



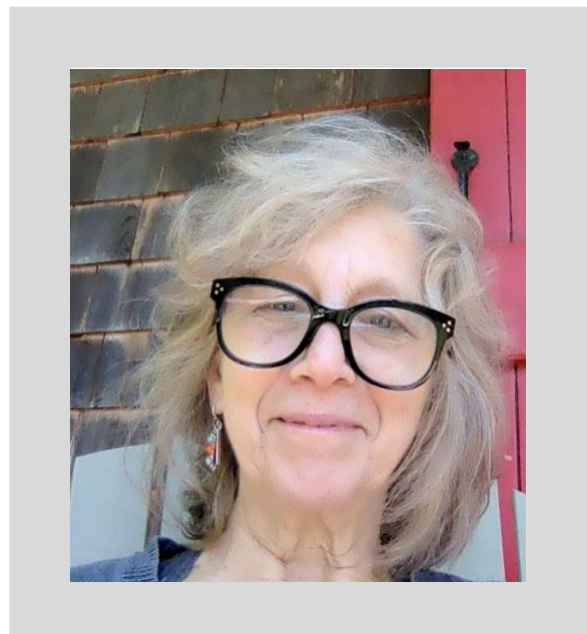
Home > Artist of the Month > Barbara Jo

Barbara Jo, September 2025 Artist of the Month

Interview with Barbara Jo as told to Seth Garcia

You have worked in archaeology in many positions, including as an illustrator, academic writer, educator, and curator. How does this inform your artistic endeavors?

In college, I started out as an art student and gravitated towards archaeology classes, eventually combining my two interests to have a foot in both areas. That combo is not really taught in my experience, it is something one pursues independently. While I was doing fieldwork in Central America and Mexico and technical illustration documenting ancient Maya ceramics, sculpture, and hieroglyphs, I became proficient in reconstructing sculpture that had fallen apart. Because drawing and studying things very carefully visually archives them in your brain, it gave me a recall ability others who might be just snapping photos or walking by didn't generally retain. It sharpens the senses, and I am already naturally visually acute. In those years my creativity was being applied to conceptualizing and carrying out new projects with teams of people, like building a sculpture museum, helping recreate a full-scale ancient temple, initiating 3D scanning of monuments at risk. But it was also confined to a set of conventions and outcomes. Now, I am leaning towards passing on that knowledge.



Over the past six years, I've felt a pull towards creating my own art, approaching different abstract and conceptual pieces in a variety of mediums, painting, mosaics, digital, and conceptual. It helps that I have my own studio for the first time. Sometimes, I simply create without a particular idea in mind, a process in the present that brings me

joy, or satisfaction in the outcome. Letting go of those conventions and expected outcomes allows my personal style to emerge outside of work. The transition seems to also involve noticing details of my life and thinking about them archaeologically too, I guess. How would future civilizations view me/us? What if anything do I want to leave behind? How are we changing as humans? What can I reuse and repurpose to create less waste? There's beauty in nature, but where is the aesthetic in chaotic urban sprawl? Artists have been very good at pointing out the underpinnings of our existence and treatment of each other, but now we are at a strange crossroad of humanity with technology, so with my art I hope to develop new ideas and directions.

You are the community curator for the upcoming exhibit Barcode Journeys at the Somerville Museum. What first drew you to propose this collection?

