

BASCHA MON

Mountains, Barriers and Poppy Fields



# Mountains, Barriers and Poppy Fields

What is beauty? If it can be found in the truth of one person's articulate feelings about continuing tragedy, then here it is on view for all to see in *Mountains, Barriers and Poppy Fields*. This exhibition by Bascha Mon contains personal truth embedded in a landscape of grandeur and despair. It all began with the event of 9/11, on a morning of absolute clarity. That elemental perfection underscored a drastic failure of human potential. The faultless blue skies became smeared with ashes of ambition, anger, and fanatic self-righteousness. Thus the suffering continues today.

Bascha Mon is an accomplished artist who has been at work for over forty years. Her recent practice has been dedicated to a quietly resonant vein of painting. These works, rich in texture and color, employ an innovative approach to applying the ancient medium of encaustic. Using sheets of heavy archival paper as ground, her paintings often incorporate a variety of material that invests each piece with emotional, cultural, or political meaning. The form is ordered, not by current artistic fashion, but by the artist's personal values and spiritual need—spiritual in the sense that her oeuvre is driven by something beyond material values or specifically art world issues and tendencies. Ms. Mon has chosen to live in a bucolic area of New Jersey. From her studio she looks out onto calm fields replete with evidence of flora and fauna alive and thriving. However, in her current art, nature has become suspect, an ambivalent beauty, and a recalcitrant symbol of our moral and physical frailty.

*During times of war, artists help us remember this: if we knew each other more, we might damage each other less. Across distances when we often perceive each other askance, at angles slant and sharp, we can forget what we instinctively know—that seeing another as an 'other,' separate and quite apart, can lead to our collective end.* —Sarah Lewis

While Bascha Mon's current project, *Mountains, Barriers and Poppy Fields* has been instigated as a response to a specific ongoing conflict in a particular part of the world, the artist's past work has often been driven by a humanistic sensitivity along with her need to understand and bridge cultural barriers. Mon visited Osaka, Japan, in 1991, after winning a prize at the Osaka Triennial. The contemplative installations she made upon her return to the US became subtle meditations on the poetry of Japanese environmental aesthetics. And in a way, Ms. Mon's images have always been more about poetics than reportage, whether responding to the nuances of Japanese culture, or to a tragedy such as the tsunami of a few years ago—a natural event that shocked the world with its immense devastation. In either case, her images function via the engine of passion. And it's not particularly about romanticizing the far away Afghan war; *Mountains, Barriers, and Poppy Fields* have become an

Cover and opposite  
page. DETAILS

**American Legion  
Veterans' Poppy  
Field #4** 20 0

Encaustic with  
veterans' poppies  
and fragments of  
US flag on paper  
26 x 30 x in.



elegy to one person's feelings via the weight and measure of vision combined with lucid form Goya's, *The Disasters of War* went to a dark and terrible place to show directly the horrors of war Bascha Mon has chosen to underline the evident darkness by 'speaking' to the beauty of light and color Again, it is somewhat of a metaphysical journey, if by that we mean the inchoate striving of human beings to transcend death despite our constant tilting toward the darker corners of the heart.

*But death cannot conquer a man who has shaken off his dust, it is powerless against eternity. The wind, life, flow from the infinite, the moon drinks the breath of life, the sun drinks the moon, and the infinite drinks the sun* From *The Mahabharata*

The mountain that is the major subject of many of these works is a physical place It's also a metaphor for those obstructions, which separate people; it is the shadow of death It is implacable in its stolid presence Bascha Mon came upon the image of this threatening prominence as a black and white photograph in the New York Times, and kept it tacked to her studio wall for a long time The mountain stands between Pakistan and Afghanistan in South Waziristan She notes, "At first, I couldn't imagine being that realistic, but then thought about Cézanne and how he painted so many versions of Mont Sainte Victoire ( ) but the idea was planted that there could be variations on the mountain "



Opposite page, left to right

**Mountains and Barriers #1** 2010

Encaustic on paper  
23 x 30 in.

