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# LIVING FOR BEAUTY

THOMAS HYDE CATCHES UP WITH ACCLAIMED AMERICAN FURNITURE DESIGNER BARBARA BARRY DURING HER RECENT TRIP TO AUCKLAND.

**B**arbara Barry writes about the design process as “a dance” – one performed not while toiling over a drawing board in an office but in the relaxed setting of her home, where she might begin her dance by playing with watercolours, her favourite medium.

It’s a process interrupted by restful moments in her garden or in her kitchen reflecting over a cup of tea. In the end, her work is about how furnishings and fabrics, patterns and colours all relate to each other to create a harmony that to her eye results in a beautiful interior.

As Dominique Browning writes in her introduction to Barry’s book *Around Beauty*, “Barry is a rare designer who puts as much heart as mind into her work, which has a timeless rather than trendy quality.”

Barry was born and raised in California. She lives today in Los Angeles, where, if she’s not working from home, you’ll find her at her studio, along with her 12 members of staff. She travels frequently, talking about her work and gathering inspiration. In New Zealand her designs are available through Cavit & Co (Auckland and Queenstown).

On your website you state: “I live unabashedly for beauty, both inner and outer, and I always have.” What is beauty for you?

Beauty is my survival technique, meaning, it’s a harsh world out there no matter if you have money or not. The world today is one of information overload, so for me beauty is an antidote to that and an absolute necessity for my well-being.





I also look at beauty as a connecting force in our lives. I used to believe my work wasn't as important as, say, doctors or teachers, but I've come to believe it is. When we create a space of beauty, that is when design is doing its most powerful work. Where else but in your home can you find silence? So I see my work as providing a sense of calm and creating a place to be renewed.

My passion for design derives from my mother. She was an artist who worked on her own. She was an optimist. She would say things like, "Look at the colour of the sky today" or "Look at this orange" and right there as a child I was starting to see things differently. So for me

were named as one of the World's Best 100 Designers. What is your relationship with architecture and how does it influence what you do?

Architecture is the beginning point. As a designer I never know what space I'm going to work with, so space calls me to respond to it. When the architecture is right, meaning space is proportional to the human body, my work is simpler. When it's not, my job is to make spaces look better than they were before. It's almost as if you're erasing the idea of design to get the space right. Space is everything. It's a luxury with an intangible quality. Too often, decorators invade space. So, for me, architecture



ABOVE: The garden is a place of inspiration for Barbara Barry, who says nature and the quality of light influence her work.

ABOVE RIGHT: Room setting in Piedmont, California. Complementary furnishings and fabrics, patterns and colours create harmony and beauty.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Barbara Barry's home showcases the Joan Armchair by Henredon in the library and the Baker Deco Classic Lounge Chair in the foreground, with a Henredon Coco Accent Table.

it was and still is about observing: at a young age I had a confident opinion about things that has served me well.

Simplicity is fundamental to your style. In what simple ways can someone create beauty in the home? Simplicity is a state of mind; the irony is it can be quite complex to achieve because it takes discipline. So in your own home it's not about how much you have, it's about how what we have serves us. The most simple meal – salad, roast chicken, apple tart, for example – and you're done. We all try to overdo things. In your home, if you had just a polished wood floor and a mattress on it but that floor was polished to perfection and next to the mattress was a single rose in a vase, you can feel a sense of well-being and real wealth. So I like to advise people to keep it simple in a way that you allow space for life to take place.

You've said you believe less is more, which is the famous dictum of the architect Mies van der Rohe. Your work has often been featured in *Architectural Digest* where you

is the space I try to understand and integrate with more than a mere lamination of decoration.

On the other hand, the writer Clare Booth Luce has been quoted as saying, "Home is where you hang your architect." Can interior design be an antidote for bad architecture? I think it can. What comes to mind immediately is a room with a lot of mouldings or maybe windows that are not in line – the cacophony of separate shapes. As a decorator, I would think of painting it all one colour to unify the spaces and using drapery to layer it, and even making upholstery in the same colour. When more things are the same, the space speaks. So you can enhance spaces by unifying them.

Are labels like "traditional", "modern" and "contemporary" meaningful to you?

No. I feel I am an authentic designer, an original who started young looking for furniture that didn't exist so I began drawing it. Today I use watercolours. I don't look







ABOVE: Script Armchair by Barbara Barry for McGuire, Swell Accent Table by Barbara Barry for Baker

to history and as a Californian I don't have that yoke of history around my neck, because California has always been a place where one can have a personal voice. So I don't like labels, I love colours you can't describe in one word and the only box I use sometimes is to say something is transitional.

So how do you describe your style? Or does it depend on which of your many partners you're working with?

First of all, the partner always helps to define the style, but I don't think of myself as having a style so much as having a philosophy. It's a philosophy of simplicity, of trying to make a unified whole, of using the right colours regardless of the style of a house.

Do home furnishings necessarily have to be a statement about who we are or who we think we are?

I think they were in the past, when we defined ourselves by the things around us. But today I find people are more self-expressive in many ways. It shows in everything from fashion to the way we eat and the type of restaurants we go to. We are more eclectic. That's the great thing about design today: it's never been more available and it doesn't matter which strata of income you're at, design is more than ever a part of the vernacular.

You have galleries in Bangkok, Singapore, Moscow and Kuala Lumpur. Why those particular cities and not Los Angeles, where you live and work – not to mention New York and Paris?

Those galleries are through partnerships. They have my name and my designs but I remain a designer, not a retailer or a merchant. So they are totally separate endeavours. I'm quite reclusive where to do my work; I need to spend a lot of time alone. So they are partners that take care of that end of things for me.


At oprah.com you once listed "10 Things I Know For Sure". One was "go easy with patterns"; where you suggested patterns can create a "visual noise". What is visual noise for you and are you against patterns outright or is it a matter of how they're used?

Pattern for me goes back to how we fill up our homes. That's what creates the pattern. We're often drawn to a patterned fabric or wallpaper or a combination of a red sofa and a blue chair and an oriental rug, for example, and that can create what for me is visual noise that does not create the effect I want, which is calm. I'm much more interested in mood than anything and its provenance. Where something comes from doesn't impress me. It's important that design patterns do not compete with the patterns of our lives.

Your first and only book so far, *Around Beauty*, was published to critical acclaim by Rizzoli in 2012. Is there another book in the works?

I would absolutely love to do another book, even one that's less about design. When I wrote *Around Beauty* I did not want it to be a book about "I did this and this", because there are enough magazines and websites for that. I tried to tell stories, and in doing that I learned how much I love to write. Writing is a lot like design, because it's not what you include that matters so much as what you leave out. It's the same idea of simplicity, allowing the words to take their own form. So I'm hooked on that and I hope to do more writing.

Nature, the quality of light and, in your own words, a "myriad of greens" has strongly influenced your work. New Zealand has all this. So having been here, might this country inspire your work?

Absolutely! Everywhere I look I see something that inspires me, from an island out there [in the Hauraki Gulf] to the blues and greens and the composition of the landscape. As an artist I'm always looking, searching for moments of beauty and then trying to hang them together like strands of pearls. New Zealand is full of beauty and now, at the end of a tour where I've been mostly in Asia, I feel like I've died and gone to heaven. 

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