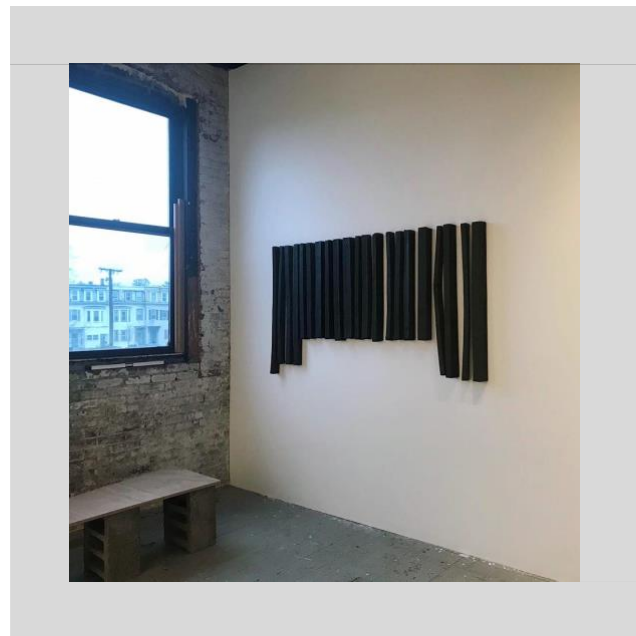
You know, one thing I've learned is to pay attention to what my children, family, and friends have to say. I saw the responses of people who attended my little show "My Year in Barcode" (2022) and many encouraged me to take it to another level, so I did. It invigorated me; I noticed something happening and acted on it. I thought if I could have a barcode journey, why not others? I started talking to artists I knew and pretty soon there was real momentum. It made me happy.

The stated mission of Barcode Journeys is to explore the pervasiveness of barcodes in our daily lives.

What originally drew you to this object/image? Has your understanding of it changed or expanded during your curation? And what do barcodes mean to you as an artist?

I started collecting barcodes off purchases and boxes because quite frankly, they annoyed me. Sometimes the things you don't like command your attention. Here was a lovely box or item and this unsightly barcode stamped on it. What did they mean and why did everything have them? Those produce stickers—awful—but suddenly the piece of paper we tapped them onto, instead of the counter, became attractive. I thought maybe I could bring an aesthetic to this weirdness, a message in the conundrum. I didn't need to accept them at face value; there must be more.

While my bag of barcodes grew, I did research, learned about how they came to be, engineers involved, how they work (some of the basics anyway). I was taking a ceramic class at the time and tried to make



a clay barcode, and when I had to explain the work (that was not a success btw) to the class, someone spoke up and said that although they didn't have any conceptual aspect to their ceramic project, it was interesting and ironic that I read, given my experience drawing undeciphered hieroglyphs. Voila! There was an unanticipated intersection of my academic work and this new creative puzzle. I love when that invisible force points it out if you are tuned in.

Curating the exhibit has led me in new directions and formed a community around something found in everyone's cabinet! Now, I feel attached to these codes, and I've talked with others about them and heard their histories, reactions and experiences. The humorous conversations the topic has generated alone are inspiring. It has taken me down paths I would not have explored, connected me to people I would not otherwise have known, in a sense an entirely new dimension, new connectivity.

The artists that joined Barcode Journeys were open to exploring a theme, in some instances not previously developed in their artwork, and in others already prevalent in their work. There are others, too, who for various reasons couldn't join. It is amazing how often and in so many ways the barcode has been tapped for illustrating life and the human condition. Bringing together these disparate works shows how incredibly far reaching something barely noticed like the barcode truly is in all of our lives. Positive and negative, mundane and influential, black and white and colorful, visible and invisible.

In the broader sense, personally, I think that this curatorial experience underscores a sense that we can take an underappreciated aspect of our life and have fun with it, learn more about it, and even alter our opinion of it. In truth, never look at it the same way. A gentle reminder to not lose sight of the complex processes that the human mind's intricate network of neurons has a capacity to perceive, create memories, control our minds, adapt, learn continuously, imagine. Technology is part of the network, and this art exhibit questions what we are going to do with that.

What is your personal curatorial process or philosophy?

