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Caitlin Correa  4 days ago 7 min read



Artist Julia Whitney Barnes

Updated: 3 days ago

**ARTIST
JULIA
WHITNEY
BARNES**



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Studio Visit Artist

Julia Whitney Barnes is an artist living in the Hudson Valley who works in a variety of media from cyanotypes, watercolor, oil paintings, ceramic sculptures, murals, drawings, etchings, and site-specific installations. She has exhibited widely in the United States. She was awarded fellowships from New York State Council on the Arts administered through Arts Mid-Hudson, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Abbey Memorial Fund for Mural Painting/National Academy of Fine Arts, and the Gowanus Public Art Initiative, among others.

Born in Newbury, VT, Julia Whitney Barnes spent two decades in Brooklyn, before moving to Poughkeepsie, NY. She received her BFA from Parsons School of Design and her MFA from Hunter College. Whitney Barnes has created site-specific installations at Arts Brookfield/New York, NY and Brooklyn, NY, the Wilderstein Sculpture Biennial, Rhinebeck, NY; The Trolley Barn/Fall Kill Creative Works, Poughkeepsie, NY; GlenLily Grounds, Newburgh, NY; ArtsWestchester, White Plains, NY; Gowanus Public Arts Initiative, Brooklyn, NY; Space All Over/Fjellerup Bund i Bund & Grund, Fjellerup, Denmark; Lower Manhattan Cultural Council/Sirovitch Senior Center, New York, NY; Brooklyn School of Inquiry, Brooklyn, NY; New York City Department of Transportation, New York, NY; and Figment Sculpture Garden, Governors Island, NY and among other locations.



I approach each growing thing with equal importance regardless of whether it is a weed, rare species, wildflower, or cultivated flower. Most works have several species fused into one composition, often to the point where the exact plants depicted are open to interpretation. Each composition starts as a blue and white print onto watercolor paper and then I work in layers of color. Even the works that appear all blue and white are usually augmented with brushed on media. I am most interested in creating objects that feel both beautiful and mysterious. I want them to be familiar yet slightly outside of time.



1: Tell us a little bit about yourself and your background in the arts.

I was born on an L.L. Bean camping pad on the kitchen floor of a Victorian house in Newbury, Vermont. This largely sums up my childhood. I often work on the floor of my studio and have done many site-specific floor paintings; I've wondered if perhaps I have a natural affinity for the floor due to my auspicious arrival.

At the time, my parents had a small business buying and selling antique cars and stringed instruments. My mother's background is in theology and spirituality and my father is a poet. My parents were part of the 1970s back-to-the-land movement and we moved around a lot for various reasons. I lived all over New England as a child and for high school attended a fine arts program at the Norwich Free Academy in Norwich, CT. It has a unique educational model, and has a museum on the campus, plus an area of rotating exhibitions.

I moved to NYC to attend Parsons School of Design for my BFA and then went on to earn an MFA from Hunter College. After 18 years in the city (mostly in Brooklyn), my photographer husband, Sean Hemmerle, and I moved to Poughkeepsie in 2015. We have a daughter who is five, a son who is almost three and a house that is over a hundred years old.

Pre-motherhood, I spent a few years focused on traveling to various parts of the world and those travels were formative for my future art making. Some of the work that resonated most strongly with me were mosaics made in the last 2,500 years. Being in very different landscapes, like that of Iceland and Greece, also made a lasting impression and I'm grateful I was able to experience so much before travel became more complex. I have always enjoyed splitting my time between making studio work and public art. My murals and installations have been installed in various indoor and outdoor locations in the United States and Europe. One of the projects I have dreamed of doing since I was in undergrad twenty years ago is to design an immersive NYC subway station mosaic. Each year I feel that I am a bit closer to making that possible.

2: What kind of work are you currently making?

Since we moved to the Hudson Valley from Brooklyn six years ago, my work has been much more focused on the natural world. For the past year I've been focused on making works on paper that combine watercolor, gouache, ink and cyanotype. The process feels like a satisfying marriage of painting, printmaking, collage, digital media and camera-less photography. As I've worked in a myriad of mediums over the past two decades, this current body of work is a culmination of a lot of ideas. Part of my process is growing and pressing plants that I manipulate in the photogram process, and also photograph for source imagery.

