

Portraits & Roots

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Jean Bartlett photo

Interview with artist Melinda Lightfoot at Linda Mar Starbucks, Pacifica, CA.

Artist in Progress

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Written by Jean Bartlett

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"Why is doing art so important to the human experience?" Artist Melinda Lightfoot examined the question over coffee in Pacifica. "We can go back to the cave paintings. We don't really know why they did those, but they speak to us still. Art is another way of communicating with others and with ourselves."

On February 13, 2020, the program manager retired from Sanchez Art Center. Melinda began working at Sanchez Art Center shortly after Kathleen Salvia came on board as the executive director of the Center in 2006.

"My friend Kathy Dybeck saw a listing for an eight-hour-a-week administrative assistant at the Center," Melinda said. A gifted artist, the late Kathy Dybeck was then on the board of the Art Guild of Pacifica.

"So I met Kathleen Salvia and somehow convinced her to hire me."

Au contraire! Kathleen, who retired in the fall of 2015, had quite a few wonderful words to say about the "guest of honor" at the recent celebration hosted for Melinda in the Center's Main Gallery. They began with Kathleen noting she knew Melinda was the perfect candidate from the start. No convincing required.

"Melinda handles herself with a professionalism that is at all times couched in grace and kindness. In nearly 10 years, I never, ever saw her lose her temper, even when, in my opinion, it might have been understandable to do so. The result was that she got results and produced many successful shows and arts education programs."

Jean Bartlett, author (www.bartlettbiographies.com)

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Cindy Abbott has been the Center's executive director since the fall of 2015. Her opening remarks also highlighted just how important Melinda has been to Sanchez Art Center and to her.

"Technically, I'm Melinda's boss," Cindy said, "but since I began here, Melinda, along with Linette Morales (the Center's operations coordinator), and I have really been a team working together to see that all of the exhibitions, arts education and other programs at Sanchez Art Center keep rolling ahead with our little part-time team."

Cindy then used the definition of the word "gracious" to define Melinda: "A) Marked by kindness and courtesy; B) Marked by tact and delicacy, urbane; and C) Characterized by charm, good taste, generosity of spirit."

"As happens in the workplace, particularly one with a small number of employees, coming to work we don't check our lives at the door," Cindy noted. "We support each other. The years have had a series of personal ups and downs. Health issues, family loss – and through it all, friendships are what we've formed that go beyond. I'm looking forward to continuing our friendship."

Who is this woman who rode into Sanchez Art Center to be a part of all the work that goes into giving artists a place to grow, to be seen, to share and to learn?

* * *



The artist, age 5, and her brother Jimmy in Goodwell, Oklahoma.

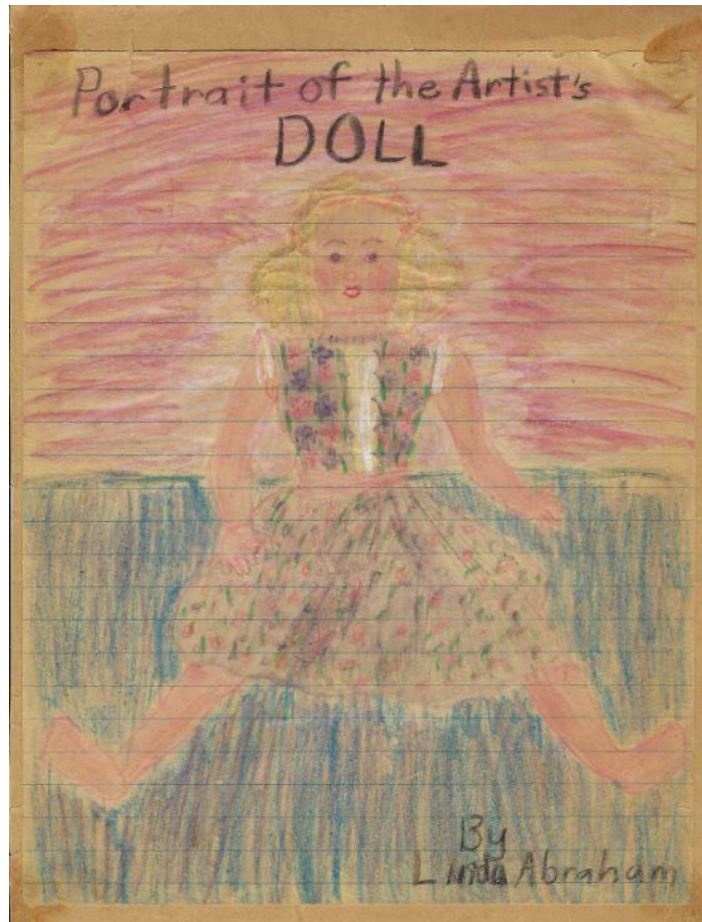
"I was born in Kansas City, Kansas," Melinda said. "My dad, who was a mathematician, was in the Navy when I was born. When he left the Navy, we moved to Goodwell, Oklahoma, where he was a professor of mathematics at Panhandle A&M College." (The population of Goodwell was recorded as 1,293 in the 2010 Census.)

