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Red to the Core: The Work of Barbara  
Astman by Georgiana Uhlyarik

Portfolio: Portraits and Conversations  
with Empty Vessels by Barbara Astman  
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by Georgiana Uhlyarik

# Red to the Core The Work of Barbara Astman

Previous spread  
Barbara Astman  
Selection from *Portraits and  
Conversations with Empty Vessels*  
2016–19  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CORKIN  
GALLERY (TORONTO)

There is a lot of magic that happens in the alchemy of the light, the photo paper, the object, and this total unknown. It is the unknown that really interests me. I have to trust that something will happen.

—BARBARA ASTMAN

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Astman, interview by Georgiana Uhlyarik, January 18, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

**BARBARA ASTMAN IS DEEP IN RED AGAIN.** “I had to get to this oxblood tone to feel like I’m getting it. Part of me is in the red.”<sup>1</sup> She is talking about her most recent body of work, *Portraits and Conversations with Empty Vessels* (2016–19), as we look through a dozen boxes of new prints in her studio. The new prints are photograms, created in a darkroom by projecting light through a filter that produces the red colour onto a clear glass bottle or a group of bottles that lie on photosensitive paper. The resulting images are silhouettes of these vessels: a chicken, a hand, a shoe, a violin, a skull. By using the vessel as a negative, the glass appears transformed in the image into its molten state, as though heated near the point of liquefaction. Just as in a flame the hottest parts are yellow and the soot and smoke are black, so, in the photograms, the thickest parts of the bottle where less light has penetrated are recorded as a deep yellow/orange, while the rest of the bottle is a dirty red, streaked with black. These are images of fire in a pool of dry blood. They seduce and bewilder.

Astman has been collecting these clear, mostly figurative bottles since 2016, instinctively pursuing her fascination with empty vessels. Among the earliest of human technological innovations, glass is a material that Astman has worked with in a number of public art commissions. These vessels, however, which once held liquor, perfume or other liquids, are for holding in your hands and, as such, they are at once both practical and symbolic. The artist’s collection began by chance—as is so often the case with her serial work—when friends gave her a Madonna-shaped bottle she had admired. Once ensconced in her studio, this bottle launched her quest for other vessels. Collecting things, or “curiosity-driven research,” as she describes it, has always informed her work, and, eventually, dozens of these bottles lined the long windowsills in her

studio. Surrounded by the randomly grouped bottles, she studied the peculiar shapes of the molded glass, the way the light passed through them, and the emptiness they hold. “I like the strangeness of them,” she notes. “The empty space within the vessel interests me as much as the shape of the vessel.”<sup>2</sup>

Astman began her investigation of the bottles by photographing and scanning them. But it wasn’t until she used them as negatives to create photograms that she discovered what she had been seeking. The process “breathed life into a static object, translating object into image.”<sup>3</sup> She experimented with various colours and found that, as has been the case in earlier works, it was the colour “red” that she favoured. When she first saw the prints come out of the darkroom, she was astounded. They create a feeling of wonder similar to that which viewers must have felt when they saw, for example, the precise details of algae made visible in the cyanotypes created by Anna Atkins nearly one hundred and eighty years ago. “There is a lot of magic that happens in the alchemy of the light, the photo paper, the object, and this total unknown. ... I have to trust that something will happen.”<sup>4</sup> For Astman, this latest series began like all of the others before it, when the artist allowed herself to burrow deeply into her core, giving her imagination free play, remaining absolutely open to the unexpected. “My interests come from somewhere deep inside of me. It is what drives a lot of my work.”<sup>5</sup>

Astman’s artistic journey has been guided by a practiced intuition and marked by unconventional approaches and breakthroughs. Curious about new technologies, not inhibited by external expectations, and attuned to the materiality of the world, she is propelled by a conviction in the validity of her own imagination

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<sup>6</sup> See Georgiana Uhlyarik, "Performing Private Alchemy" in *Barbara Astman: I As Artifact* (London, Ontario: McIntosh Gallery, 2014): 11–12.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *Wondereur* 80, 2014, at [www.wondereur.com/artists/barbara-astman](http://www.wondereur.com/artists/barbara-astman). Accessed March 18, 2020.

and viewpoint. For more than forty-five years, she has defined and embodied a sustained examination of lived experience that defies categorization.

