

Rising from the Ashes

Elizabeth Barlow Captures Hope on Canvas

BY RENEE BRINCKS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY ETHAN PINES

Carmel artist Elizabeth Barlow creates "Portraits in Absentia." She tells stories of her clients' lives by focusing her art on a meaningful personal object.





Bob Ellis lost his home in the Tubbs Fire in Sonoma in 2017, and soon after, his wife Jane Bernstein passed away. Ellis commissioned Barlow to paint a rose shrub that survived the fire.

putting paintbrush to canvas, Barlow presented him with a six-foot commission called "The Phoenix Rose." Fourteen flowers in shades of pale pink and peach bloom across vibrant emerald leaves and a rich, blue-sky backdrop.

"It's filled with luminous roses at various stages of opening, and they have this dramatic way of changing color. She's surrounded them with beautiful leaves and an amazing-colored sky, which is not so different from



Hydrangeas, roses and wisteria flourished on the Sonoma-area property where Bob Ellis and Jane Bernstein lived as the Tubbs Fire took hold in 2017. One evening, with flames roaring across the surrounding vineyards, a friend encouraged them to depart for safer ground.

By the time the Tubbs Fire ended, it had scorched nearly 37,000 acres and thousands of homes—including the one owned by Ellis and

Bernstein. Six months later, Bernstein passed away. As Ellis mourned the loss of his wife, he set about rescuing and repotting a few scorched plants that he thought might have survived the flames. He was especially hopeful about a unique shrub rose that had long grown against a stone wall in the yard.

While discussing the fate of the cherished rose with his friend, Carmel artist Elizabeth Barlow, Ellis asked if she would commemorate it in a painting. This March, six months after first

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the way our Sonoma sky looks on a good day,” Ellis says. “Elizabeth has created a wonderful version of this rose that I can enjoy, and it’s a great reminder of how you can find your way back from the tragedies and terrible things that happen.”

The piece is an example of Barlow’s signature Portrait in Absentia style of work. Rather than painting her clients and their families, she shines a light on their treasured personal belongings—

coins, toy cars, books, shoes, skates and, of course, flowers—to tell a significant story about their lives.

To outline plans for the Ellis painting, Barlow sifted through hundreds of photos of the rose that were captured both before and after the fire.

“Instead of creating a literal portrait of the original plant, the painting presents an idea about this rose bush,” she says. “The narrative of the painting is one of beauty coming out of

devastation. The rose literally grows from the ashes of this devastating fire. And, the painting will be installed in the new home that he’s building, which is also a symbol of hope emerging from tragedy.”

After Barlow and Ellis discussed initial design concepts, she ordered a custom easel big enough to accommodate such a large canvas and went to work. She painted each individual rose first—some are the size of dinner plates—





"The Phoenix Rose" is a six-foot piece with 14 flowers blossoming against a vibrant blue sky. It will hang in Ellis' new Sonoma home, on a bedroom wall.

and then tackled the detailed leaves and sky. Though she refrained from sharing full photos of the completed piece until Ellis saw the final product, Barlow did post work-in-progress images on social media.

"I had so many positive responses. I think that people want to see things that give some sense of possibility in the world. We're so consumed by the news, and we certainly need to be informed and aware, but I also think people are deeply touched when they see something that is just

uplifting for the spirit," she says.

Crews are currently working on a new house that will sit near the site of Ellis' former home.

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He anticipates a fall completion date. Barlow's painting will be installed on a long bedroom wall, facing a view of the sunset.

As he settles in, Ellis will decide whether to

replant his original rose bush in the yard or keep it in a pot on the deck. He'll also determine the best location for a few of his wife's hydrangeas that survived the fire.

"I was always more into roses and she was more into hydrangeas, but this particular rose was one that we marveled at together," Ellis says. "I think she'd be very pleased to know

that it's still living with me."

For images and information on Elizabeth Barlow's work, including a photograph of "The Phoenix Rose," please visit www.elizabethbarlowart.com. ■