

Exalted Beings
Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax Nova Scotia
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Catalogue Abstract for Barbara Berry
written by Peter Dykhuis, Director/Curator

Barbara Berry creates optically complex figure/ground problems in her bas-relief paintings. Dancing or meditating human bodies, often female, are the central 'figures' in an interweaving and patterned ground. It takes just a short while, though, to realize that the pictorial space is filled with animal figures and plant forms. Deer, wolves, tigers, ducks, doves, leopards and rabbits flow in and out of the various picture planes, often close to full-scale in representation: the human figures are central but smaller and spatially subservient to the pantheon of creatures surrounding them.

The paintings are not square, nor are they flat. Indeed, the figures and plant forms often burst off the central core of each work. Specific figures are also carved out of wood and become image/objects that stand proud of the main field of activity. These operate, literally, on a different plane, a subtle but important metaphor within Berry's work.

Berry has been a Buddhist practitioner for many years. Some of the animals represented within her paintings, as well as a few hybrid animal/human forms, are linked to Buddhist deities and are borrowed from traditional Buddhist paintings. Others are literal depictions of the natural world gathered through photographs or the artist's sketches from life. Collectively, along with iconographic human figures, they embody, in an ecosystem of wood and paint, the Buddhist understanding of animals and nature as objects of contemplation. Berry states:

My paintings over the past few years explore and delve into the relationship between the world of humans, the world of animals and the unseen world of the spirit. Many cultures contain stories about animals to help convey ideas of human conduct, morality and behaviour in order to teach people how to lead their own lives. I discovered the Buddhist *Jataka Tales*, written around 300 BC, when searching for Buddhist children's storybooks for my daughter and son when they were younger. These tales are unique in the fact that they are stories of the Buddha's rebirths, namely how he was reincarnated as various animals before becoming the 'enlightened one' or Buddha. The idea that we could have been, or could become, animals in other rebirths, speaks of the interconnectedness of all living beings. My paintings are generally about the larger elemental energies of the nature and the sacredness of all things. ⁴

Berry's animal forms are not so much illustrations of naturalistic animals but more representations of spirits passing through various stages of being. Although the human beings have an imagistic solidity to them and are often much smaller in scale, the animal beings literally fold and weave through the picture planes in painted images that integrate with the varied topography of the bas-relief wood surfaces. The human figure may appear as the focused object but the animal being is foundational to the ground of each piece.

The hybrid creatures that appear in a few of Berry's paintings - neither fully human nor fully animal - call to mind anthropomorphic characters that one would find in a comic strip or animated cartoon series. But, as one would expect from a highly codified religious system such as Buddhism, these are not arbitrary or incidental creatures.