**Mountain #2** 2009

Encaustic with  
copper wire  
23 x 30 in.

This page

**Mountain #4** 2009

Encaustic with rubber  
and lichen on paper  
9½ x 29¾ in.

In his series featuring Mont Sainte Victoire, Cézanne pursued ways to assert an absolute equivalency of dynamic structure using paint on canvas. But Ms. Mon is less interested in the formal aspects of constructing a painting than in building up its symbolic configuration. Not that she is unconcerned with how a picture is made. She has already considered and mastered the plastic and formal means required to present her pictures as effective and satisfying aesthetic objects. The encaustic medium she prefers for this series has an assertive yet malleable character. Centuries older than the invention of oil paint on canvas, the most memorable use of the encaustic medium was the vivid Fayum memorial portraits of the dead found in Egyptian tombs dating from about the 1st to 3rd century in Hellenistic Egypt. While those portraits have found a way to ensure the human desire to live forever, at least in memory, Mon's contemporary images, also concerned with death, and just as vivid, are memorial pictures of a sort. They have become cultural mementos that implicate us as thinking people and as responsible Americans. In this way they signal endings, beginnings, and possibilities for change. Technically, Bascha Mon eschews the jewel-like translucent quality of the medium for dynamic encrustations worked into a range of pictorial effects. Fluid when heated, the pigmented wax quickly hardens, incorporating a magnetic accretion of 'significant' material that can suggest the equivocal and poignant aspects of human greed and desire. Coupled with the titles, as specific or metaphoric language, they indicate what we know or think we know about the area geo-politically and in human terms.





Paintings such as *Conflagration* and *Exploding Building* depict flames and burning buildings inspired by news photographs from the conflict. These are considered the 'Barriers' of the exhibition's title, since, as the artist said, "through destruction we have not eased the burden of war but caused more devastation and death " For Bascha Mon, poppies have become symbols for "the greed and anguish of war " because money from the cultivation of the poppy fields enriches individuals involved in the heroin trade, and funds the ongoing war

The most political aspect of the works on view is their titles, which tend to implicate us, as much as they suggest sorrow and concern regarding the situation for those who have to exist in that beautiful, distant, and desolate place of our imaginations. The specific titles of her pictures reflect our individual confusion and American complicity in this relentless conflict.

There are actual red paper poppies embedded in *The American Legion Veterans' Poppy Field #4* Part of a United States flag shows in the sky. *Will Wheat Ever Replace the Opium Poppy Crop?* is the rather

Opposite page

**Will Wheat Ever  
Replace the Opium  
Poppy Crop?** 20 0

Encaustic and toy flag, jute,  
sticks and threads on paper  
23 x 30 x ¼ in.

This page, left to right

**Exploding Building** 2009

Encaustic and roofing  
tarpaper on paper  
23 x 30 in.

**Burning Hut** 2008

Encaustic on paper  
23 x 30 in.



plainspoken title of an encaustic with found US toy flag, bits of fiber, and jute on paper Torn and cut up dollar bills with more fragments of an American flag comprise *Dollar Mountain Battlefield* lies flat beneath the exquisitely painted, *White Mountain*—an intriguing compound installation

Far away from the actual theatre of the Afghan war, in her quiet corner of New Jersey, Bascha Mon has turned landscape tradition, informed by the lessons of modernity, into an effective medium of protest. It is, to be sure, nothing so simple as a political protest. As Sharon Memis, the Director of the British Council in the United States argued recently, "The arts can play a pivotal role during war or conflict because they encourage understanding between different cultures, helping foster trust, prosperity and stability." So, amidst the terror and absurdities, lay the absolute beauty that makes us human Bascha Mon's art, luxuriously textured in form and concept, is proof, if such is needed, that contemporary painting, conflicted though it may be, retains the ability to engage our senses, our emotions and intellect as not many other forms of creative endeavor could

© Carl E. Hazlewood –2011



Opposite page

**Poppy Field #3:  
Poppies/Dollars/  
Destruction** 2010

Encaustic with collage,  
dollar bills and wool  
on paper  
33 x 30 in.