One must be open to following signs and opportunities. I've always considered that everyone has some form of artistic creativity to bring to their approach to life, often untapped. A concept springs to my mind and it usually seems crazy or out of reach, but slowly develops into something

with potential, because whether I realize it or not, I am already in the first gathering phase, putting out feelers and exploring what connectivity is buzzing under the surface. I start putting the puzzle together in my mind and with images. Once in the space with the artwork and items around me, my approach tends to be somewhat intuitive. I have an idea sketched out for an exhibition, but I leave room for the pieces to start interacting in ways I wouldn't have anticipated on paper. Light and atmosphere play a role. Spacing around a piece is important to me. I want people to be able to focus on a piece without being crowded by something else, unless they are actually related or speaking to each other, then it is exciting to group items in conversation.

This is your first time curating a contemporary art exhibit. What has the experience been like for you? Has it differed from your past experiences curating archeological museum shows? If so, how?

Over the years I curated many archaeological exhibitions, which were fun and hard work. I worked with teams of exhibit designers, installers, graphic artists, conservators, technical assistants, internationally and nationally. There was often the feeling that a lot was at stake academically, and solid answers were expected. Those past exhibit projects were important and taught me a deep respect for subject knowledge and about how essential teamwork is to the process. It is important to keep an open mind to incorporate other's suggestions that can enrich your original concept.

Barcode Journeys, though, is my first experience curating a contemporary art exhibition. It is different. I felt a freedom to develop something unscripted, more open ended, more lighthearted. It wasn't coming from a book or academic scholarship; it sprouted from my own unconventional thoughts. I needed that free expression at this stage of my life. The Community Curator program was a good fit. A blend of history, community, and art.

You have participated in the Somerville Open Studios program. What has opening up your space to the community been like?

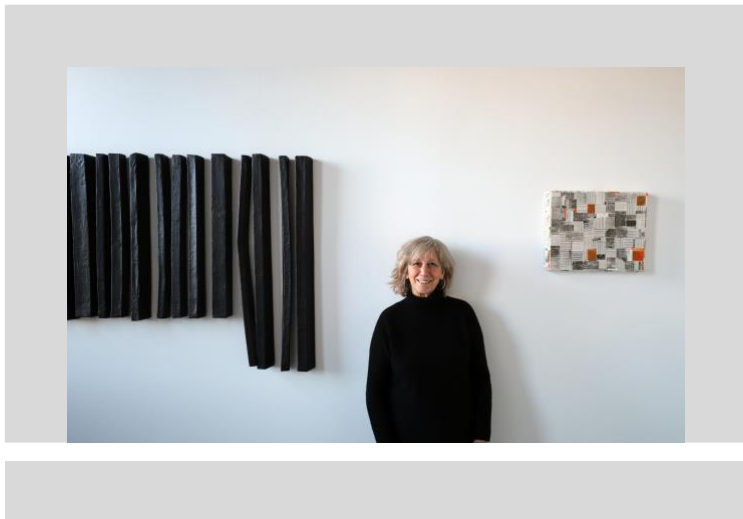
I really only started using my studio for my personal art work in 2022. Up until that point I was using the blank wall space to try to fit together an ancient mural from Teotihuacan for a work-related research project. There were thousands of fragile fragments that the archaeological team had excavated. I printed them out on paper to be able to move them around and try to make sense of them. People would walk in and be dazzled at the site trying to figure out what on earth was going on. It looked to various people like sushi or meat on the wall! When I concluded that

work, I was overcome by a deep desire to use my studio for my self-expression and get to work on those barcodes I'd been hauling around with me for ten years. After "My Year in Barcode" mini-show I was emboldened to open up my space for others to visit during Open Studios. A couple years previous I went around visiting other spaces in Somerville, and getting my bearings. I am fortunate to be part of Milk Row Studios (MRS), and interact with some really energetic and wonderfully unconventional artists with profound art knowledge. This kind of exposure, meeting other artists, and outward encouragement is critical when you are starting out. Conversations with others, meeting neighbors, and making connections in Somerville, have been confidence-building moments. You never know who is going to walk through your door and spark a connection.

