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[The Eye of the Beholder: An interview with artist Steven Barbash](#)

[[Text by Mike Berlin](#)] [[Photo gallery by Jake Forney at our flickr](#)] [Steven Barbash](#) fires off his first wisecrack — of many — as I’m welcomed into his serene Ludlowville home. “Would you like the fifty-cent tour? Sundays are free.”

Barbash is the focus of the [Johnson Museum’s](#) new exhibit, “Shared Experience: The Steven Barbash Collection,” showcasing pieces that the 75-year-old artist has acquired over the years from colleagues, mentors, protégés, neighbors, and family members. The public display spans more than 50 years of Barbash’s varied and tenured life in the art world.

It’s difficult to comprehend just how the works on loan to the Johnson Museum could fit into Barbash’s house. His works, and the numerous other pieces he’s collected, battle it out, frame-by-frame, for a rare commodity in the artist’s two-floor house: wall space. Despite the 53 missing pieces currently sitting in the Johnson Museum, the décor of Barbash’s house is overwhelmingly full and rich. And immediately, the prospect of a real fifty-cent tour through his live-in museum seems like a steal in a culture where an artistic experience seldom comes without a cost.

“You know what,” says Barbash. “We could’ve filled up another room if we wanted to, there’s so much stuff here from over the years, the greedy bastard that I am.”

He says things like this, the “greedy bastard” bit, to downplay some of the more impressive aspects of his life. His collection, which includes works by great American artists like Louis Schanker, Gabor Peterdi, and Michael Mazur, didn’t come from throwing down at Christie’s or Sotheby’s either.

“It’s very different presenting the collection of an artist, as opposed to the collection of a layperson collector,” says Andrew C. Weislogel, Curator of the Barbash exhibit and Associate Curator and Master Teacher at the Johnson.

“Because the reason why, and the method through which he obtained all these objects is, in some cases, very different from the way a regular collector would do it. These are his friends that he’s exchanging work with.”

And true to form, even before Barbash begins discussing the exhibit, the artists' names are casually mentioned. Gillian, Zevi, Michael, Evan. They're all introduced into conversation as friends - complete with memorable quips and stories — before artists.

The brightest, largest, and initially, most dynamic work on display at the Johnson is Barbash's *The City*, composed of three six-foot-high color woodcuts. Framed in each panel, train cars, cranes, and fire escape-adorned apartments are stacked upon each other, almost two-dimensionally, bathed in bold reds, blues, and yellows. "For me, I see this and it's like the bustle and energy of post-war New York," says Weislogel. "It's New York flexing its muscles and the big buildings going up."

At 19, Barbash was working with an architectural renderer through an outside field period that Bard College then required of their undergraduate students. "I learned more on the construction of painting from him than I learned from any artist," says Barbash, leading me to the original pine boards in his basement. "And he said, 'I have an idea. I would like to do a woodcut like you showed me. Could you do one six-foot square? I'll mount it between Plexiglas and use it like stained glass.' I said, 'I'll give it a shot.' And he gave me the princely sum of \$500 for it, which was a fortune."

The piece, Barbash's first commission, sits in-between two works: Gabor Peterdi's 1959 etching, *The Big Winter*, and Louis Schanker's *Untitled*, an abstract painting completed in 1950. The placement of the trio is strategic, indicative of two student-teacher relationships. Barbash's formal training at Bard College (under Schanker), and later, Yale University (under Peterdi and Josef Albers), naturally shaped his development as an artist. But at the time, he found himself and those around him going against the stylistic grain of the late 50s and early 60s.

"He came of age, artistically, at a time when abstract expressionism was the dominant paradigm. And yet, he and the artists that he trained with at Yale all remained pretty resolutely figural in their art. And that was kind of a bold decision at that time," says Weislogel, who is quick to point out similarities in Barbash's collecting. "We wanted to highlight the counter trend in his own art and his collecting where most of the things that he's gone on to collect, regardless of the origin or where he met the people — and there's a lot of different chapters in his life that are represented in the gallery — have been innovative but figural."

