

Curator Angie Barry found her niche in art

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Art winds and winds its way into our lives by mysterious means. Angie Barry, curator at the Gadsden Arts Center and Museum, knows this all too well. She is surrounded by art at every turn, from her 2-year-old son's drawings that fill her desk to the gallery exhibitions she designs while abuzz with creative energy.

Her home is as carefully curated as her workplace with one of her favorite pieces acquired from John Lytle Wilson. The former Tallahassee artist was commissioned by her husband's friend to paint a piece for Barry's wedding and features two robots being soldered together by a monkey.

Another painting serendipitously found its way back into her possession after having hung in the airport for many years. It was one of her own, a self-portrait of her first-grade self, that had been framed, matted and returned to her one day. She vividly remembers being frustrated at age six by her rendering with its un-proportional arms, but laughs now at how detail orientated she was in meticulously painting pig-tails in her hair and bracelets on her wrists.

"Art is part of human expression and I can't imagine life without it," said Barry. "Something about making it with your hands helps your brain to process in such a different way. I think it connects us with each other."

Getting hands-on with art had always been her favorite activity, though it wasn't until high school that she considered pursuing it seriously. At Florida State University, she majored in theater for a semester with her sights on set design, but quickly realized the intense atmosphere wasn't for her. Instead, she found her groove in the art history department, and with the full support of her parents, graduated with her bachelor's degree in the subject.

A career-affirming internship to the UK in 2005 opened Barry up to the museum field. She cataloged and digitized over 100 years of exhibitions in the south London gallery where she was immersed in both history and visual masterpieces. Her manager taught Barry a great deal about maintaining a collection as they visited the city's many museum offerings.

"I always loved being around artists and creating art," explains Barry. "In art history, you have to take art classes, but I liked it more for the therapy aspect. I knew I wanted to do something in the arts, and there are so many different avenues you can go down that are creative and still hold onto your artistic sentiment."

Upon returning to Tallahassee, she



GADSDEN ARTS CENTER & MUSEUM.

Angie Barry, Curator of Exhibitions & Collections at the Gadsden Arts Center & Museum.

volunteered her time as a docent in local museums. It was a mutually beneficial position where Barry learned how to give lectures from the other docents, mostly retired schoolteachers, while she gave them lessons about art history.

She returned to Florida State to earn her master's in arts administration and was offered her current position as curator of exhibitions and the collection by supervisor and mentor, Grace Robinson. Barry credits Robinson for teaching her to work at the highest level of standards while giving her the support she needed to grow and exercise her eye for crafting visual designs.

"I get to do what everyone is coming to see," says Barry, who feels lucky to love her work. "It really is creative because there are endless possibilities of what you can put where and how you can make it look. I always joke that I don't actually get to enjoy the artwork until much later because I'm looking at how is it going to relate to another piece or fit in the gallery."

In preparation for a show, she loves conversing with the artists, her co-workers, and fellow museum colleagues to get a sense of an exhibition's direction. Her deskwork includes researching, organizing, and typing up what reading materials and text panels will impart, but the majority of her work happens on her feet in the space. When the artwork arrives she lays everything out on blankets, moving pieces around as in a giant game of chess, finding groupings based on artist, style, colors, or subject matter.

Barry acts on eight-years of curating instincts; placing pieces that she believes will aesthetically co-exist together

while inviting and challenging viewers' interpretations. She oversees the 57 pieces in the permanent collection, as well as the multiple galleries that feature children's, artist guild's, and visiting artists' works.

"Every day I do something different," smiles Barry. "I'm always learning about new artists, different types of art, and new techniques, which is really neat. I love working with the artists and learning more about them."

Not only does she hang the artwork, but adjusts overhead lighting, paints baseboards, and can often be seen running around with her trusty hammer. With the museum transformed from a 100-year old hardware store, Barry oversees its upkeep and is continually enchanted by its many quirks. This includes a giant metal safe in the main gallery that was too heavy to be moved from the former cash register area. More renovations to the building will yield an interactive art studio and additional gallery space, and a recent accreditation added "museum" to the center's title thanks to community support.

Barry feels her staff is honoring their mission to improve the quality of life in the region through art education with programs geared towards children and seniors. One unique offering is annual "art trips," serving as a fundraiser for the museum's permanent collection. Trips allow Barry to accompany patrons to places like Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Arkansas' Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, and even the art museums of Havana.

"They may be very isolated but the

IF YOU GO

What: Collector's Choice: Inside the Hearts and Minds of Collectors Exhibition
When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, through October 1st
Where: Gadsden Arts Center & Museum, 13 N. Madison Street, Quincy, FL
Cost: Free, guided tours available
Contact: For more information, call 850-627-5023 or visit <http://www.gadsdenarts.org/>.



culture and art being produced in Cuba is amazing," said Barry of the experience. "It's been neat because not only do we get to take people to these places but I learn so much. I get to see all these different types of exhibitions and how they're installing their artwork."

In fact, she says the current Collector's Choice show was inspired by a trip to the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens in Jacksonville. She put the word out in the Quincy and Tallahassee area to find local collectors' treasures and was generously invited into local art aficionados' homes to hear the stories behind their artwork. Barry loved hearing Fred and Lucy Harris' story. The couple had agreed not to gift Christmas presents that year after having bought a new farm, but neither kept the promise. Lucy bought Fred pants, and he gave her a commissioned painting by Molly Mabe.

More stories from "the hearts and minds of collectors" can be found in the museum's online catalog and read alongside each piece, which will show in the museum's main gallery through Oct. 1. No matter how pieces become intertwined in the lives of the museum's visitors and community, Barry is proud that free admission gives anyone who wants to experience art the opportunity.

"My biggest goal is that people know that it's for them," said Barry. "Just because you look at something and either don't like it or don't understand it, that doesn't mean that it's not for you. Art can be anything and that's what I love about it."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).