



A multimedia artist attuned to the zeitgeist

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When Judith Barry was invited to make a new mural for the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's façade, one image haunted her: a photo of people in an inflatable boat, shot from a drone.

"They were escaping from northern Africa," says Barry. "I was intrigued by their hopeful expressions as they looked up at this drone. They're in the middle of the ocean, trying to escape. It's terrifying. But for this brief moment. . . ."

The mural, "Untitled: (Global displacement: nearly 1 in 100 people worldwide are displaced from their homes)," featuring a digital collage of a similar scene, is on view through June.

The multimedia artist, a professor at MIT, has two works in the citywide "Art + Tech" programming this winter. In addition to the Gardner mural, her 1991 piece "Imagination, dead imagine" is in "Art in the Age of the Internet: 1989 to Today" at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

The ICA's chief curator Eva Respini says she considers the piece "an anchor of the show."

"Judith is a prescient thinker, working on a cutting edge with

digital and video technology," says Respini.

Barry made "Imagination, dead imagine" at the height of the AIDS crisis, responding to the era's terror of bodily fluids. She borrows the title from a Samuel Beckett story about people trapped inside a small space, and takes a cue from Beckett's searing existentialism. In video projections on each face of a 10-foot cube, muck pours over people's heads. Then the magic of video wipes the heads clean.

"It was a fun shoot," Barry recalls. She placed an ad in *Backstage* magazine, and 30 people auditioned to be showered with gunk: agar mixed with red food coloring for blood, rubber cement that looked like mucus, and silly putty tinted to resemble feces. Added to the mix were crickets and mealworms certified safe for human use. A cricket wrangler was on hand.

"There were 20 people on the crew," the artist remembers. "All the men got sick and had to go home."

The AIDS scare has subsided, but Respini finds the work no less resonant today. She points to the concept of going viral, and how artificial intelligence blurs the line between human

and machine. She updates the language of Barry's video wipe, using a verb with 21st-century meaning.

"She swipes it all clean," Respini says.

Barry, 63, has always been attuned to the zeitgeist. She came to art via dance and architecture, which orient her work to the body in space. She performed with modern dance companies in the 1970s and studied architecture at University of California Berkeley.

"I never graduated with my architecture degree," she says. "Or maybe I did. I was plucked out of school to work at an architecture firm. Title VII [of the Civil Rights Act of 1964] had happened, and they needed women."

A recession ended that job, and she returned to school and took up performance art. "Joan Jonas and Vito Acconci were on the cover of every magazine," she says.

Barry pushed performance beyond the body toward installation art. In a piece that anticipated "Imagination, dead imagine," and nodded to Beckett's play "Happy Days," Barry had a ceiling open, dropping 2,000 pounds of silica sand on top of her.

She also started making videos, which she worked to bring out of museum alcoves and into galleries. In time, the artist moved to New York and became an exhibition designer.

"I really got to play with space," she says. "That's how I developed."

Design savvy and playing with space are intrinsic to Barry's work. The 32-foot-tall "Untitled (Global Displacement: nearly 1 in 100. . .)" at the Gardner is an intricate collage of many photographs, with text moving across the image.

"It couldn't be pretty," Barry says. "We played with the opacity of the text so it's hard to discern. It takes longer for the visitor to read. And we made it hover in bands so faces poke out."

The faces are not those of North Africans. People everywhere get thrust from their homes. Last year, as Barry's deadline approached, hurricanes and fires displaced Americans in Texas, Puerto Rico, and California. The mural features people of many races.

"She's thinking about how do you work with other people's stories — there's a carefulness about how to approach them," says Pieranna Cavalchini, the Gardner's curator of contemporary art. "It became everyone's story."

Like the Gardner mural, "Imagination, dead imagine" is attuned to a group in need of support, and blends dire straits with optimism.

"It's a hopeful image, though horrific," Barry says. "I think there's beauty in the horror."