Astman never formally studied photography. Among the first images she made were single photo-booth portraits in which she holds in each hand an uncut strip of photo-booth portraits of herself. Some, she has coloured in with markers; to others, she has added star stickers. These images are documents of private performances in a sequestered public space, recorded sequentially in palm-sized photographs. Astman literally holds her multiplied self in her hands. Thus, she is both the subject and the object, the creator and the created. In the classic tradition of portraiture, where subjects hold and are surrounded by objects as attributes of their status and ambition, Astman's root attribute is her own image.<sup>6</sup>

The artist's early work is characterized by a playful audacity, a confidence that the camera will reveal to her, in a more direct way, "things that I'm imagining. If you can imagine it, then you can start to use any materials that you feel like, and combine them. ... I think it's just kind of the chaos of my own mind pulling these together."<sup>7</sup> In addition to her photo-booth self-portraits, Astman experimented in the early 1970s with appliquéés, heat transfers and photo

linens combined with fabrics, quilting, hand-written texts and painting. In other words, she created photographs as objects. One such work, *Family* (1972–73), she carried in her pocket while traversing the city of Toronto. She also created larger sensory pieces using images of her family, such as *Bert and George in the Living Room* (1973). In this work, she utilized two colour snapshots of her parents sitting on their couch, with family photographs, including their wedding portrait, hanging on the wall behind them. The images are embedded in a velvet quilt covered in decals of butterflies that rebelliously flutter across the border of the fabric onto the photographs. In a surrealist gesture, the artist has transported her parents into an animated fairy-tale: the doubling of their portrait is echoed in the repeated symmetry of the butterfly wings, so that the whole composition resembles both an open storybook and a trippy conceptual grid.

More poignant still are Astman's self-portraits from this period, many of which are accented with red elements. The red fruit and flower stickers and even, in one instance, an American flag incorporated in these works are early precursors of the spray-painted red objects in the iconic, life-size Ektacolour murals of her *Red Series* (1980–81). In the bacchanalian *Strawberry Cherry Queen* (1973),



*Doll Piece Family* (1973) by Barbara Astman. Hand-tinted silver gelatin prints sewn in plastic. Photo: Barbara Astman. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CORKIN GALLERY (TORONTO)



Untitled, *Self-Portrait with Apple and Cherries* (1975) by Barbara Astman. Silver gelatin print with stickers and plastic laminate. Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto) COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CORKIN GALLERY (TORONTO)

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Nauman, *Self Portrait as a Fountain*, 1966–67, printed 1970, suite of eleven photographs, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/57149>.

<sup>9</sup> Astman, interview, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Uhlyarik, "Private Alchemy," 12.

<sup>11</sup> Excerpt from an explanatory video created by Barbara Astman to accompany the installation, *The Emergence of Feminism: Changing the Course of Art*, co-curated by Barbara Astman and Georgiana Uhlyarik. The installation was part of the exhibition *Canadian Art in the 1960s and 1970s Through the Lens of Coach House Press*, held at the Art Gallery of Ontario, November 2008 to June 2010.

a wreath of ripe red cherry and strawberry stickers embraces the artist's naked upper torso, and the figure's right hand is raised in a regal wave. Unflinching, the figure stares back at the viewer, claiming her image as her own. "I was influenced by performance artists. People moving. People performing. Seeing Bruce Nauman be the fountain.<sup>8</sup> ... That piece really resonated with me—performing an act that had so much meaning in it but was so simple. ... It helped me make that leap in my work."<sup>9</sup>

