

# Feeding The Soul

Barry Nemett fuses painting and poetry to reach his artistic vision.

## Jenny Glick

Special to the Jewish Times

It's hard to say what is more moving — Barry Nemett's paintings or his poetry.

At the Creative Alliance at the Patterson, where I recently found Mr. Nemett taking down an exhibition in preparation for another show, I found myself taken in by both.

I first checked out "Sideglances." At 10 feet wide and 8 feet high, it was larger than life. It contained multiple panels of solitary images of birds, trees, books and owls, in muted blues and grays woven together by poetic text.

Mr. Nemett describes his approach in his new book, "Paintings, Poems, and Passages."

"The drawings and paintings originally created independently in order to record, say the dances of branches weaving through a thicket, may become part of a much larger tapestry-like composition."

Like the quilted, layered feeling the piece gave off, Mr. Nemett also touches on several intertwining themes in "Sideglances" — innocence, gathering and survival.

At 62, Mr. Nemett has certainly made a powerful impact in the art world. He has sold hundreds of paintings, is known internationally and has the respect and admiration of his peers.

"Barry's paintings, drawings and writings reflect the very dense, rich and dynamic breadth of his life. There is no boundary between either. His work reflects the passionate, sensual and curious engagement he sustains with the world and relationships around him," said Jan Stinchcomb, dean of undergraduate studies and faculty at the Maryland Institute College of Art.

Mr. Nemett has been a teacher at MICA for more than 35 years. But he

wasn't raised in Maryland. He was born in the Bronx, N.Y., and grew up in northern New Jersey. His family attended a Conservative synagogue.

He fell into painting, or he would tell you, more aptly, he fell in love with painting, when he was 12.

"I got hit in the head. I had brain surgery. My left arm got paralyzed, so I couldn't play contact sports," he said. "That summer, I was 12, my mother bought me some paints and I fell in love with painting."

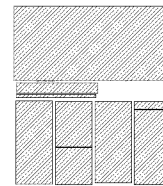
The injury to his arm would heal, after launching him into his life's work. "That bad situation turned into a pivotal experience," he said. "I think of it as one of the most positive things that happened in my life, although I would never have thought that at the time."

## Book Lover

Mr. Nemett would first study sculpture at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, then go to Yale to study painting in graduate school. He would move to Baltimore in 1971 to take a teaching position at MICA, and now serves as chair of the painting department.

It is clear some of Mr. Nemett's work has been influenced by his Jewish upbringing. There is the painting of "Seven *Shofarot*" that currently hangs in the Kol Shalom Synagogue in Annapolis, and the hand-painted *ketubah* for his son's wedding he exhibited at the Creative Alliance.

But aside from obvious Jewish subjects in those paintings, his early work hints at another Jewish theme: a fascination and respect for books. He made a staggering 1,000 paintings and drawings of books in graduate school, all of which he says have sold. Some are whimsical depictions, where the books take on lifelike personalities and emotions. Mr. Nemett's reverence



and deep respect for books is obvious when he includes this quote in his novel "Crooked Tracks" from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel:

*"When a good man dies, his soul becomes a word and lives in God's book."*

Like many artists, Mr. Nemett's focus and style has evolved over time. In 1978, after having two disks removed in his back, he found he couldn't paint large-scale compositions without pain. Rather than take a break from painting, he found another way to keep working.

"For years, I had problems intermittently during the night painting. I had to lie down and painted one panel next to another. That's how the panels came about."

After the birth of his children, Laimi and Adani, we see more multi-paneled work, as well as collaborative and mixed media projects with his children and other artists.

By the 1980s, the painter had crossed over to a poet, and we start to see his paintings accompanied by poems. He describes a series of paintings called "Gatherings" with the words:

*"Innocence, joy, and vitality frolic within the peaceable kingdoms of fenceless, fearless fantasies, as surrounding leaves and branches lace the sky."*

Though much of Mr. Nemett's work is inspired by his travels, over the years he said he has repeatedly been inspired from a view outside his window in his Stevenson residence.

As demonstrated in his collection of paintings on landscapes, and an accompanying poem, "Window View":

*"Knots and needles, smothered by snow and fat with water, list towards loss. Frozen fingers, fisted spokes of pine, must unwind before reaching out to bless a blazing congregation of maples and dogwoods and vine-covered oaks."*

More recently, Mr. Nemett has turned a graphite pencil toward landscapes. The impact feels more seamless, and holistic, than earlier work.

