



WITHIN YOU WITHOUT YOU

Artist Kathy Barry conducts new energy into the world through her graphically dazzling works of watercolour.

Story by Robert Leonard
Photographs by Harry Culy

Left: Barry approaches her pieces one at a time.

I'd seen a few paintings by Kathy Barry around the galleries, but it wasn't until I caught her show at Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington last year that I came to appreciate her work's epic ambition and scope. Everything clicked.

_____The show was a two-hander with fellow traveller Sarah Smuts-Kennedy: Barry upstairs, Smuts-Kennedy down. With its metaphysical flavour, Energy Work wasn't your typical Adam Art Gallery show. According to the press release, both artists "give visual form to intuited energy fields that exceed the human sensorium", "connect us to the planet and to alternative dimensions of time and space" and "decentre the human subject and sensitise us to a multi-dimensional universe".

_____Barry showed three major series, each encompassing 12 framed watercolours: Twelve Energy Diagrams (2015), The Loom of Time (2018-9) and Search Engine for Her Future Self (2020-2). Plus there were some earlier watercolours and a video. This is the

preponderance of the work Barry has produced over the past 10 years and the show was her biggest outing yet.

_____The watercolours have a common format. Each is 700mm x 700mm square – not big, not small. Barry rules up an irregular pencil grid, then colours in its polygon compartments, usually leaving some unpainted white paper. Each shard has qualities of hue, dimension and direction. We flip between reading them as individuals and experiencing them cumulatively, as an energised field. The effect recalls looking through those sheets of fancy patterned glass that refract light, suggesting that larger shapes and logics may be embedded, lurking behind the chaotic dazzle.

_____There's a play between the delicate modesty of watercolour and the juggernaut ambition of Barry's project. Watercolour is a tough medium for this brand of hard-edged geometric abstraction. It's time consuming and unforgiving. It demands precision – no room for mistakes. When you look at Barry's paintings, you can't help but consider the contrast between the grinding labour involved and their optical immediacy and vitality.

_____Combining the high-tech and the handmade, Barry conjures a variety of eye-popping effects. In trying to describe her works, I fall back on metaphors. I talk about speed and saturation; frequency, fracture and dilation; radio static, magnetic fields and interference patterns. Showing them in series alerts us to subtle shifts in emphasis and tuning.

Barry's works could be taken at face value, as appealing geometric abstractions, but there's a backstory that prompts us to look deeper. In 2012, while on a McCahon House residency, Barry had a road-to-Damascus experience, an awakening of sorts, and everything changed. She explains: "I softened my gaze. I felt energy, pulsating light-yellow energy, coming into me. I became aware of other presences in the room. They inhabited my body and showed me what to do."

Barry abandoned ideas of artistic agency and intentionality, of conceptualising and problem solving – the backbone of her art-school training. Since then, she has produced work that is "100-percent guided", with every decision directed by those external presences, bit by bit by bit. "I took the visual language I was working with and infused it with something else, an

intelligence that was beyond myself," she says. To casual viewers, perhaps her work didn't change so much, but, for her, its logic, the experience of making it, and its purpose were something new.

Barry's watercolours represent energy fields and are energy fields. When I observe that she doesn't use curves or spirals, she quickly corrects me, explaining that most of the works are based on spirals, on looking down through a spiral, a vortex. She explains: "At any given time, I'm aware of the key energy centres in my body. I feel energy coming through in a strong spiralling current. The chakras are experienced like rotational energy vortices."

Barry's project is a big commitment and required major lifestyle change. She gave up her Massey University art-school teaching job and sold her house to pursue it. "I let go of a lot to focus on the work. I gave myself over completely to something that wants to be articulated. I lived precariously. It's been lonely," she says. For a while, she was itinerant, a housesitter, but these days she flats with her dealer, Jenny Neligan of Bowen Galleries.

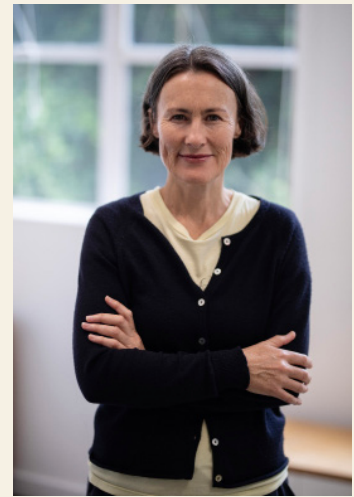
The art is just part of a wider project. In addition to her paintings, Barry does healing energy-activation work on herself and on others – all of it guided. At the Adam, her video *Twelve Minute Movement* (2016) showed her doing energy-activation work as a performance. "For years, my practice has entailed a full day in the studio and then almost the same amount of time after dinner, doing energy-activation work sometimes until 3am", she says. "I've worked on many people in the art world, including writers and curators – you would be surprised."

It can take Barry over two months to complete a single painting, and two years to make a series. The work's long-haul exegesis requires monk-like discipline. Barry works in a small quiet studio in Wellington City Council's Toi Pōneke studio complex, largely free from distractions. The set-up is simple. She works on one painting at a time. When she finishes it, she puts it away and begins the next. She paints sitting at a table, with the paper taped to a board, propped up on an angle. When I visit her in January, a new work is coming to life. She's applying the first colour – filling in all the red bits.

Below: With painstaking care, a new piece takes shape. Opposite page: The artist in her studio.



Introducing Barry's work in a talk, Adam Art Gallery director Tina Barton was anxious to distance her practice both from modernist abstraction and from postmodernism, saying it lay outside both traditions. Clearly, it isn't ironic postmodernism, but it does resonate with the metaphysical ambitions of early modernist painting, when Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian and co. were informed by spiritualism and theosophy. Indeed, Barry's paintings recall all manner of modern-art precedents: pointillism, cubism, orphism, futurism, vorticism... op art. But I take Barton's point. Barry's work doesn't seem to be looking back to them. It's not quoting them, not leaning on them. It doesn't need art history.



Right: Barry also practices energy-activation healing.
Below: One of 12 pieces from The Loom of Time series.

That said, Barry's work does find precedents in three recently discovered pioneer female abstractionists who were spiritualists and mystics: from

Britain, Georgiana Houghton (1814–84); from Sweden, Hilma af Klint (1862–1944); and, from Switzerland, Emma Kunz (1892–1963). None were recognised in their time, but today they are the talk of the art world. Their examples simultaneously erase and enrich the received wisdom of art history. Barry relates to Houghton, with her swirling energy fields; to af Klint, who painted large instructive cycles under instruction from the High Masters; and to Kunz, who developed square-format geometries on graph paper for use in healing rituals.

Barry's paintings are about conducting new energy, new consciousness, into the world. She describes them as charts, teaching aids, healing tools. What do we make of her insistence that she's stepped aside and that others are calling the shots, as we cling to an idea of art as the product of individual artistic intention and sensibility. If we take her at her word, are Barry's works "art"? And does it matter? Perhaps her project transcends art, its contexts and histories, becoming something bigger.

Barry is serious and she's careful with her words. She is disdainful of faddish New Agers and hates talk of mediums and channelling. To her, that suggests communing with the dead – which, she says, has nothing to do with anything. While some will be sceptical of her claims, her work is undeniably compelling. It excites us regardless – it hums. As Barry says, "The energies described in the work are from the universe, and then there is energy that the body emits. You don't have to believe it, you are simply in it, of it, and are it."

