



Advisory Perspective

Hayley Barker Reflects on Ritual, Nature, and the Moon

By Rory Mitchell | Edinburgh, 18 June 2024 | Artists

Hayley Barker's delicately rendered landscape paintings illuminate scenes from nature, transforming them into ethereal images. Subjects ranging from her backyard in Echo Park, Los Angeles to ancient boulders on the Isle of Tiree, Scotland are all afforded the same exacting technique, eking out every fibre of magic from the tiniest details observed.

This distinctive style, characterised by fine brushstrokes on raw linen, reflects her deliberate and unhurried creative process, which yields only a few works each year.

Now, as she debuts in Europe at Ingleby, Edinburgh, with *The Ringing Stone* (15 June–31 August 2024), her painstakingly produced paintings take centre stage. Gleaned from life yet seemingly from an interior place, Barker's work celebrates the cycle of the seasons, blending real and imaginary worlds to suggest dreamscapes as much as landscapes.

Barker met with Ocula Advisor Rory Mitchell to discuss her latest paintings, her fascination with lunar and seasonal cycles, and how she perfected her intricate style.

You taught yourself to use oil paint as a teenager, experimenting in your bedroom. Do you remember what you were painting or who inspired you?

I was obsessed with [Edvard Munch's](#) *The Sun* (1910–1911) and kept a printed picture of it in my school binder. I also loved Charles Burchfield and painted natural scenes of the tree-lined rivers in Oregon, where I grew up, or women lifted from Symbolist paintings.

The first painting I was proud of was of a vase of sunflowers, inspired by [Vincent van Gogh](#), which I made when I was around 19. My parents recently found it and sent me a photo of it. Seeing it again brought back memories of trying to infuse character and emotion into the flowers' stems, leaves, and petals. Although I felt far from Van Gogh's level, it urged me to try harder and create more powerful paintings—a feeling that continues today.



Hayley Barker (2024). Courtesy the artist. Photo: Max Knight.

After completing your BA in fine arts at the University of Oregon, you went on to study video and performance at the University of Iowa. Your choice of institution was a conscious one because [Ana Mendieta](#) had studied there under Hans Breder. What was your biggest takeaway from your experience at Iowa?

Breder, who founded the university's Intermedia Department, was still teaching there in the late 1990s when I was studying for my MFA. As my mentor, he taught me to take risks and that the process is as important as the outcome.

He showed me that art means more when something personal is at stake. From the Fluxus school of thought, he passed those values on to his students. I learned that performance is integral to life, and that intentional actions can make every moment more meaningful.

Being immersed in Mendieta's life and work instilled in me a deep gratitude for her legacy and helped me infuse my performances and videos with spirituality.

Mendieta, who was evacuated from Cuba at a young age and settled in Iowa, made work that emphasised her bodily connection to the elements and soil. From an early age, I've felt a deep kinship with dirt, water, fire, air, and how my body fits into it all. Her work gave me permission to dig deeper and explore these challenging and spiritual issues. She was a very brave artist.

At Iowa, I learned that the body is the channel for generating art. Making art is an embodied experience, and good work engages the body—and, hopefully, the heart—of the viewer.



Exhibition view: Hayley Barker, *The Ringing Stone*, Ingleby, Edinburgh (15 June–31 August 2024). Courtesy the artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh. Photo: John McKenzie.

When you transitioned to painting after university, which artists did you turn to for inspiration?

I was drawn to [Pierre Bonnard](#), [Peter Doig](#), and [Marlene Dumas](#), studying their painterly brushwork and use of colour. Additionally, [Gustav Klimt](#), Gustave Moreau, Edvard Munch, and Odilon Redon influenced my work.



Hayley Barker, *Spring Valentine Path* (2024). Oil on linen. 254.3 x 208.3 cm. Courtesy the artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh. Photo: Paul Salvesson.

***The Ringing Stone* features four paintings of your garden across the span of a year. What did you aim to capture in these moments?**

Los Angeles, where I now live, has subtle seasonal changes due to its mild climate, making it easy to lose track of what month it is—it could just as easily be December or June. I wanted to capture the quiet shifts in light and foliage that define each season.

This year, I've been growing a patch of native plants to make a 'moon garden' with white and silvery blossoms, night-blooming flowers, and pale leaves, which look best when illuminated by the moon.

I read that, when you lived in Portland, you were part of a coven practising Earth-based spirituality, and that you still follow moon cycles. Can you expand on your interest in seasonality?

Now, I have a more private practice of honouring the moon and the seasons, using the Wheel of the Year, which is common in many Earth-based spiritual communities. It celebrates the turning of the seasons and the midpoints between the solstices and equinoxes.

My interest stems from the feeling that life is precious, and knowing that our time here moves incredibly fast. I am in love with this life and this planet, and I want to honour the sources of all existence: the Earth, the sun and the moon.

Paying attention to the shifts in the seasons allows me to feel closer to this source, which I call Goddess. On special days, I perform simple rituals to honour this connection. Observing the moon and seasonal cycles helps me to stay grounded and in tune with the natural world, even amid the planet's current turmoil.



