

Painted Love

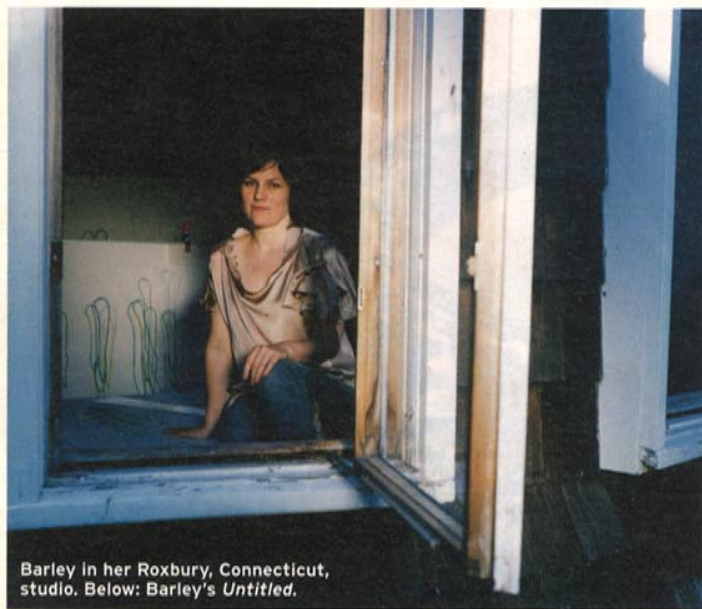
The new woman in Arthur Miller's life is an abstract artist with concrete ambitions.

PHOTO BY JOSEPH MAIDA

It's a setup most young artists would kill for: A beautiful, book-filled, Connecticut farmhouse, a warm, windowed barn in which to paint, a New York City pied-à-terre, no tedious day job, and an adoring, intellectually challenging partner to share ideas with (and foot the bills). "I feel very lucky," says Agnes Barley. "I feel just so fortunate."

The 34-year-old painter is eating lunch this sunny day at a picnic table on the 340-acre farm where she enjoys this enviable existence. "We wake up and have breakfast together," she says, describing her typical routine. "Then we'll each go to our respective studios to work. We'll usually meet for lunch, and perhaps go for a little walk. Then I'll usually go back to my studio and paint some more."

"Darling," she says to her gray-haired companion and de facto patron, who is



Barley in her Roxbury, Connecticut, studio. Below: Barley's *Untitled*.

sitting beside her, reading *The New York Times*, "do you want any broccoli before I take it in?"

"No, thank you," says Arthur Miller.

Barley and the legendary playwright, 89, have been involved for almost two years, living a quiet, artistically productive life in the sleepy town of Roxbury, Connecticut. Barley works on her abstract, minimalist paintings in the barn's silo (Miller bought the former dairy when he was married to Marilyn Monroe) and is learning how to cook; Miller writes in a guesthouse up the hill

and, in the summer, tends his tomato garden. Last night they watched the first Kerry-Bush debate on TV. ("We were pleased," says Barley of Kerry's performance.) Their relationship existed relatively under the radar until this past September, when the opening of Barley's exhibition made the *New York Post's* Page Six. Among the boldfaced names who crowded into the postage stamp-size gallery in NoLiTa were Miller (the column called him her "boyfriend"; Barley prefers "partner"), ICM agent Sam Cohn and author Frank McCourt, their neighbor in Roxbury. "It was raining, but we still had about 200 people," says Jen Bekman, her dealer.

Barley's show presented two bodies of work: small, monochromatic pieces, which the artist describes as "careful constellations of line," and larger

scale, multicolored compositions, which she says were "inspired by biblical, vertical landscapes." Kate Spade creative executive Julia Leach purchased one of the smaller paintings for the Kate Spade flagship. "I loved how it was feminine and lyrical, with both restraint and a sense of energy," says Leach.

Barley, a petite brunette, has a fringe of heavy bangs, large brown eyes and a measured, serious style of speaking, especially when she talks about her work. "I'm interested in exploring spatial constructs of harmony," she says. She cites Ellsworth Kelly and Cy Twombly as influences, as well as Agnes Martin. (Coincidentally, Barley's middle name is Martin.) "I keep coming back to harmony, I suppose, because I secretly feel that all of my work is about love."

Barley is the first to acknowledge that it is her own unusual love match—with a man 55 years her senior—that has drawn much of the attention to her painting. "I'm not naive to the fact that people are curious about us," she says matter-of-factly. The two met in the fall of 2002 at a dinner with mutual friends. Miller's third wife, the photographer Inge Morath, had died earlier that year. "Obviously there was no intention of introducing us for romantic reasons," she says. "I honestly didn't know Arthur Miller was still living! I thought, He's alive?" But from the first moment, recalls Barley, "there was a sparkle between us." Soon they were having dinner four or five nights a week. "We talked about everything, our concepts of love, time, life...I think we spent six months together before I even admitted, God, I'm deeply in love with this person."

Barley grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, the daughter of an architect father and a stay-at-home mom. She showed an independent streak at an early age, leaving her family's home at age 15 after an argument (long since settled) and moving in with her grandparents. "I had a very special relationship with my grandfather," says Barley. "When I was very young, I used to sit by his bed when he was asleep and try to synchronize our breathing. He had all these beautiful bruises that looked like marble to me...there was a connection between us that I really feel was like the first lines I ever drew." After high school, Barley briefly attended Parsons School of Design, and then, searching

for more cultural stimulation, moved to Austria. She lived in Vienna for seven years, obtaining an MFA on scholarship at the Academy of Fine Arts.

In 1998 she arrived in New York City, where she worked as public relations director for Sigeron Morrison shoes and later as a freelance stylist. (One of her gigs involved furnishing Sofia Coppola's apartment.) Barley was working part-time at a stationery shop and painting in her Chinatown apartment at night—"it was so small I didn't have enough room between the bed and the wall to turn my paper on a diagonal," she says—when she met Miller.

"She's been wonderful for Arthur," says close friend Dini von Mueffling, whose fiancé, David Richenthal, has produced many of the playwright's works. (Von Mueffling also introduced Barley to gallery owner Bekman.) "Agnes is a free spirit. And Arthur is like a kid with her."

Barley says the attention on their relationship hasn't affected them much, even with the recent opening of Miller's latest play, the highly autobiographical *Finishing the Picture*, and the attendant renewed interest in Miller's personal life. "We are just so focused on our work," she says firmly; she's currently gearing up for a group exhibition at the World Bank in Washington, D.C.

"In a very abstract way, he's very much a part of what I'm doing," Barley says. "And Arthur has even taken up painting himself." —CATHERINE HONG