*Barbara Coming ... Barbara Going ...* (1973), created in the same year as *Strawberry Cherry Queen*, is a double, full-figure self-portrait presented from front and back. The subject's hand is raised to her forehead, in another royal gesture that, in this work, has become exaggerated and wistful. The cut-out figures are surrounded by stickers of flowers; a blue-bird sticker is perched on the figure's shoulder, and the assemblage is covered in a clear, plastic laminate, shaped like a butterfly. The title is included in the work in capital letters, as is the artist's signature, prefaced by "Self Portrait." In the related images *Untitled, Self-Portrait with Rose* (1975) and *Untitled, Self-Portrait with Apple and Cherries* (1975), both also constructed using appliqué and lamination, Astman covers the female face with stickers: in one case, a rose, and, in the other, an apple (flowers and fruit representing beauty and fecundity). These pieces, created little more than a decade after René Magritte painted his familiar portrait of a face obscured by a green apple, are not an homage to his work. Rather, in replacing her own face with a red apple, Astman

makes explicit both the objectification of the female body and the imperative toward public masks assigned to efface our private selves. The apple in her work is a heavily burdened fruit, a warning of sorts, no matter how sweet and innocent that sticker might at first appear.<sup>10</sup>

In an explanatory video created by Astman for the installation *The Emergence of Feminism: Changing the Course of Art* (2008) at the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto), the artist recalled her relationship to feminist art in the 1970s:

"Dear Barbara, I was thinking about you ...," she says, referencing her well-known series from this period. "My early visual influences were still mainly American at the time, looking at hybrid artists such as Betty Hahn and Bea Nettles who worked with photography in a sculptural way and from a female perspective—using "handiwork," like quilting/sewing and finding in the family album and diary entries their source of inspiration. I don't remember ever consciously knowing I was a part of a bigger feminist movement in culture; I just did what felt right for me and tried to stay focused on what I wanted to say with my art. My art became my voice, speaking a different language that I knew others would instinctively understand."<sup>11</sup>

The use of handiwork and a diaristic approach are evident in *A Short Story about Winter and Me* (1975). It is among the first of her works to feature

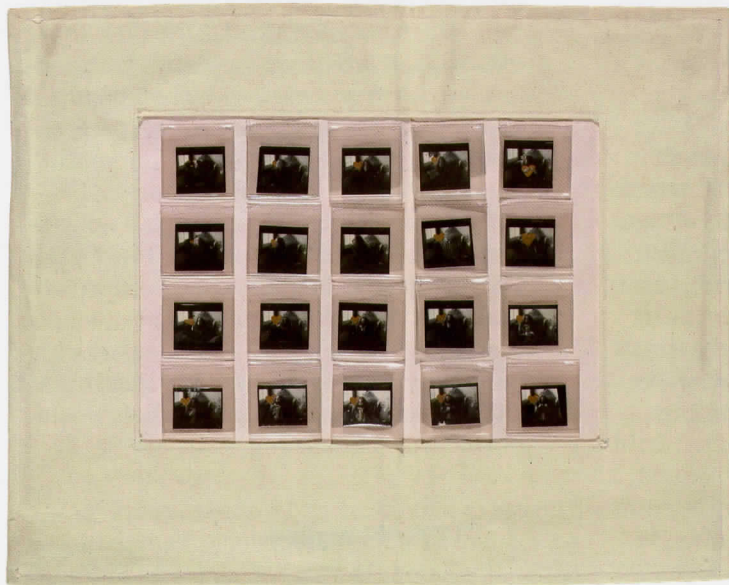
<sup>12</sup> Barbara Astman, *Artists with Their Work* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Astman, interview by Georgiana Uhlyarik, June 26, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Liz Wylie, *Barbara Astman: Personal Persona: A 20-year Survey* (Hamilton: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1995): 15.

text and images—a strategy that has underpinned Astman’s work for many years. “Language, through the use of words and symbols, reinforces my explorations of memory,” Astman once stated.<sup>12</sup> Working primarily in series, she has used the tension between image and text to explore the ways in which memory and desire are constructed. In *A Short Story ...*, she photographed herself in the sunroom of a house she had rented one winter on Lake Ontario. She cut out twenty images from a contact sheet, placed each image in a plastic pouch, and sewed each pouch to a lightly painted pink canvas, creating a grid reminiscent of a storyboard. The canvas she sewed into a larger canvas window frame, much like a pillowcase. In the photographs, she is slowly putting on more layers to keep warm. She recalls that the lake did not freeze that year and that she was fascinated

