



Barbara Friedman on Target

Editor's Note: Think & Ask is honored to display Barbara Friedman's artwork for our readers on the fourth anniversary of 9-11.

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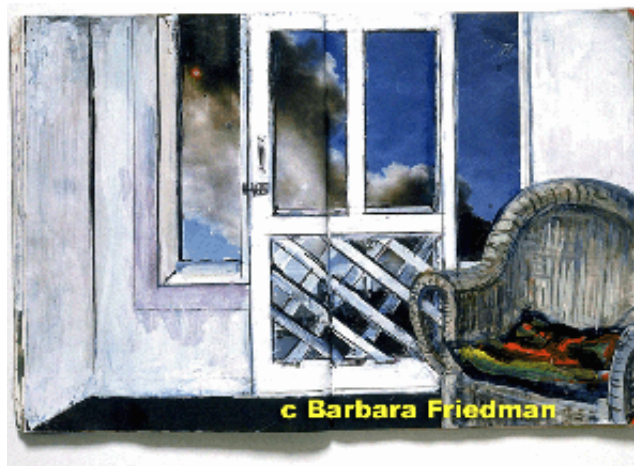
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Mark Blickley

SPECIAL TO THINK & ASK
LONG BEACH, NY

It was all about falling and failing and fleeing.

The Divided We Fall was severed from the United We Stand, a sliced sentence that cut into our most frightening vulnerability. Children of the Baby Boom were taught to duck and cover at impending explosions, not stand tall. Wouldn't standing tall simply turn us all into easier targets?



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In this unconditional war waged against our city we New Yorkers assumed the role of targets, not combatants. Even our heroes weren't warriors but victims of falling debris and hot ash that buried and burned them inside their uniforms as they attempted to rescue those targeted within the Twin Towers.

The initial response to the terror from people of the city was an explosive display of patriotic banners and American flags that dripped down from thousands of window ledges and sprang up across thousands of motor vehicles. The many cars in motion decked out in dozens of fluttering flags reminded me of red, white and blue matador capes designed to distract danger away from the target in a furious attempt to avoid becoming a target.

On a street called Liberty, three hundred yards away from the fourteen hundred and fifty foot Twin Towers, is the home of artist Barbara Friedman.

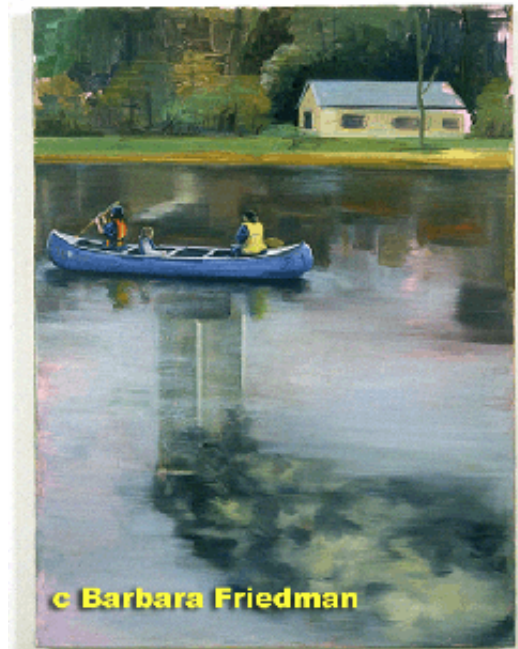
September 11, 2001 would be an exciting day of firsts for each member of Barbara Friedman's family. For her eldest daughter Sabina, it would be the first time she rode the subway by herself to her private school in Brooklyn Heights. For Barbara's husband Nick Pappas, a philosophy professor at the City University of New York, it would be the first official day of his year long academic sabbatical. It would allow him to take their younger

daughter Sophie to a morning of double firsts -- her first day of the first grade.

As for Barbara, September 11th was the culmination of a dream she had long lobbied for. It would be her first day of teaching art at Pace University in Manhattan, located close to Rudy Giuliani's office at City Hall and within easy walking distance from her home on Liberty Street. She had been teaching at the Pace campus in Upstate New York and was thrilled to begin a fresh semester sans the long commute out of the city.

On the morning of September 11th, Barbara was walking to work when she heard the sound of the first plane before it crashed into the second tallest building in America.

The aircraft's engines were deafening; she and others on the street froze. Barbara turned and saw the explosion although she was unaware that the plane had caused it. She thought it must have been a bomb, but even that thought could not extinguish the breathtaking cinematic beauty of the explosion. Millions of pieces of multi-colored paper blown loose from incinerated offices floated above her. Later she would recall the explosion's mock tickertape aftermath of confetti and wonder at the popular cliché that we were a "paperless society."



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Terrified that she would be bombed and swallowed up within the monolithic canyons of lower Manhattan, Barbara met a woman emerging from a subway exit who told her it was a plane, not a bomb, that caused the devastation and Barbara felt a sense of relief. Her four-minute walk to Pace University occurred in between the first and second attack.