"He decided to pursue a Ph.D., so we headed to Austin, Texas."

By then Melinda was paying some attention to art. Her parents had a "big old book filled with color plates by different European artists" and she would spend time leafing through it. She also had art in school, which included poster contests, and she liked doing art. It was in Austin where she created her first "saved" art. It is titled: "Portrait of the Artist's Doll."

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"Portrait of the Artist's Doll" by Linda Abraham (Melinda).

"She was a Madame Alexander doll, and the medium was crayon!"

When Melinda was in the fifth grade, the family moved back to Goodwell.

"It was a really small town and a small-town school. The building held the elementary kids in the basement and the high school was on the upper floor. We had two grades per room. The teacher who taught fifth/sixth and the teacher who taught seventh/eighth were artists and friends. Every once in a while they would just haul off and have an art day, and that was really fun."

Melinda said she did not purposefully steep herself in art, or the arts, as a kid, but as she looks back, it was always there.

"My mom played the piano. That was her real art love. She painted a few things with watercolor and she liked it, but not like piano. She played classical. She still played it in her eighties and it was wonderful. I'm sure she had piano lessons when she was a child, and all of her children did as well."

Melinda is the eldest of four. Her brother Jimmy is two years younger, her sister Lois Ann is four years younger, and Adair is eleven years younger. All of them work in the arts as adults: Melinda in the visual arts, Jimmy as a singer-songwriter, Lois Ann as a writer, and Adair has been a dancer all her life. In addition, their dad was a singer.

"He sang bass with the New Mexico Symphony Orchestra Chorus in Albuquerque for many years."

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The family moved to Albuquerque from Goodwell at the beginning of Melinda's freshman year of high school. Her dad got a job with Sandia National Laboratories. Melinda really liked New Mexico, and still likes it. "That's where I think of as home."

← Melinda, top center, with her siblings in Albuquerque, NM.

In her junior and senior years of high school, Melinda took Russian, taught by a teacher from the University of Michigan. She enjoyed it and was good at it. "Well, I was good at the pronunciation, not so much at remembering the grammar!"

Why Russian?

"It was the Sputnik era and Sputnik coverage was all over TIME Magazine. I found it very interesting, and I liked the language."

In fact, when she talked to the high school counselor about college, she wanted to be sure she could go somewhere where she could declare Russian as her major, if that's what she decided to do.

"But I was someone who grew up thinking that I wouldn't have a career because 'obviously,' I would get married and have kids."

She was accepted into Stanford University.

She lived on campus, as all female students were required to do at the time, except for part of her second year when she lived in Tours, France.

"I took two quarters of French, the minimum requirement," she said. "I hadn't yet declared my major and I saw this as a wonderful opportunity. I studied French literature and French history and I saw all this great art. It changed everything."

"They had this museum in Paris, which is not far from Tours, called the Musée du Jeu de Paume. I could just go and stand inches away from van Gogh's textured furrows of paint and soak it in—totally thrilling." (From 1947 through 1986, the Musée du Jeu de Paume held many important impressionist and post-impressionist works which are now housed in the Musée d'Orsay. The Musée du Jeu de Paume has since merged into the Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume.)

During her study abroad, Melinda also traveled many times to the Louvre—in addition to going on field trips to Rome, Venice, Brussels, Amsterdam, the Normandy Coast, and Pamplona in northern Spain.

"In Tours, we had a three-week break between quarters specifically so people could travel more."

Melinda went on a tour with a group of Stanford students from the Florence, Italy and the Beutelsbach, Germany campuses.

"They had put together a trip inside the Soviet Union. It was all by train. We met up in Vienna and then by train we went to Warsaw, which I thought was great. The people there were so energetic and welcoming. From there we went to Moscow. I saw Khrushchev in a car caravan appearance with the cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova. Moscow was strange, unfriendly. We were told we couldn't take pictures of buildings or bridges." (Still finding its world footing in the 1960s, Moscow had strict rules for tourists: follow certain paths, no photos with policemen in them, no photos of famous architecture.)