This page, left top to bottom

**White Mountain** 2009  
Encaustic on paper  
23 x 30 in.

**Battlefield** 2009  
Encaustic with plastic  
fragments on paper  
25 x 29½ x in.

Above

**Detritus Mountain**  
2010  
Encaustic and wrappers  
on paper  
23 x 30 x ¼ in.

NOTES AND REFERENCES Bascha Mon is quoted in each case from letters to the author, January 2010. Sarah Lewis discusses war in a Facebook update, November 30, 2010; her play is part of *The Great Game* a series of 12 contemporary British and American plays tracing 150 years of foreign engagement in Afghanistan. Sharon Memis' quote is taken from her article, *War, culture, and the "great game"* in *Foreign Policy* magazine, online, September 14, 2010. *The Mahabharata* is a major Sanskrit epic poem of ancient India.



# Bascha Mon

Bascha Mon was born in Newark, New Jersey. She grew up in an apartment house on High Street, now Martin Luther King Boulevard. Summers at her grandparents' farm in southern New Jersey and summer camps in the Pocono Mountains were her first introductions to nature. Her parents' store in Newark gave her a subliminal introduction to color and design through her mother's choices of clothes and window displays. This early creative experience was set aside for the study of French and Spanish literature at Skidmore College and New York University.

Not until the birth of her second son did she begin her study of art with Adolf Konrad in New Jersey and then subsequently spent four and a half years commuting to the Art Students League in New York. There she immersed herself in the study of contemporary art and art history as well as painting, sculpture, and printmaking. A move to Long Valley, New Jersey provided a new experience of nature with expansive fields that proved the impetus for work which was abstract yet inspired by her surroundings. These works led to a significant solo exhibition at Lee Ault Gallery in New York City in 1977.

From those beginnings, she went on to explore childhood influences and her work became very personal. In time, travel provided a source for her work. Her early interest in France came to fruition in many paintings, one of which is in the collection of the Newark Museum. A purchase prize for a print in the Osaka Triennale in 1991 led to a trip to Japan. This experience profoundly affected her art for many years. Work related to France, Japan and China garnered three New Jersey State Council on the Arts

Fellowship Awards (drawing, painting, and sculpture). Textures, color, form and space in both two and three dimensions occupied her for many years. Sculpture led to highly textured encaustic painting.

As a result of the Tsunami in Indonesia, for the first time, she began to explore a subject of world interest in paint, with encaustic. This led to the decision to combine a heretofore abstract sensibility to a more realistic theme: the mountains of Afghanistan which were providing the Taliban with hiding places and affecting our attempts to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict which had begun in Iraq. Immersion in mountains, explosions and war eventually led to a series of Poppy Fields. Since the dollars gained from the opium poppy have exerted an influence, not only on the war, but on the people who grow them, as well as those who use the opium/heroin, it is a self-perpetuating conundrum.

Bascha Mon has exhibited widely in this country and abroad and after 40 years of work is still exploring new ideas.

All work copyright Bascha Mon 2010

Photography: Peter Jacobs Fine Arts Imaging

Special thanks to Lora Martinez Hudicka; Dr. Jerome Rosinger; Maria Goldstein; Jill Devlin Ligenza and Tracey and Steve Luckner for their generous support of this publication.

[baschamon.neoimages.net](http://baschamon.neoimages.net)

Opposite page, DETAIL

**Detritus Mountain** 2010

Encaustic and wrappers

on paper

23 x 30 x 1/4 in.

Back Cover, DETAIL

**Will Wheat Ever Replace the Opium Poppy Crop?** 2010

Encaustic and toy flag, jute, sticks and threads on paper

23 x 30 x 1/4 in.



**WILLIAM  
PATERSON**  
UNIVERSITY

BEN SHAHN CENTER  
300 Pompton Road  
Wayne, NJ 07470  
[www.wpunj.edu](http://www.wpunj.edu)

Nancy Einreinhofer, Director



This exhibition was made possible in part by a grant from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, Department of State