I combine several species into single compositions, often to the point where the species of plants depicted are open to interpretation. I create unique blue and white cyanotype prints on thick sheets of cotton paper and then paint in many layers of watercolor, gouache and ink.

I am most interested in creating objects that feel both beautiful and mysterious. I want each painting to be familiar yet slightly outside of time. These works symbolize resilience to me. I want the content of the work to be a powerful experience, not only because of the historical moment in which they were made, but in that the process speaks to a kind of gutting and reconstituting. There's an object, then a ghost of the object, and then the reassertion of the object. The final work isn't the object, but instead, a record of my will to bring it back. And that is more satisfying, more hopeful, than had the original object appeared back on the paper.

3: What is a day like in the studio for you?

I work in my studio every day. Even if it's only for 15 minutes, that consistency feels important to stay in the flow. My studio is in the attic of our hundred year old house. After five years of various projects up here, we finished the space last winter and I have been super productive since then. A third of my studio has been taken over by my children but that allows me to spend more time in my studio so it was worth the loss of space. It's fun to see what they create (though they make HUGE messes).

I carefully arrange elaborate cyanotype compositions at night and utilize long exposures under natural or UV light to create the prints. I also create digital renderings in Photoshop and Illustrator and turn them into negatives to use in this work. Once the unique cyan imagery is fused, I meticulously paint the exposed watercolor paper with multiple layers of watercolor, ink and gouache.

I work on many pieces at once and rotate them out of sight in my large flat files when I'm feeling frustrated or need a change of pace. Some of my cyanotype paintings are all blue and white and some are painted in full color, so I like to go back and forth working with these different palettes. I do my most concentrated work at night once my children are in bed. I'm naturally a night owl, but I am looking forward to having more daylight hours of studio time once outside childcare and in-person school are happening again. I include my children in some studio activities like collecting, photographing, shaping and pressing plants, and also making color studies while they paint or draw. Experiencing the world with them is equally inspiring and distracting.

4: What are you looking at right now and/or reading?

I'm collaborating with the Shaker Historic Site and Albany International Airport and am reading "The Shaker's Private Art," a book about gift drawings plus skimming through a few other books on Shaker culture. The Shakers sold the land to the county to facilitate the project and when it opened in 1928 it was America's first municipal airport. I am excited to cross-pollinate the audience that experiences both places. I will be collecting specimens from the historic Shaker garden, which was long used to grow medicinal herbs and I have been studying the uses for each plant. The signage on each plant includes its common name, Latin name and the purpose for which it was grown.

I also read many books on flowers and art. A few recent favorites that are nearby include, "Say it with Flowers, Viennese Flower Painting from Waldmüller to Klimt," "Flower: Exploring the World in Bloom," and "Frances Palmer, Life in the Studio." Palmer's book has photos of her fantastic ceramics and garden and also has recipes in the back. Flipping through it always makes me hungry, and I want to grow gorgeous plants to arrange in porcelain vases.

5: Where can we find more of your work?

<https://www.juliawhitneybarnes.com>

<https://www.instagram.com/juliawhitneybarnes/>

<https://www.tiktok.com/@juliawhitneybarnes>

I'm bad at saying no and somehow have five shows opening in May...

I'm excited about are my upcoming show, "Propagation" with Kenise Barnes Fine Art, on view from May 8 – June 20 in Kent, CT. The show is at the gallery's new space along with five other artists whose work I love. I also have a triptych of cyanotype landscape paintings in the exhibition "Sunrise Sunset" at the Albany International Airport from May 15 – August 30 in Albany, NY. The gallery is open to the public and does not require going through airport security. One of my cyanotype paintings will be included in "Together apART: Creating During COVID" at ArtsWestchester from May 7 – August 1 in White Plains, NY. You can also see my

work in "Continuum" in the Perspective Gallery, Whitney Center (A program of Ely Center of Contemporary Art) from May 15 – September 1 in Hamden, CT. Four of my small works are included in "Flourish" from May 1 – 31 at Lark & Key Gallery in Charlotte, NC.

My work is also represented by Carrie Haddad Gallery in Hudson, NY, where I just had a show of a dozen works this spring.









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