"Once we left Moscow we all expelled a sigh of relief. We then went to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), which included a trip to the Hermitage Museum. We continued by train to Kiev and then to Budapest. I did have a chance to use my Russian on the trip. It was on the train leading to Moscow. There was a guy who spoke a little English and

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after two quarters of French, it was hard for me to remember my Russian—so I spoke only a little Russian. He wanted to know why Americans wanted war, and I said, 'Oh, no, no. We want to know why you want war.' I think we were both surprised by that conversation."

When Melinda returned to Stanford she declared Russian as her major. After she received her bachelor's in Russian, she did a year of graduate work. "But came out without my master's," she noted. She did however go on to receive her M.A. in Clinical Psychology from the California School of Professional Psychology. But in between Stanford and her master's degree in clinical psychology, she married. The couple lived in Berkeley. Her sister came out to visit and eventually also made California her home.



Melinda and her sister Lois Ann in Berkeley, CA, early 1970s.

Her husband was studying law in Berkeley, and Melinda decided to pursue clinical psychology.

"He learned to argue and I learned to analyze!"

While studying at CSPP in the late 1970s, "I met a remarkable Jungian analyst and talented writer named Renée Brand and working with her sparked a renewal of an artistic bent I had forgotten."

In order to prepare to be a counseling psychologist, students at CSPP are required to choose a therapist and attend sessions.

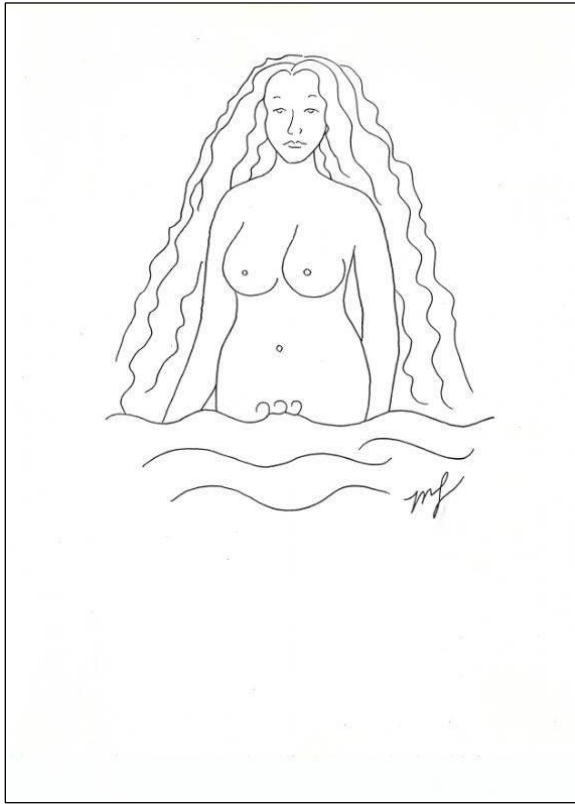
"I had been seeing one of my instructors," Melinda said, "but then the school came out with a ruling that that was a conflict of interest. I decided I wanted a female therapist and interviewed three women. Renée was a short little woman with beautiful blue eyes. She opened the door and I looked down at these big blue eyes. The next morning I woke up from a dream of Aphrodite emerging from the waves. That pretty much sealed Renée as my therapist choice."

Dr. Brand received her degree in German literature and was associated with Germany's Bauhaus modernist art movement. She fled Germany in 1939 and went on to study psychology in the United States where she was revered as both an analyst and a distinguished writer. Her novel, *Short Days Ago*, is based on her escape from Nazi Germany.

"She told me that on her last day at her home in Germany, she got a call from a neighbor down the road. 'You've got to get out. They are coming!' And so she ran."

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"Aphrodite Rising from the Sea" by Melinda Lightfoot, pen and ink, late 1970s.



"Aphrodite of the Pearl," by Melinda Lightfoot, acrylic, re-imagined, 1993.

"I really started doing art from that drawing I did after meeting Renée. I showed it to her and art became a large part of how she and I communicated."

Following a difficult divorce, Melinda received her M.A. But she never worked in the clinical psychology field. Instead she walked through the doorway that beckoned. It was working as an in-house light caregiver/companion to a 98-year-old woman. She did that for almost two years, and it was interesting work but the pay, not so much. So she took an administrative job with a division of McGraw-Hill, their Construction Information Group. Located in San Francisco, the construction group was responsible for the Daily Pacific Builder, a newspaper which reported on and published construction reports, legal advertising and request for bid notices covering regions in Northern California and Northern Nevada. Melinda stayed with the company for almost 20 years.

