



Surreal Self Portrait

Drawing From The Past, Expressing The Present

The Art of **James Xavier Barbour**

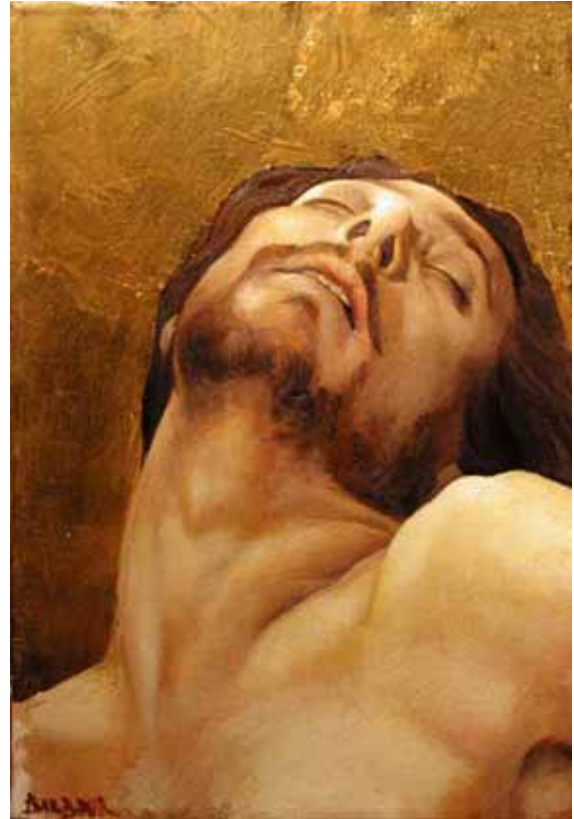
Review by **Grady Harp**

ATTEMPTING TO classify James Xavier Barbour's position in the realm of art is a challenge. His technique is deeply rooted in the past, emulating the strengths of the Old Masters who in turn strove to recreate the complexities of nature, of God's creations, finding satisfaction and

success in painting as perfect a representation of the figure, of the landscape, of still life as precisely as the subject presented itself. And with this philosophy of technique Barbour has mastered anatomy and re-creation of corporal objects, having studied his craft in the New York Academy of Art,



Lament



Pieta

the Art Students League of New York, the Hartford Art School and, perhaps most significantly, in Italy, for many the home of classical painting. Barbour has found that illusive territory that lies somewhere between classical rendering and capturing the essence of painting in the contemporary setting: he uses his practiced gifts to define images that not only are representationally excellent, but that also suggest the nocturnal alterations of dreams that play with illusion and perception. Perhaps his approach to art is best translated in the imagery of his painting *Surreal Self Portrait*: the precision of anatomic accuracy with which he reveals himself, the varied sketched and carved tributes to Michelangelo and Velázquez, the still life of a simple bowl of cherries – all are made more fascinating by the presence of the floating bubbles of his

imagination. The broken pieces of Michelangelo's head of David are Barbour's symbol of picking up broken pieces of classical realist art tradition in the contemporary era, creating something new, breathing new life into it.

Barbour's family is from Spain, though the artist was born in Texas. He has moved from the East Coast to the West Coast and currently lives and paints and sculpts and teaches in San Francisco: he is a teacher/lecturer of Human Anatomy, Figure and Portrait drawing and painting, and Art History at the Academy of Art in San Francisco. Commissions, both for portraits and for murals, call him away from his home to sites across the United States and in Europe and Australia. With each new challenge he meets his imagination is nurtured. A



“Whatever else art is good for, its chief effectiveness lies in propagating more art. All art is infested by other art.” Leo Steinberg

photograph of the artist during a recent sojourn in Australia tells us even more about his enigmatic mind: his own image, carefully capturing classical light and shadow chiaroscuro, looks down while in the background is his painting of the *Pieta* looks upward.

Observing his sculptures, drawings, anatomic studies, and paintings offers more of an explanation of the diversity of James Xavier Barbour than attempting to translate his complex, psychologically fertile creative mind. From the simplicity of his timeless *Lament* and *Pieta* that appeal to the

The Sojourner

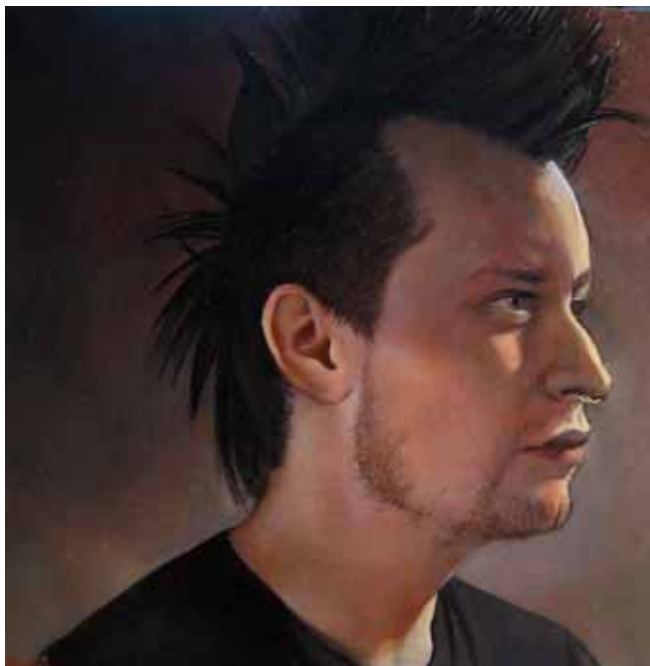


Global Chaos and Harmony





Roses from Thorns



Breaking Bricks

viewer as homages to centuries old works that could be part of the sanctity of ancient cathedrals, to the boldly masculine, anatomically complex *The Sojourner*, Barbour's roots are most evident. Yet for all the classicism of these subjects there is also a mystical element of unearthly light, of questioning the cropping of the images in a way that draws the viewer into that space where Barbour feels most at home – the conversation between truth and illusion.

When Barbour steps away from more obvious evidences of his roots, he is able to both at times shock the viewer with the Dante-esque *Global Chaos and Harmony* or lure us into the psychologically potent imagery of *Roses from Thorns*. Yet at all times and in all manner of his many works both in sculpture and drawing/mural/painting, the magic of his work is grounded in the solid foundation of his training and skill, a fact that further illustrates that artists can say anything new or extraordinary or strange as long as they have the language and skills of the masters in their hands. Perhaps that is why his very contemporary painting *Breaking Bricks* works so well – all of the classical elements of technique allow the artist to render the bizarre yet vulnerable lad in his tribal attire!

James Xavier Barbour, savoring his Spanish heritage, is introducing his concept of the past in his teaching and his lecturing, traveling to Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and soon to Istanbul, Turkey to share his prodigious gifts as a keeper of the Classical tradition. He is an artist to watch - a fertile mind that has absorbed the techniques of the Masters to create those transient moments of today that challenge our awareness of reality and illusion that define our imagination.

JAMES XAVIER BARBOUR