Barbara was entombed inside a school elevator when the second plane hit the Towers. She helped Pace's staff take people off the street and ride them down to the basement where they were given filtered facemasks and water. According to the radio the Federal Reserve in Washington was hit and that threw Barbara into a panic because there was a huge Federal Reserve building right across the street from her apartment.

Trapped in the university's basement, cut off from seeing yet experiencing the auditory fear spewing from the radio, Barbara felt a claustrophobic compulsion to go outside and escape the underground structure. What she saw outside was worthy of a scene from a science fiction film. Everything was covered and coated with white ash.

The silence frightening.



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Barbara looked over at the Brooklyn Bridge and knew that her eldest daughter wasn't far from the other side. White ash muffled her steps as she headed towards the bridge. Once on the bridge she witnessed a surreal and terrifying exodus: As many people were heading into Manhattan as were fleeing it. The Brooklyn Bridge became clogged and choked with so many people that Barbara was unable to push forward. Obsessed

with her daughter's safety and once again upset by a fear of feeling trapped, she tore her dress while climbing a fence from the pedestrian walkway, but made it across the bridge.

She hurried the short distance to St. Ann's school in Brooklyn Heights to retrieve Sabina. The surrounding chaos reminded her of films she'd seen of London Blitz refugees during the Second World War. At St. Ann's she was told that Sabina went to a classmate's home. When she arrived at the address, no one was there.

She finally tracked Sabina down at another schoolmate's house. Her daughter was hysterical. She thought all the buildings around the World Trade Center were destroyed and that her family was dead. Once Sabina held her mother she felt relieved and resumed her teenaged normalcy, hanging out with her friends. She pretty much ignored her mother for the next two days.

Nothing felt remotely normal to Barbara. She was in a strange house with all strangers save Sabina, and she didn't even know if her husband and youngest daughter were alive until he called her late that night from a friend's place in SoHo. Barbara was upset that it took her husband so long to track her down. She claimed he had abandoned her and told him that others had husbands who rushed to find their wives.

Nick asked his wife to join them in Manhattan. They battled over where they should go; Barbara said that she never wanted to return to Manhattan. He told her to come and stay with friends instead of strangers and that angered her. She said that she didn't want the pressure of having to "behave" like

a friend right now, things were too unbalanced. Her core of isolation dictated that having to be friends right now would force a connection she did not want to make.

Barbara's irritation extended to the parental distribution of their children. She had a teenager who seemed content to hang out with her friends and didn't think her mother needed any comforting, whereas Nick had the little one who was probably clinging to him as they spoke. He was her hero, right? Barbara wanted to be with her younger daughter. She needed someone to help her remain strong and focused. Nick had Sophie and his friends. All she had was the kindness of strangers and the overwhelming fear that more tragedy was imminent.



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She withdrew from the rest of the household and stayed in the living room, catatonic, watching CNN throughout the night. She arranged various pillows in such a way that they seemed to be a physical expression of her bunker mentality. When her daughter and her hosts decided to go up to the roof deck to view the rubble, Barbara loathed the idea. She still feared incoming attacks.

One of two iconic television images that haunted her that night was the bombing of Kabul by the Northern Alliance. She kept thinking it was America bombing Afghanistan and that we were now engaged in a full-fledged shooting war with the terrorists. The other image was of Yassir Arafat's face. She was distraught by the CNN interview with the Palestinian leader because of his look of naked fear when the interviewer told him of the World Trade Center attack.

After spending two nights at the Brooklyn Heights house, she stayed a week at a friend's place in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn. Despite her dread of re-entering Manhattan, Nick convinced her to join him and Sophie at their friend's apartment in SoHo. When she met her husband she was infuriated by his celebratory response to his and Sophie's survival. Unlike Barbara, he didn't display any signs of depression or anxiety and she bitterly resented him for that.

It took months of joint therapy for Barbara to realize that her husband had every reason to feel fortunate and euphoric instead of feeling like a victim. He was just hundreds of yards away from the attack and felt sure that the Twin Towers were going to fall on their home. He rushed his daughter out into the street and into the shouts and smoke and ash that was their neighborhood. He truly believed that he and his first grader were going to perish that day.

I ran into Barbara Friedman about six weeks after September 11th. Mutual friends were conducting an open studio tour at their mid-town subsidized artists building when she smiled at me in the elevator. I didn't recognize her. We had been introduced a few months earlier. Her hair had changed to a shorter, more severe cut and the color had gone from blonde to black. I whispered to my companion, "do I know this woman?" I was shocked when she told me who she was. It wasn't just her hair but her expression that threw me off.

I was the crazy one, claims Barbara. Everyone else was busy, getting on with their lives.



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My companion, Barbara, and I left the building together. When we asked her if she wanted to ride the subway with us she said she couldn't bear going underground and would hail a cab. She talked in nervous, machine gun rhythms and kept berating herself for her lack of focus and the consuming fear she could not shake.

