

## About the Cover Artist

# Susan Barmon

## A Thirst for the Unseen

By Karin M. Lazarus, BFA

In Atlanta, Georgia, Susan Barmon maintains a spare bedroom turned studio, her botanical portraits lining the walls, and a collection of flowers of every hue neatly arranged in jars of water.

Why do we look at photographs? What arouses the compulsion? There are several answers, of course. Among them is a thirst to see things we haven't seen, to understand the world through someone else's eyes, to read a visual language that will extend our own breadth of view.

Barmon's botanical series derives from many scanned images that result in a single definitive or iconic image. Her work is bursting with the colors of cut flowers in various states of bloom. Her view is idiosyncratic: In her beautifully crafted pieces, she focuses on the smaller scale, the edges and the nooks and crannies of her blossoms. Flowers are seen from the viewpoint of life and motion. "The flowers are not just a static thing; I want to create movement. Sometimes it takes ten scans to get multiple flower arrangements composed on the scanner." Because the flowers are delicate and fragile, Barmon must work quickly. "I know when to stop, though. If it's not working out then I stick 'em back in a jar and hope they will look better dead."

Barmon is easy to talk to: open, warm, insightful, and honest. These characteristics come through in her powerful photographs. And although sometimes contemplation and deep, quiet, soul-nurturing reflection seems completely impossible for me, it is a measure of the power of Barmon's work that I sat quietly for quite some time, taking in the images.

### At a Glance

Photographer Susan Barmon captures natural and manmade objects with the lens and transforms them into something more than still life. Her photographic "documentaries," too, give viewers a glimpse into settings they would otherwise never experience.

Born in Bethesda, Maryland and raised in Westbury, New York, Susan Barmon doesn't downplay the influences of growing up in suburbia. "I had a nice, normal place to grow up. We had original art on our walls unlike my contemporaries at the time. As my parents got older and had more money, they took great pleasure in buying art they liked. I have always created art and was encouraged by my parents. I think, looking back, that both my parents were creative, but never created any art." Other aspects of her upbringing were also clearly momentous. Much time was spent in "the city" at museums, Broadway shows, the circus, a classical music concert series for kids held at Hunter College, the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and "one of my favorite memories"...the celebrated Horn and Hardart Automat.

Barmon attended Syracuse University School of Art where she studied advertising design and photography. In 1967 she decided to leave school and move to Miami. There she was selected to become the art director for the Miccosukee Indian Tribe. The tribe needed a bilingual educational program that included books for both adults and children.

Barmon's job was to design the schoolbooks, draw the images that were needed to accompany the text, and transcribe the Miccosukee language, which had never before been recorded. Through Barmon's efforts, the Miccosukee

Susan Barmon has been telling stories through photographic portraiture most of her adult life. To view or purchase her work, please visit her website at <http://www.susanbarmonphotography.com> or her Etsy shop (a social commerce website) at <http://www.etsy.com/shop/suzib123>.

people could finally see what their language looked like. This is where she got back into photography. She began taking her camera to work and started photographing Miccosukee natives. Barmon intentionally selected subjects with social implications but gave visual impact and visual pleasure paramount importance in her designs. In 1978 one of her photos was submitted to a *Time Magazine* contest, called the Power of Print. Barmon won, and her photo was published. That's big!

In 1979, Barmon moved to Atlanta and attended the Portfolio Center in Atlanta, Georgia. There she studied photojournalism “from a man whose work I greatly admired, Dennis C. Darling. He was a selfless teacher and mentor and I learned a lot about the photography business from him. He now teaches at the University of Texas in Austin where he has been since at least 1983 and is a respected name in photo circles. We are still friends. It is a regret that the trend in photography today is not wonderfully shot stories that draw you immediately in like Dennis and Mary Ellen Mark do, but more illustration and manipulation digitally.”

In 1981, Barmon took a job as the art director of *Brown's Guide to Georgia*—a very popular magazine at the time. However, she found the work to be dull and uncreative.

She began to do freelance portrait photography. Rather than having clients come to her studio, where it would always take time for them to acclimate and get comfortable, she went to them. The approach worked well for her, allowing her clients to feel immediately at ease. People responded, and by word of mouth her business grew.