Mr. Nemett seems to get much of his inspiration from his family. He

said it was love at first sight when he met his wife, Diane, in high school, but as things started getting serious, he couldn't help but wonder whether his vocation of choice was impractical.

"I was thinking, 'How would I support a family?' She was always encouraging me to follow my passion, and that is the life we live," he said.

To imagine a childhood filled with artists and travel would be imagining his children's childhood. His adult daughter, Laimi, is now a successful artist in her own right. She said she spent her childhood in museums with a father whose hands were never idle; he was always busy sketching or writing.

Like her father, she already has won a Fulbright Scholarship. It seems growing up the daughter of Barry Nemett has taught her to follow her own dreams.

"He knows you can really be happy if you follow your passion," she said. "That in terms of lifestyle is really inspiring."

Mr. Nemett speaks in prose, but he is not one to brag. He is remarkably down to earth for a man who has traveled the world, surrounded by paint, pencils, artists and poets.

But even he admits he is a rare breed — a poet and painter. To him, it is one and the same.

"To me, it is super-connected; they overlap exquisitely and they both feed the soul," Mr. Nemett said.

*Barry Nemett's most recent series of drawings and paintings will be on display at the Pinkard Gallery in the Bunting Center, at the Maryland Institute College of Art, through Dec. 20.*

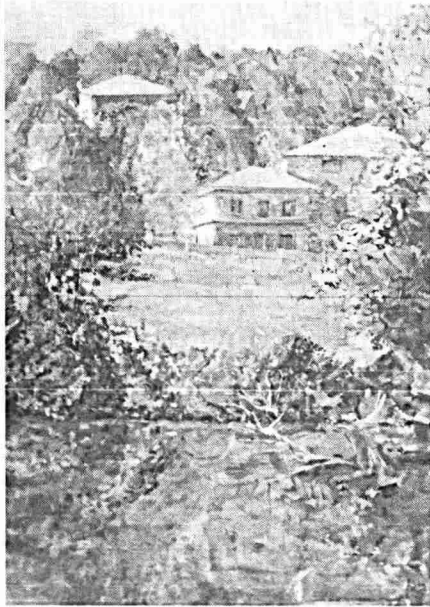
*Jenny Glick is a local free-lance writer.*

"That summer, I was  
 12, my mother  
 bought me some  
 paints, and I fell in love

with painting.”

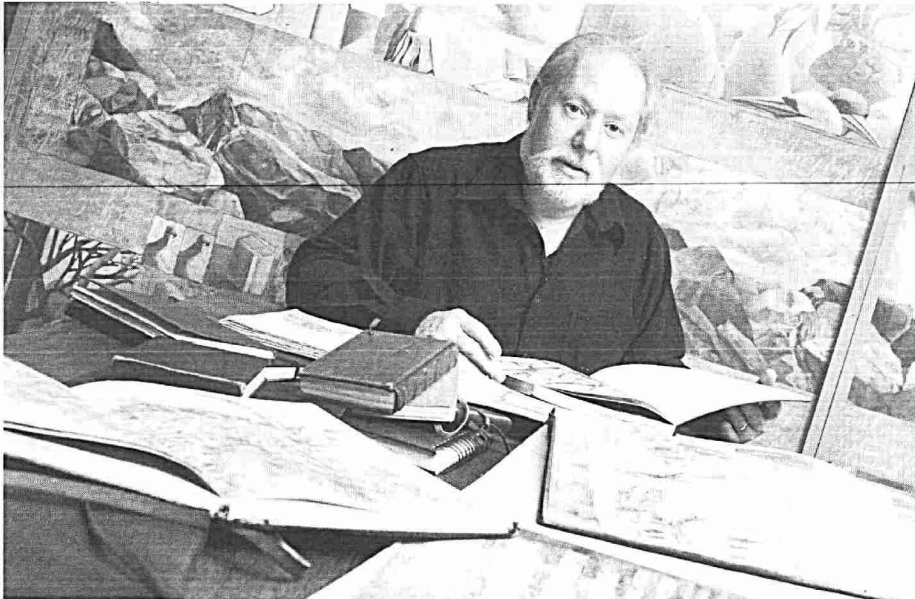
— Barry Nemet

PHOTO PROVIDED



“Tibor River” is one of Barry Nemet’s dream-like visions.

PHOTO JUSTIN TSICALAS



arts&life

**Barry Nemet:** Poetry and painting are “super-connected, they overlap exquisitely, and they both feed the soul.”