Like many people, as a young child I was taught to color within the lines. But I also was free to doodle around on a chalkboard at home. In archaeology you need to stay within the academic boundaries, and drawings have conventions. It was an exhilarating, productive time of my life, but now I am moving towards self-expression and away from archaeology's academic boundaries.

Liberating myself to reinvigorate a part of me I had let go fallow too long brought much relief, self-awareness, and joy back into my life. I flourished with my newfound energy. It was back to the chalkboard

😊



I chose to use my given name, Barbara Jo, as my new artist's name. When I married, I dropped the 'Jo' and used the 'W' from my last name as my middle initial, to my mother's chagrin. Later in life she explained she had named me after a dear friend that died too young. It seemed meaningful to recapture my youth, and the person I was before I married, now that that segment was over. But I kept Fash as my legal name, because it was part of my professional life for so long and it seemed so complicated to change everything. Plus, I didn't want to go back to my maiden name, so now I use Barbara Jo as my full artist's name. I know it is strange for some people to transition, those who know me in both roles, so I don't mind whichever name feels most natural to them. I like that many people in my family write me now as Barbara Jo. My fresh identity seems to make them

happy and we feel youthful together.

Sometimes through art we put ourselves out there, revealing pain or trauma we want to move past. That giving of ourselves and emotions is helpful because even though we may have moved on, someone else reading those words might find it helpful. When 42 years of marriage ended abruptly it shook me to the core. I felt rescued moving into Somerville and recovered. During that period of trauma, though, I kept imagining a piece that was an enormous Velcro strip that anyone feeling pain could rip apart to release their inner agony. At the time I didn't have the resources to make that, but it eventually evolved into a smaller, cheerier barcode rendition called "Rip It Good." Now the piece amusingly entertains children because it allows them to touch the usually-off-limits art, and they get a surprising reaction in return. Perhaps this moment plants a seed that art can respond to them upon their engagement. It speaks to anyone who needs a release and will be at kid's height in the upcoming Barcode Journeys show. I'm reading David Sheff's recent biography, *Yoko*, and I imagined her voice screaming from an inner anguish; perhaps she might have enjoyed my giant Velcro strip.

Generally, what have you loved about the arts scene in Somerville?

Honestly, I have never experienced an art community like Somerville. It is inclusive and supportive unlike any other place I've lived or worked. I travel a fair amount, and now coming back home just feels so good and is totally my comfort zone. I am grateful for my family, neighbors, friends, and artists in the community; they keep it creatively alive and forward-thinking. There are so many events that bring people out to participate in the arts as well. So many artists spaces and markets to explore. It is doubly wonderful because my grandchildren live a 20 minutes' walk from me and the city is a terrific community for them. I can walk to work, ride my bike, take mass transit, find Zipcars. So fantastic that I don't need to own a car!

I got involved at the Somerville Museum through my friend David Guss, and I started volunteering on an exhibition he was mounting. The museum hosts so many art-related events that bring a full range of artists and community into the space. It is amazing to be a part of that and contribute. I believe Somerville helps people achieve their creative dreams, and nurtures our collective humanity.

Any other upcoming work or community events you want to plug?

During the pandemic I did a ton of walking, and I've always been taking photos of street art graffiti, which is developing into my next project.

Of course I hope many readers can make it over to The Somerville Museum to see Barcode Journeys while it is up September 18 – December 6. There are a number of programming events we've scheduled, a variety revealing the many directions barcodes impact us. [Visit the Somerville Museum page](#) for events listings.

I am seriously concerned about what we do to the planet and support the Somerville tree initiatives.

My friends and neighbors in the SheBoom Band are part of Porchfest yearly and will be playing at The Burren this Fall.

I'm a big proponent of bicycle safety, improved bike lanes, and safe walking in our city. My neighbor Lenni Armstrong creates and often donates her creative reflective wearables at local events. A shout out to Lenni: <https://www.safenstylin.com/>



Oil on paper, Barbara Jo, 2023