entitled "Bronze: Patterns and Color". "Tenth Anniversary Invitational", Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ. Received commission for *Rendezvous II* for the William P. Rodgers Building, 2001 K Street N.W., Washington, D.C. Received commission for largest bronze sculpture fabrication, *Melinda at the Beach*, for Pyramid Hill Sculpture Park and Museum, Hamilton, OH. Bronze sculpture *Cavalier* acquired by the Las Vegas Museum of Art, NV.
- 2005**
La Jolla Crossroads acquires bronze *Rendezvous III* for corporate collection.
- 2006**
Lexeme and *Lexicon Series* maquettes created using a book and page forms.
- 2007**
Bravo III acquired for the Gerdin Building, College of Business, Iowa State University, IA. *Pinnacle Series* maquettes created. Further development of the *Lexeme* and *Lexicon Series* incorporating slab forms in the sculptures. Full scale bronze sculptures created from this series were *Lexicon II*, *Libretto*, *Lexeme VI* and *Chat*.
- 2007 (con't)**
Midsize Carrara marble sculpture *Lexeme VIII* created in Querceta, Italy.
- 2008**
Martha Graham Ensemble commissioned for the Four Seasons Hotel, St. Louis, MO. Trinity Medical Foundation, Fort Dodge, IA acquires *Stargate 6*. Large Carrara marble sculpture *Lexeme VIII* created in Querceta, Italy. "Drawing Exhibition", Michigan State University, College of Arts and Letters, Kresge Art Center, East Lansing MI. Michigan State University acquires *Twyla* for the Art on Campus Collection. LewAllen Contemporary Gallery exhibition "Divertimentos in Bronze" with essay by Peter Frank, Santa Fe, NM.
- 2007-2010**
"Exquisite Balance: Sculptures by Bill Barrett", inaugural exhibition in the Elizabeth and Byron Anderson Sculpture Garden, Iowa State University, Ames, IA.
- 2009**
"Zeller Kunstwege Invitational Sculpture Exhibition" at Villa Haiss Museums, Zell, Germany. Large marble *Lexeme VIII* sculpture shown. Dell Corporation acquires *NY87* for their outdoor sculpture collection.
- 2010**
"Polyphonic Abstractions: Paintings and Maquettes by Bill Barrett", first major painting exhibition, Christian Petersen Art Museum, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. "Synchronicity" painting exhibition with maquette sculptures at Kouros Gallery, New York.





Bill Barrett (American, b. 1935)

Bravo III, 2005

Fabricated bronze

9.2 x 6.5 x 6 feet

Purchased with funds from the College of Business. In the Art on Campus Collection, University Museums, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

Located at Gerdin Building, west entrance, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

U2007.36

Bill Barrett (American, b. 1935)

Bravo III Maquette, 1988

Fabricated bronze

11 x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 7 inches

Gift of Bill and Debora Barrett in honor of College of Business Dean, Labh Hira. In the Art on Campus Model and Maquette Collection, University Museums, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

U2008.605





Cular 4, 2009
Oil on canvas
30 x 30 inches
On loan from the artist.

Exhibition Checklist

All works of art on loan from the artist.

Track 3, 1998
Oil
61 x 49 inches

Track 4, 1999
Oil
66 x 64 inches

Oil Painting #7 from the *Century Series*, 1999
Oil
67 x 46 inches

#11 from the *Century Series*, 1998-1999
Oil
61 x 49 inches

Oil Painting #4 from the *Memory Series*, 1999
Oil
60 x 48 inches

Oil Painting #2 from the *Memory Series*, 1999
Oil
75 x 50 inches

For Barbara, 1996-1998
Oil
66 x 34 inches

Oil Painting #5, 1999
Oil
61 x 49 inches

Tiepolo's Opus, 1999
Oil
56 x 36 inches

Cular 5, 2009
Oil
20 x 32 inches

Cular 4, 2009
Oil
30 x 30 inches

Cular 2, 2009
Oil
35 x 47 inches

Cular 3, 2009
Oil
35 x 47 inches

Cular 7, 2009
Oil
24 x 24 inches

Cular 6, 2009
Oil
20 x 28 inches

Cular 1, 2009
Oil
34 ½ x 68 inches

Polyphonic Relief Model, 2009
Fabricated Bronze
26 x 18 ½ x 3 inches

Little Poly 1
Acrylic
16 x 20 inches

Little Poly 6
Acrylic
16 x 20 inches

Little Poly 3
Acrylic
16 x 20 inches

Polyphonic 1, 2006-2009
Oil
48 x 60 inches

Polyphonic 2, 2006-2009
Oil
48 x 60 inches

Polyphonic 3, 2006-2009
Oil
48 x 60 inches

Matrix Painting 11, 2005
Oil
48 x 48 inches

Matrix Painting 3, 2005
Oil
48 x 60 inches

Matrix Painting 8, 2005
Oil
48 x 60 inches

Matrix Painting 6, 2005
Oil
48 x 60 inches

NAM, 1984
Fabricated Bronze

Pinnacle X, 2008
Cast Bronze Model
26 ½ x 14 x 12 inches

Embrace, 1997
Cast Bronze Model
19 x 18 x 16 inches

Libretto, 2006
Cast Bronze Model
17 ½ x 16 x 10 inches

Elba's Piece, 1989-2008
Cast Aluminum with Gold Leaf
15 x 15 x 8 ½ inches

San Sebastan, 2003
Cast Bronze Model
20 ¾ x 11 x 8 ½ inches

Arcadia, 2001
Cast Bronze Model
13 ½ x 16 x 9 inches

Lexicon III, 2006
Cast Bronze Model
18 x 14 ½ x 9 ½ inches

Pinnacle XIV, 2009
Cast Bronze Model
23 ½ x 18 x 17 inches

Pinnacle XVII, 2009
Cast Bronze Model
27 x 13 x 11 inches

I feel that the artist's responsibility is to project his own happiness and good will—but not at the expense of the rawness, the incompleteness, the questioning that must be at the core of every true artist's work. This kind of self-disclosure—the very nakedness of which is universally discomfoting—is part of what's fun about art.

-Bill Barrett

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