Barbara felt that her paranoid and weak behavior was pulling her family apart. She kept beating herself up over her perception that every one else was able to deal with the crisis except her. I told her she was absolutely normal. I recognized and understood that look on her face

and the nervous, staccato speech. I am a Vietnam Veteran whose job was to load body bags into planes, frequently during rocket attacks. I was not a warrior. I did not fight. My job in the Air Force was to be a target. Looking into Barbara Friedman's face was like gazing into a historical mirror. She shrugged off my empathy and disappeared inside a taxi.

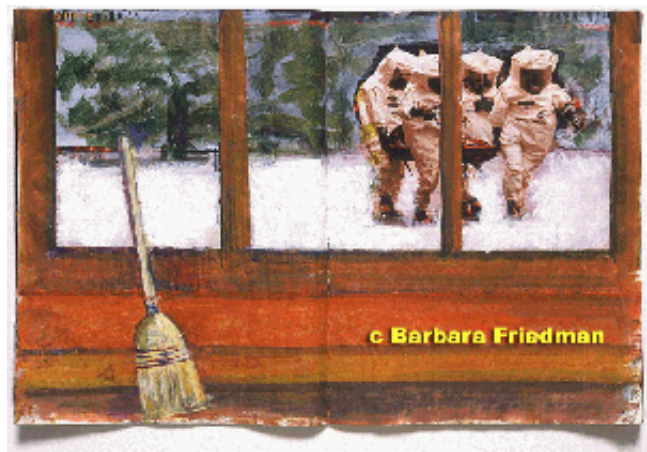
I was worried about her until, months later, I viewed a Manhattan gallery exhibition of her recent work at the Art Resources Transfer in Chelsea. The terrifying role of American target that we both shared resulted in my becoming a writer in order to help exorcise its absurd unfairness and fear; it seemed to me that Barbara Friedman had a metaphysical implosion that released itself into an explosion of powerful, important work.

I loved the uniqueness of her exhibition. The show was collectively titled "Weekends Away." The individual pieces were all named for the places of exile where the work was executed --the homes of friends and family-- safely removed from the stench filled smoke of Liberty Street. Barbara took current news magazines, such as Newsweek and Time,

located photographs and text dealing with the World Trade disaster and then by applying acrylic paint, crayons and markers, superimposed bucolic landscapes and cozy views from country porches and windows that created conflicting tableaux of serenity and terror.

These disturbing tableaux are not framed and hung on walls. Each full spread magazine object is opened and placed on a small, swivel-based book lectern made of wood. Displayed within this literary context, these magazine compositions strike the viewer not so much as works of art as visually discerning reports from the Diaspora, a journalism of emotional exile. Because of the swiveled base, each artwork could be set in motion to present a moving target to its audience. And wasn't that the point of Barbara Friedman's "Weekends Away" -- that no matter where you escaped you were still a target, but that a moving target might be harder to hit?

Barbara hit upon the idea for these magazine artworks quite by accident. The first one was executed on September 22, 2001 up in the Catskill Mountains at Beaverkill, New York. She and her family were staying there with friends. Barbara was distraught and frightened and this manifested itself in her always keeping a small radio with her to constantly monitor the news. She was terrified of not knowing what was going on. This radio addiction lasted through May of 2002. Her family and friends tried to get Barbara to calm down. "I was the crazy one," claims Barbara. Everyone else was busy, getting on with their lives. They suggested she make art but destruction, not creation, was obsessing her and so she dismissed their suggestion.



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Knowing that her nervousness was discomforting to others, she walked down to the Beaverkill Lake and sat in a chair, viewing the landscape. She turned on her radio. There were magazines lying about and she picked one up. It was a news weekly devoted entirely to the World Trade disaster. Flipping through photographs and texts chronicling the horror, Barbara wanted to cover over the reality of the tragedy so she grabbed some children's art supplies that were at hand --crayons and markers-- and in a frenzy of artistic instinct and intuition began imposing counter images of beauty and peace onto the magazine pages. She saw the text as shape, not just narrative, and so let some of the words bleed through the drawing.

A litany of more detailed, sophisticated magazine compositions followed, created in an exiled flight that stretched from upstate New York to Long Island to various states in New England. It was a magazine composition drawing of her husband, looking out of their safe Cambridge Marriott hotel room window onto the photographed smoke and destruction of the Twin Towers, that led Barbara to seek healing therapy for the two of them. Barbara never planned to offer these magazine compositions for exhibition. Her show at Art Transfer Resources had been scheduled two years earlier.

My favorite piece is one titled "Sharon, CT." Barbara has painted a beautiful New England lawn scene, complete with resting wheel barrow that throws a shadow in the comforting midday sun, but on the horizon is a photograph of dark skies and aggressive, rolling clouds of ashy smoke thrusting their way toward the New England green, threatening to swallow up its serenity.

Although this "Weekends Away" exhibition has long since passed into memory, I'm still haunted by the images Barbara Friedman created and the context wherein these images are displayed. Her personalized, primary source response to a national trauma is as historic as it is aesthetic. Four years after September 11th, these disturbing yet beautiful pieces deserve recognition greater than just a New York City art audience.

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Mark Blickley is a short-story writer, essayist, playwright, and the author of Sacred Misfits.

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