In this vein, Evan Summer, one of Barbash's protégés in the early 70s during his teaching position at SUNY Cortland (1970-1999), is heavily featured in the exhibit. His etchings and collography — a technique that mixes collage and printmaking — touch upon figural representation and linear geometry, but also contain an intricate play between shading and use of light, like many other artists shown alongside.

This would include the many works of Michael Mazur (a Yale colleague and close friend) that are on display. Mazur's *Boiler Room #2*, a 1961 etching in relief and intaglio, uses similar lines and striations to create the minute details of the Yale nether room, while drawing attention to particular focal point with negative white space. In the bottom frame of the picture, the caption, "For wonderful Steve from Mike," is written.

Barbash also acquired Mazur's chilling 1965 portfolio, *Images from a Locked Ward*, in a trade-off. The five lithographs currently in the Johnson are filled with spectral, faceless figures, some wandering corridors that lack a definitive end, others lying on beds that look disproportionate and cluttered, and one with bound hands, struggling and contorting to break free. The works are uncomfortably honest and stunning.

Other parts of Barbash's collection appeal to the whimsical, though still concern the figural, like a humorous 2002 portfolio of etchings, *Little Known Unknown Birds of the World Volume VII*, by Zevi Blum.

A former Cornell professor, Blum used Cortland's cutting edge printing facilities, striking up a friendship with Barbash in the process. Blum's portfolio takes a playful stab at the world of bird watching — of which Barbash enjoys — by pairing up finely detailed, somewhat preposterous etchings of the "Greater Groingazer" and "Operatic Hermit," each accompanied with a guide-like description, mocking the language central to the binocular hobby.

Another familiar face in Barbash's collection is Gillian Pederson-Krag, one of his close friends and neighbors in Ludlowville. The coloration in "Landscape #16" (1979), an etching of two goddess-like statues reigning over ancient ruins, is particularly inventive and advanced, using shade of brown and pale green to create contrast between foreground and sky. Pederson-Krag's etchings also stand out amidst the predominantly black-and-white prints of the exhibit.

"He has dozens of her prints, he's an avid collector of her work," says Wieslogel. "In the way that he explains, it's that admiration and envy thing. She does things, she makes types of marks on her printmaking that really makes him scratch his head and really keeps him engaged."

Admiration and envy relate to almost everything in Barbash's collection. When asked about that concept, Barbash says, "Sheer covetousness! I love having these things! I love living with them! But it's a different kind of covetousness. It's like having a great book around. The reaction and how you work with the pieces that you collect changes all the time."

Barbash has a tendency to, sometimes offhandedly, impart deeply profound wisdom about the art world. His home is the hyper exhibit, and walking through it with him — foot by foot, piece by piece — brings about more knowledge than a headphone-guided tour through the Met. Having taught for 40 years, it's his second nature to inspire with stories, and conversation rapidly fluctuates between the anecdotal and the technical.

Barbash is wearing a Johnson Museum t-shirt with the back slogan, "Art happens." Perhaps this simple saying relates to a self-awareness or modesty. When talking about his career, Barbash tends to preface any important museum he's shown at with, "...and I'll name-drop." He also calls himself "hyperbolic" and "emphatic" when describing friends who he considers Important American Artists. It's an endearing habit and relates to Barbash's unique sense of value.

"Unfortunately, financially, what I collect now is terribly out of style," he says. "I collect things because I like them, or I like the people... I think they're doing something interesting."

If anything, Barbash's collection — of artwork and experience — is beyond interesting; it's expansive and full. But even then, the 75-year-old artist will continue to be enchanted by art and its possibilities.

“Michael gave a talk years ago and the thing I always remember he said was, ‘The really serious thing art does is expand the imagination.’ It sucks you into it in certain ways, usually by doing things that you know you can't do, or you're amazed that anybody can do,” says Barbash. “Why are we so taken by pictures, the cultural ethos of which we not only don't care about, we might not even like? Art is extraordinary because, for a time, it makes you intensely believe in things you know you don't believe in.”

‘Shared Experience: The Steve Barbash Collection’ will be up at the Johnson Museum through Sept. 14.