Hayley Barker, *Autumn Equinox Moon* (2024). Oil on linen. 132.1 cm (diameter). Courtesy the artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh. Photo: Paul Salvesson.

In this exhibition, several paintings celebrate the seasonal cycle through the play of light across the old Glasite Meeting House—formerly a place of worship in Edinburgh's New Town, and now home to Ingleby.

I was deeply inspired by how the building's architecture integrates the sun's movements. The dome invites the sun and the moon into the gallery, creating a magical atmosphere. This led me to think about circles, cycles, and how light travels across space, marking time.

The four walls inspired me to use the seasons to document a year in my life. The gallery's history as a Glasite Meeting House—a spiritual community on the margins—also intrigued me. My show feels like a dialogue with its former inhabitants, though I'm unsure how they would respond to the work of an Earth-based, intersectional feminist witch.

Colour plays a big role in your paintings. Compared to the lush flora of an L.A. garden, the sandstone of Edinburgh buildings seems a little more sombre. How do you coax out colour and portray it in abundance on your canvas?

Daily engagement with colour is perhaps the most joyous part of my work and a fundamental aspect of human experience. It feels intoxicating and instinctive. As I get older, I increasingly perceive how synaesthesia shapes my perception of colours; they resonate in me like music.



Hayley Barker, *The Ringing Stone* (2023). Oil on linen. 183.2 x 243.8 cm. Exhibition view: Hayley Barker, *The Ringing Stone*, Ingleby, Edinburgh (15 June–31 August 2024). Courtesy the artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh. Photo: John McKenzie.

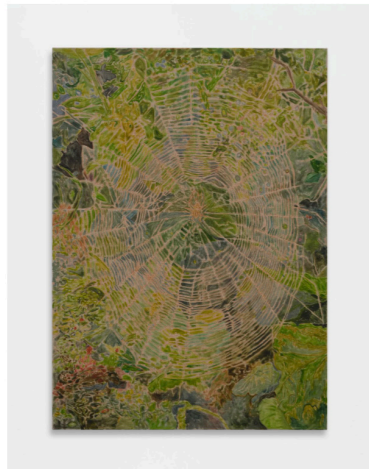
When I paint, it's as if I'm translating the colours from my garden into the studio, akin to carrying a tune from one space to another and then singing it onto the linen canvas to share the song.

Throughout the painting process, it feels like I'm composing melodies, harmonies, and rhythms. I want my paintings to vibrate and breathe. Painters like [Wassily Kandinsky](#) and [Joan Mitchell](#) were said to have connected deeply with this way of experiencing colour.

Your technique appears painstaking, with fine brushstrokes on raw linen, often on a massive scale. How did you develop this style?

The way I paint is fastidious yet also loose and sometimes even sloppy. At times, I paint with obsessive precision, which is how I draw.

I love the idea that, up close, a painting may appear disorderly or chaotic in moments, but then, from a distance, it reveals something familiar. I strive for control over each brushstroke, treating my paintings almost like drawings.



Hayley Barker, *Orb Weaver 2* (2024). Oil on linen. 109.2 x 78.7 cm. Courtesy the artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh. Photo: Paul Salveson.

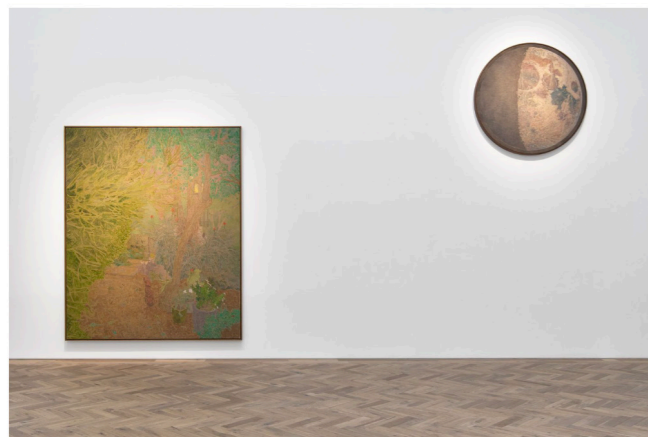
I believe that the way paint is put on the canvas is crucial. I like to get lost in the marks when I paint. It's soothing and healing. It's also a lengthy process. My paintings need time to build that depth of colour, layer upon layer.

Would you say there is still a performative element to your artistic practice?

Absolutely. Everything is connected: my spiritual life, gardening, painting process, and the time invested. I think of painting as a form of prayer, chanting, or making incantations. Often, I sing while I paint.

It's a holistic process in which each aspect of life enriches the others. Observing and interacting with nature, witnessing the cycles—this is how I am guided in what and how to paint. —[O]

Main image: Hayley Barker, *Summer Valentine Path* (2024) (detail). Oil on linen. 254.3 x 208.3 cm. Courtesy the artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh. Photo: Paul Salveson.



Exhibition view: Hayley Barker, *The Ringing Stone*, Ingleby, Edinburgh (15 June–31 August 2024). Courtesy the artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh. Photo: John McKenzie.