

## Illia Barger displays closeup views of flowers in 'Nuance' exhibition at Morpeth Contemporary

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By **Janet Purcell/For The Times of Trenton**

It's been said that Illia Barger loves jazz and that she dances while she paints.

Although that exuberance can be seen in other bodies of her work, her collection of flower portraits now on display at the Morpeth Contemporary gallery in Hopewell offer such tranquility it's easier to picture her working in her garden among butterflies and enjoying birdsong than listening to Coltrane.

All that being said, however, her flower portraits do project energy, albeit more the graceful movements of a Mozart piece where a peony opens first on a trilling melody and then rises to a crescendo of total unfurling.

Take my personal favorite in the show, "Sophie," in which Barger brings the viewer's eyes into the golden heart of a pink peony. The fullness of the flower fills the picture plane with each petal individually surrounding, protecting, opening to reveal the center where new life lies waiting.



Illia Barger takes the viewer into the heart of a pink peony in "Sophie," one of her flower portraits in the exhibition "Nuance" at Morpeth Contemporary in Hopewell.

Barger, who was honored with the prestigious Pollock-Krasner Foundation Award in 1999, has been featured locally in *Nouveau Magazine* and *New Jersey Life* and more broadly in *Oprah Home*, *Philadelphia Magazine* and *The New York Times Magazine*. She has been covered in television on NJN, Channel 6 Eyewitness News and in a

mini-documentary on Channel 13 news.

She is also a muralist. Her "Winds of Change" can be seen at 23 S. Warren St. in Trenton, her "Poppies" at Capitol Health's Hopewell Campus, and "Continuum" at 74 Witherspoon St. in Princeton, Hamilton's Grill Room in Lambertville and Colligan's Stockton Inn. Farther afield, her largest mural, an undersea scene, can be found in the Brooklyn, N.Y., Army Terminal.

But back to Hopewell. This is an exhibit that embraces more than her large bug-eye-view floral portraits. These are not still lifes of carefully arranged flowers in a vase. Instead, they bring the viewer up close and personal with one single bloom whose face fills the entire linen picture plane.

The delicate white petals of "Lira" open to the viewer revealing just a few violet petals. The center of the bloom suggests a cup of petals holding the day's sunlight.

"Zoe," however, suggests something different. In this painting, the white petals droop and curl around a center opening. Its stamens are heavy and lie around a green/brown opening. When responding to a comment that among all the paintings that offer peaceful repose, this one feels a bit threatening, gallery owner Morpeth explains this one was painted just after its peak bloom when it was beginning to wilt and fold in upon itself.

Displayed nearby, however, is "Adele," a triptych that seemingly celebrates life. Presented in three panels measuring 42-by-36 inches each, the rose-pink blossom with its rich gold stamen is a tour de force of vibrant color.

In further contrast to that exuberance, there's "Wish," which depicts the wispy seed stage of a dandelion. It brings back childhood memories of picking them, making wishes that you were sure would come true, and then blowing the wish seeds and watching your dreams float on a summer breeze.

Complementing Barger's large paintings are two bronze sculptures by Point Pleasant, Pa., artist Mark Pettegrow, which have been described as being "poised on the edge between representation and abstraction."

His "Tripod," which is on display, was awarded First Place in Sculpture in the 2012 "Art of the State" exhibition held at the State Museum of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg.

Pettegrow's work is in the permanent collection of the James Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pa., and at Penn State University, among numerous other private and public collections.

The works in this exhibition offer more than is usually seen in traditional art shows. It is a focused collection in which you can lose yourself in the peaceful beauty of flowers. But it also offers an opportunity to marvel at the skill of both these artists to be able to portray the delicate nuances that can be found in nature.

**Illia Barger: Nuance**

**When:** 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays, through Nov. 10

**Where:** Morpeth Contemporary, 43 W. Broad St., Hopewell

**Contact:** (609) 333-9393 or **[morpethcontemporary.com](http://morpethcontemporary.com)**

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