*A Short Story about Winter and Me* (1975) by Barbara Astman. Silver gelatin prints with gold leaf, paint, canvas and plastic. Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto)  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CORKIN GALLERY (TORONTO)



by the activities of the ducks on the lake, which signaled to her hopefulness in winter.<sup>13</sup> She painted and inset a gold heart in most of the images. Underneath each image pouch, she included handwritten text that is revealed only as the viewer lifts each flap. It reads:

a short story complete on this page / about me / and winter. / on Lake Ontario / in my heart / a quick fantasy / the ducks / survived the winter / and me too / I hate to be cold / in the winter / here on the lake / ... / I prepare to get warm / but the lake is so cold / the ducks will survive / but i'm not sure I will / now / ... / here on the lake, in winter.

The candour of these early portraits was characterized by curator Liz Wylie as “among the first that any of us saw that was unabashedly female. With the personal, private feeling of entries in diaries or journals, or items pasted into scrapbooks, Astman’s images were intimate and appealing, but also amazingly brazen and confident. ... It is important at least to attempt to mentally reconstruct how exciting and radical this work was, back in 1974.”<sup>14</sup> Now, twenty-five years since Wylie’s writing, it is possible to recognize in Astman’s early work core veins of her artistic practice. Throughout the last four-and-a-half decades, she has pushed the limits of the unique print of the instant camera in her commitment to low-tech methods, working through the predetermined grid, the combination of image and text, the impetus to perform, the implicit narrative in sequencing, and, most importantly, the self-exploration that fuels it all.

Astman has recruited new technologies, using them in unconventional ways to express her vision of the world. When the newly developed Xerox 6500 colour copier and SX-70 Polaroid became more widely available in the mid-1970s,



*Untitled, I was thinking about you ...* (1979–80) by Barbara Astman  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CORKIN GALLERY (TORONTO)

<sup>15</sup> Astman was coordinator of the Colour Xerox Artists' Program at Visual Arts Ontario, 1977–83.

she began to use them to expand her visual vocabulary and extend the kaleidoscopic narrative structure of her images, creating two experimental bodies of work that are significant precursors to the work of the early 1980s that has come to define her career. An active advocate of the expressive potential of this new machinery, she was the only woman featured in *Colour Xerography*, an innovative exhibition held at the Art Gallery of Ontario in the fall of 1976, one of the first such exhibitions in the world.<sup>15</sup> In large, composite murals such as *David Craven and*

*Art History* (1975) and *Connie and the Flowering Annuals* (1975–76), she seemingly transported friends, lovers and herself across time and space. Each of these colourful murals is composed of thirty letter-size sheets of paper arranged in a five-by-six grid. This arrangement allowed her to significantly increase the size of her work.

Working at this larger scale was a critical new feature of Astman's work, propelling her photography beyond its customary limits to a size relegated until then only to painting. In her first series using the Polaroid camera, *Untitled (Visual Narrative Series)* (1978–79), she continued her exploration of the large-scale format. Polaroid film offered an immediate, unique image, saturated colour, a smooth surface lacking grain, and space to add text. Each of the twenty-three works in the series is made up of six Polaroid images organized in two horizontal rows. The grid has been reshot and printed as a 122 x 152.5 cm Ektacolour mural. The images in each work are three-quarter portraits of the same person—the artist or one of her friends—in a single interior setting, photographed in what appears to be a quick sequence of interrupted moments. Each image is accompanied by a short text, typed on the print in the white strip below the image. Playing with caption conventions and frustrating readers' expectations, the text confounds more than it reveals. The tone of the narration is inconsistent, shifting in some works between the melodramatic and the disaffected. Events are alluded to, emotions nearly flare, resolutions are fleeting. Can we truly speak to one another? Can we ever be understood by the other?

The gestures, postures and expressions of the figure also shift from image to image in a way that is disquieting. The one consistent feature is that the figure, emotionally absorbed, is looking directly into the camera, expressing an urgent need to communicate. Ultimately, the elusive narrative of the sequenced, captioned images underscores the





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fundamental isolation of individuals in society. In the *Visual Narrative Series*, the spirited charm of Astman's previous explorations has shifted into a consideration of the distance between us and the impossibility of truly being known to one another as the unsettling condition at the core of human existence.