"When they did a re-organization, I took the money and ran," she laughed.

Art remained a constant, and she would, for many years, dream her art.

"I used to dream an entire painting with the title," Melinda recalled, smiling. "Okay! I'll do it! While I have worked in pen and ink, and in the early days, oils, I really began with pastels. I love pastels for the colors and the texture; it's almost like little particles. I will always love pastels but I don't do very much with them now because you have to protect the work under glass and have a frame and a mat and all of that. To me, that takes away from the experience of it. Recently I did a piece that was soft pastel on canvas. I showed it at Sanchez Art Center and they were kind enough to put up signs that said, 'Please Don't Touch.' But I really have yet to figure out the logistics of pastels. It's an unresolved quandary."

The artist has long worked in acrylics and finds a lot of satisfaction with the medium. She has also painted in watercolor, gouache, and worked in collage and mixed media. She is largely a self-taught painter.

Jean Bartlett, author (www.bartlettbiographies.com)

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"I was really cautious about taking any kind of class because I felt that whatever was going on artistically was something that I should keep going with—I didn't want anyone to tell me to do it differently."

It has now been years since she dreamed a painting.

"At first I felt kind of a loss. That's not going to happen anymore! But I figured it out. When I was younger, I had more barriers. I did not think of myself as an artist but now I do and am just more open to ideas. I no longer need my unconscious to bring them up—the artist becoming conscious?"

"Who are some of the artists I have been influenced by? Georgia O'Keeffe, for sure was a primary influence. She was kind of my hero for many years. Van Gogh is also a major influence. I do like Kandinsky. Claude Monet is a big influence. Before they rebuilt the de Young Museum in San Francisco, they had the Monet water lilies and some of his later works there. I really wanted to bring a sleeping bag and stay overnight in that room." She sighed, remembering.

"I do also like René Magritte."

In regards to the latter, a careful examination of Melinda's painting on the homepage of the women's art group, Tangerine Arts, reveals a lovely, humorous tip of the hat to René Magritte's painting "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." Or, "This is not a pipe."

Melinda is a founding member of Tangerine Arts, www.Tangerinearts.net, a group of women artists that meet and exhibit together. (Kathy Dybeck was also a founding member.) The group formed in 1999. Prior to that, Melinda was a member of the Bernal Women Artists Group in San Francisco. She is also a studio artist at Sanchez Art Center. "Now that I am 'retired,' I plan to make more art and maybe even explore other mediums."

Something else that is a big influence in Melinda's art is New Mexico. Its natural rich color palette can be found in many of her paintings and in her conversation. It is family.



"Abe in the Desert" by Melinda Lightfoot, 2003, a portrait of the artist's father, acrylic on canvas.

Jean Bartlett, author (www.bartlettbiographies.com)

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A year before she co-founded Tangerine Arts, Melinda moved to Pacifica. A year before that, she met her love Thom Miley.

"Thom and I were living in an apartment in San Francisco's Richmond neighborhood. The owners kicked all the renters out to make room, they said, for family. Thom and I got married and moved to Pacifica. We did all that in just a few weeks!"

Throughout her years with Thom, and the many years before that where she rediscovered art through her friendship with Dr. Brand, and in the years that have followed since Thom's death in 2016—art and her personal journey with art remains at her core balance.

"I believe in the healing power of beauty and humor and that the work of art is an imprint, a talisman of healing and inner development."

Melinda's arts résumé includes multiple solo exhibits and group exhibits. The latter includes: Arts on Fire (juried), Sanchez Art Center, Pacifica, 2000 and 2009; Fogbelt Studio "Summer Art Salon," San Francisco, 2010 and 2011; "50|50 Show II" (juried), Sanchez Art Center, Pacifica, 2010; San Francisco Open Studios, 1991–1994, 1984–1985; Winter Art Salon, East Gallery, Sanchez Art Center, Pacifica, 2013; and Art Guild of Pacifica exhibits in Oceana Gallery, Pacifica, 2012. Solo exhibits include: Pacifica Performances, Mildred Owen Concert Hall, Pacifica, 2017; "Working Theories," Salada Beach Café, Pacifica, 2005; and Art Guild of Pacifica Awards Exhibition, Sanchez Art Center, 2013. At a recent Open Studios event at Sanchez Art Center, two of her works sold—a thrill for the artist.