In 1992 there was a big change in Barmon's life. Eastern Airlines went out of business. Her husband Jimmy, who had been a captain for the now defunct airline, was offered a job as director of flight operations with a Korean flight school in San Francisco that trained pilots. Barmon and her husband decided to make the move to San Francisco in an effort to “reinvent ourselves.” An opportunity presented itself when one day the flight school took everyone who worked for them—including spouses—to visit the rodeo show that was in town. “I had never been to a rodeo before, although I've always loved cowboys and girls.” Instantly, Barmon was hooked. Thus began “the Littlest Cowboys” Jr. Rodeo portrait series, and “the Millennium” series. Both have been shown nationwide and won several major awards. Barmon started taking black and white shots, getting rodeo schedules, and traveling every week to shoot the shows.



The Horton Brothers

“At first people thought I was an animal rights activist and would not give me the time of day.” However, she kept going back and kept on shooting. She soon began to bring photographs back to be given as gifts.

The rodeo folks warmed to her quickly. Politically, rodeo people tended to hold views that were polar opposite to those held by Barmon, yet she became fast friends with many of these folks. Although Barmon is not originally from rodeo country, she managed to ensconce herself enough among the locals so that her images of rodeo riders have a ring of authenticity.

“In the Littlest Cowboys Portrait series it was ‘The Horton Brothers’ that made me realize I had a good and unusual series going on. I knew in my darkroom when I proofed the negatives that it was a winner. I am a very harsh editor of my work and don’t ever want to be accused of padding a series with filler.

“I followed those cowboys around for three years and really only have ten to twelve shots I think are show-worthy. That series is what got me published, helped me be selected for gallery shows, and won me awards. It’s funny that it did so much for me, because I only sold two pieces from that series. Also both these series have been shot with film. It has been a real struggle for me to enter the digital world and after five years I have decided to do it on a limited basis. I still shoot all my portraits on film and plan to continue that. The Little Cowboys are also film.”

Her series “The Littlest Cowboys,” a documentary study of rodeo kids in the West, is a personal, spiritual, and cultural study of the most thoughtful, probing, and perceptive sort. Her relationship to her subjects is close. “The criterion for the cowboys was a good shot that I would be happy to put my name on. That happens while watching and waiting for the moment. I learned early on as a photographer that it was never about me; that to blend into the woodwork is a good thing.”

In 1994 Barmon met a woman who owned a gallery in San Francisco. After looking at Barmon’s pieces she offered her a show. One of those “Horton Brothers” was entered in *Art of California Magazine* and Barmon won the prestigious California Discovery Gold Award for Photography—another big achievement for Barmon.

By 1996 there was more change in Barmon’s life. The flight school was not doing well, and both she and Jimmy felt like “we were treading water and it was time to reinvent once again.” When Jimmy was traveling in Korea working, he ran into a friend that he had known since third grade. What are the chances? His friend worked for Delta

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airlines in Atlanta and offered Jimmy a job teaching in the training department! Off they went to Georgia.

Barmon was busy doing portrait work, and Jimmy had been working at Delta for four years, when he had a devastating stroke. “He has gotten a bit better but will never be back as I know him. It has all been very bittersweet and difficult. We really haven’t had any meaningful conversations since the stroke. He is very smart and fakes it a lot but I know with the cognitive problems that he just doesn’t get it.” They have been married for 26 years. You can hear in her voice just how much she misses her husband as he once was.

She began her “Drive By Shooting” series in 2002. “Taking long drives was just a nice way to get Jimmy out of the house. I’d put in three hundred miles in a weekend. The Drive Bys happen while in the car. They are all digital images. In the Drive By Shooting series it was “The Roof Preacher” that started it all. I had never seen anything like that but had heard about people doing that. The South has so many eccentricities that I don’t see elsewhere. In some ways it is a gold mine for a series like that. The series is ongoing and has been fun to shoot. I try to present it as my observations and don’t want to influence the viewer with my opinions. Several pieces have been shown at the Atlanta Photography Group gallery and one of the images—‘Jesus’—was written up by Laurie Kratochvil who was the photo editor at *Rolling Stone* at the time. That was a wonderful ego boost! I’ve gotten a little bored with the outrageous signage but am always on the lookout for that oddity you just don’t see everywhere. I have shot all of those with my little Canon camera that I carry in my purse all the time. The most frustrating thing about it is when I forget to charge the battery because I haven’t used it in a while and don’t have a



*Trumpet Flowers*



*Summer '05*

spare. That happened to me with the 'Gorilla and Jesus' shot. That was about twenty-five miles from my house. I went back a few weeks later to take

the picture." That particular shot is in an ongoing show, as is her portrait work.