In the series that followed, the much-celebrated *Untitled, I was thinking about you ...* (1979–80), Astman continued her exploration of narrative. In each of these startling, life-size images, the artist stands in front of a drop cloth (which is usually red or blue), communicating with her hands and often holding enigmatic objects—a red shoe, a spoon, a light bulb. She has typed over the image, impressing into it a matrix of words that are just barely legible.

Each text is a fragmented letter to someone in her life: dear ira ..., dear karyn ..., dear harvey ... I was thinking about you. The narrative's meaning is elusive—just out of reach. Astman's reputation was extended far beyond Toronto when, in 1980, Loverboy commissioned work based on this series for the cover of their debut album. The popularity of the Canadian rock band meant that Astman's work, with its seductive fusion of Polaroid image and text, entered a wider cultural context. Her engagement with pop culture and mass media imagery has continued to be a generative force in her practice.

Astman's vision crystalized when she allowed herself to abandon written language and to fully immerse herself in the colour "red," both literally and psychically. In the enthralling *Red*



Selections from *Red Series* (1980–81)  
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 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CORKIN  
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<sup>16</sup> Astman, interview, 2019.

*Series*, narrative has become unintelligible. Once again, the artist has used herself as the model, printing Polaroid images as large-scale Ektacolor murals, matching her own wrist size with that in the final print. In the images, her life-size figure gesticulates with and is surrounded by common objects that have been spray-painted bright scarlet. The colour has the quality of freshly applied nail polish: shiny, opaque and plastic. The red objects encircle the figure, commandeering the colour of her lipstick into the scarlet swirl. Astman is performing the objects' function unconstrained by their intended use: This is how you water a pineapple. This is how you hold a ball. This is how you talk on the telephone and hold a mug. This is how you eat an apple. With these red objects, she has created her own language, translating the elements of speech into a non-verbal form of communication.

These are enduring signature pieces that conjure a supersaturated vision of a distinct moment and attitude. In 2019, the Winnipeg Art Gallery used a work from the *Red Series* to create an iconic banner for their exhibition, *The 80s Image*. Nearly four decades after their creation, these images continue to generate an intense and enigmatic yearning, to expose in a highly sophisticated and idiosyncratic way the most elemental desire to be understood. Astman narrates this desire.

In the first decade of her career, Barbara Astman embarked upon a sort of disciplined abandonment, working intuitively with colour, form and figurative composition, mining her psyche to visually articulate her own interior impulses. Periodically, she has returned to red, the colour that creates for her the most potent alchemy. Experienced and self-possessed, she is preoccupied at this stage in her artistic development with discovering "something I could not see but knew was there."<sup>16</sup> Loss is like desire, palpable and yet intangible. In *Portraits and Conversations with*

*Empty Vessels*, red yet again is the catalyst. In the darkroom, light travels through and bounces off the glass bottles, revealing the empty vessels to be filled with an emanating energy. She has transformed familiar objects into a lyrical metaphysics and, once more, brought forth the astonishing visions of her imagination.

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Rouge de pied en cap:

l'œuvre de Barbara Astman

Dans cet essai, Georgiana Uhlyarik présente *Portraits and Conversations with Empty Vessels* (2016–19), un nouveau corpus d'œuvres créé par l'artiste Barbara Astman. Sans relâche depuis les années 1970, Astman propose et incarne un examen de l'expérience vécue qui défie toute catégorisation. Fascinée par les matériaux et les technologies, elle s'en sert de manières diverses et non conventionnelles pour donner forme à sa vision artistique, sondant sa propre psyché avec l'assurance que, grâce à ses processus de travail, quelque chose se fera jour. La couleur « rouge » a joué un important rôle expressif dans les premières œuvres de l'artiste, et elle y revient dans cette nouvelle série. Composé de photogrammes de bouteilles en verre transparent, baignés de rouge, cette œuvre transforme les objets familiers en une métaphysique lyrique.