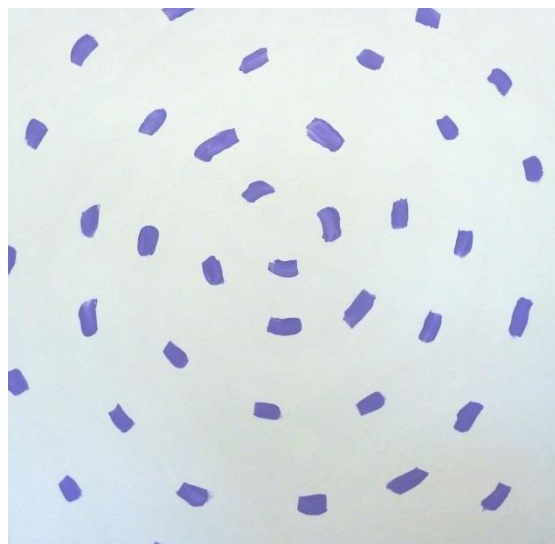
The recipient of two awards through the Art Guild of Pacifica Annual Members Exhibit, Melinda received a Juror's Merit Award in 2014 and a Juror's Exhibition Award in 2012. New for Melinda, since 2016, is "painting in series."

"In my portfolio on the Tangerine Arts website, there is a series called Spiral Fragments. All 10 paintings came from one afternoon sitting with my sketchbook in my studio, and I started drawing painting after painting in miniature—including writing in the colors I would use. The whole series just flowed out of me into those sketches. Then later I was able to actualize the whole set as 36" x 36" acrylic paintings." In January of 2017, Melinda exhibited them together at the Mildred Owen Concert Hall.

"As I look at them now, I see that some are spiral shapes or parts of spirals, and others could be seen as actual fragments in space, as if a spiral shape had blown up or disintegrated. I used algebra to keep the shapes proportionate to the original small drawings—my mathematician father would have been proud. They are, I suppose, in the category of abstract, another favorite artistic style."



"Spiral Fragments #3: Deep Seabed" by Melinda Lightfoot.



"Spiral Fragments #7: Two Grey Hills" by Melinda Lightfoot.

Jean Bartlett, author (www.bartlettbiographies.com)

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A few additional selected works from the catalog of the artist's oeuvre follow.



"Mildred at the Ocean" by Melinda Lightfoot, 2007, a portrait of the artist's mother, acrylic on canvas.

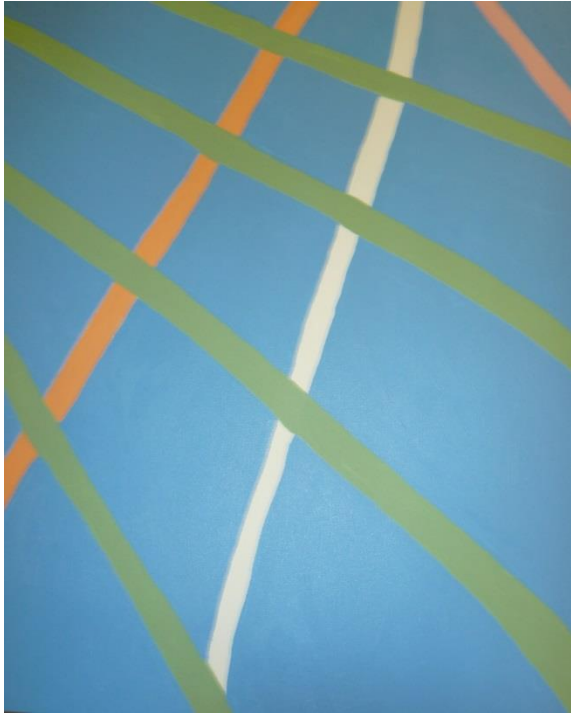


"My Father's Driveway" by Melinda Lightfoot, 1995, acrylic on canvas.

Jean Bartlett, author (www.bartlettbiographies.com)

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"Da Blues #5: Making Tracks" by Melinda Lightfoot, 2019, acrylic on canvas.

* * *

Melinda reiterated that when you create art, you so often capture something that can't be easily expressed.

"When you view someone's work that also happens, you uncover something within yourself that is unexpected. I always wanted to have a show and title it Wysiwyg, 'What You See Is What You Get'...because it's true."

* * *

Email the artist at wordsmithediting@comcast.net. Visit her blog at www.melindalightfootstudio.com or see more of her work at www.tangerinearts.net.

Learn more about Sanchez Art Center, including upcoming events in its three exhibition spaces, as well as classes, art sales, open studios and art studio space at: www.SanchezArtCenter.org.



Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco.

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Tree-inspired in Austin, Texas. Melinda Lightfoot, age 8.

