

photo: Anita Halstead



Barbara Benedetti Newton, Women Painters of Washington member and Newsletter Editor, recently told me she had to cover her colored pencils with a blanket. That way she wouldn't have to look at them in her studio any more until they were sold or given away. In the meantime she has set up another work station which is

stocked with pastels of all hues and textures.

I couldn't help but ask Barbara, "What accounts for this significant change of course in your artistic journey?" Her thoughts are something we can all learn from.

First, a brief recap. If you "Google" Barbara's name, you will see (if you don't already know it) that Barbara is an internationally respected colored pencil artist. She has worked successfully in the medium for more than 15 years, participating in exhibitions and galleries, teaching classes, and writing and publishing in books and magazines. Her specialty has been dramatically lit still lifes of exquisite color.

In 2002 Barbara began exploring other mediums and has been working predominantly in soft pastel ever since. Her primary subject matter is now impressionistic landscape scenes.



*Sweetness and Light (1996)*  
15.5 x 19 inches, colored pencil



*Gallagher Cove (2006)*  
17.5 x 23 inches, pastel

Barbara gave me two reasons for her transition to pastels. Ironically, they both had to do with success.

The first reason has to do with the medium itself, or rather Barbara's mastery of it. Barbara's method of creating a colored pencil painting involves several separate and time consuming steps. The process is challenging and rewarding. But she says that she got to a point where she felt she knew all the tricks and had made all the mistakes. There were no problems left for her to solve. She became bored with the process. Her boredom generated paralysis and it became hard for her to be productive.

The second reason was that her career success had become an impediment rather than a motivator. She realized that she wanted the challenge of a new medium, but it was difficult for her to let go of who she had become (prominent in her field). She says, "After a lot of whining, I finally let go of some of my ego, got over myself and became nobody again. Being nobody is freeing." She is now able to pursue her pastel work without the stress of outside expectations. "When I paint in pastel, sometimes I feel special and sometimes I feel like an idiot." Barbara now says she happily belongs to the "special idiots club."

Transitions like this are scary – and that is part of the fun and satisfaction of doing them. It takes a certain amount of courage and faith to step away from success. Barbara said it took a few years of uneasy dissatisfaction before she realized that she needed to move on from work she had loved. When it finally happened, she said there was no turning back.

Barbara's pastel work will be exhibited at the Jeffrey Moose Gallery through October 30, 2006. The gallery is at 1333 Fifth Ave. in Seattle.

- written by Cathy Woo