In 2004, about four years after her husband's stroke, a photographer friend showed Barmon work she had done scanning flowers while she moved them. "I loved the concept but really didn't care for moving them—I'm too literal! I didn't think about what she had showed me until six months later when I was trying to figure out how I could make more money and do it from home. My heart at the time wasn't into doing portraiture and I was uneasy leaving my husband alone for three or four hours at a time. I started scanning everything I could get my hands on. It was then that I realized I finally was doing something mainstream that had salability." There is no camera involved with her flower portraits. She uses flowers in various stages of bloom and carefully arranges them on her scanner. "It is not an expensive scanner; it's old and only cost me ninety-nine dollars new." In order to create depth when arranging the flowers on the scanner she rigged up a tiny scaffold that she made out of Tinker Toys. "I have attached the Tinker Toy scaffold! I hung an inedible radish from my pathetic garden so you can get an idea of what it looks like."

"It was suggested to me to call a young woman here in Atlanta who was trying to license her work. I did and we met. As it turned out, she played with my kids when I lived in Miami many years ago and I knew her parents. Small world! At any rate she suggested I go to the Licensing Show, then in New York City. I did and was overwhelmed. I really felt like a very small fish in a huge pond. I met a lovely couple who had a booth and gave them my information. When I returned from New York a few days later there was a message waiting for me. The lovely couple had passed my info on to the principal at Applejack Art and he wanted to get me under contract for licensing and publishing. I was thrilled. They have published eight posters of mine, sold all over the Internet, and recently published ten images that are being sold as small framed posters at Bed Bath & Beyond. I now also have agents here in Atlanta that have recently sold an image to the Gaylord Hotel in Opryland,



Yard Art

Nashville, Tennessee. I have learned along the way not to make the flowers precious so I don't have a hard time letting them go. They help take me away from some of the realities of my life. They are a respite. I have always found flower photography incredibly boring so you can imagine my surprise when I scanned my first flowers. The detail and lighting was amazing. I started cutting flowers from my small yard for subject matter. I have even stolen flowers from yards when no one was home. But always return with a print of the stolen flower as a thank you. I travel with scissors in my car! When I do cut flowers I have to get home right away and start scanning, as their lifespan is short. I set up an account with a local wholesale cut flower florist. I don't use them too much but am glad to have the account when the spirit moves me and there is nothing available. Because the scanner top has to stay up for the scan there is always a lot of busy work to do to get them right. Backgrounds have to be evened out and dust and pollen are a huge problem. I try to keep some of the little insects I have scanned unknowingly. By the time I'm done with an image I have probably spent a minimum of ten to twelve hours on it, and there is not one inch of that image I haven't seen and gone over. They have been shown extensively and are in private collections."

"I have created different pieces at different times that have been pivotal in the direction I was going. One of my first portraits—number one on my website—was exactly what I wanted and gave me the confidence to press forward in that direction. I had always wanted to do black and white portraits and was anxious to get out of graphics and art directing."

Barmon is inspired by Dennis Darling, Mary Ellen Mark, Sally Mann, Irving Penn, Annie Liebowitz, and Joel Peter Witkins' early work. "There are more but I tend to lean toward the documentary style and always figure a picture is worth a thousand words."

"I don't have any hobbies in particular but love miniatures. When one of my daughters was in the fifth grade I built her, from a kit with a lot of customization on my part, a nine room Victorian dollhouse, and electrified it. Recently, I built a room out of a French cheese drying cabinet for myself, with all the miniatures I have collected over the years and electrified it with a twelve-bulb chandelier. Riding around looking for the unusual is a nice way to spend my time."

"My photographs are a part of me and when it's time to give a client a portrait or sell a flower, I have a physical feeling of letting a piece of me go. I have to talk myself into giving it up—mainly because I like making money! But it is visceral." 🌿



*Karin Lazarus baked her first batch of cookies as at just 8 years old, when her mom gave her a Mix Master and a Betty Crocker cookbook. She has been cooking ever since. Creating her own recipes and trying them out on family and friends is her greatest passion. She's dedicated to using natural, whole foods and fresh, vibrant, adventurous, ingredients to create recipes that are good for you and a pleasure to eat.*