LANDSCAPES OF LOVE FROM MILLER'S LAST MUSE

He was married three times, most famously to Marilyn Monroe. Then, in his late eighties, Arthur Miller fell for an artist 55 years his junior. In her first-ever interview, Agnes Barley tells Ariel Leve of her lasting bond with the late playwright. Portrait: JonathanTorgovnik

On a bitterly cold December afternoon, in a tiny cafe in Manhattan where the window panes have steamed up from the heat, Agnes Barley is sitting across from me, her winter scarf draped over her shoulders. With no make-up, her luminous skin and hazel eyes give her a wholesome appearance as she explains with good-natured clarity why she is not interested in discussing the relationship with her late partner, Arthur Miller, intellectual icon and one of the most important playwrights of the 20th century. What she *is* willing to discuss is her work, and even though Miller has been dead for six years, her attachment and allegiance to him are still palpable. When it comes to protecting their shared memories, she slips into present tense. "Well," she'll state firmly. "It's just for us."

Barley, now 40, is a classically trained painter whose abstract work uses painted and cut paper to create textured collages she describes as "imagined landscapes that explore the

Agnes Barley says her art is still shaped by her bond with Arthur Miller, and she lives in the New York apartment he left her. Above left: the couple happy and at ease in 2004

human condition". She is aware that interest and curiosity about her stem from the intriguing relationship she had with Miller — she met him through mutual friends at a dinner party in 2002, when he was 87 and she was 32.After he died in 2005, there were reports that his daughter Rebecca, a writer and film-maker, threw her out of the family home. Barley will not comment on any of this. How Miller informed her art, however, is *not* off limits, and she agrees to move forward on condition that the conversation is about her work. We decide to meet again in the new year.

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When I first met Agnes Barley, she was making coffee in the kitchen of the white colonial house in Roxbury, Connecticut where Arthur Miller had lived since 1957. I was there to interview him and she introduced herself simply as a "friend", but it was evident from the tender way his eyes softened when he asked "Did you meet Agnes Barley?" that they were more intimately involved.

There was a moment when the photographer who was shooting Miller at a picnic table encouraged Barley to join him in the frame; she declined. But Miller, visibly brightened by her presence, persuaded her to sit for one shot. The stoicism that he had maintained throughout the shoot disappeared; he looked happy and playful.

In the newly published second volume of Christopher Bigsby's biography, Arthur Miller 1962-2005 — for which she declined to be interviewe — Barley is introduced in the chapter titled Endings. "They seemed to have little in common," Bigsby writes, "which was hardly surprising, given the age discrepancy. She had little interest in theatre, and later admitted she had thought he was dead." When I ask her later if this is true, Barley will bristle and clarify.

But overall, Bigsby's portrayal of her is sensitive and flattering. He details how she took care of Miller when he became sick and how the two of them were deeply in love. "Miller's own feelings for her appear to have deepened quickly," he writes, going on to say: "There is no doubting the impact Agnes had on Arthur Miller." And Miller's sister, Joan Copeland, recalls: "She was his nurse, his muse, everything good for him."

Before we are to meet again, my phone rings. The caller ID shows: Arthur Miller. Agnes, who lives in the one-bedroom New York flat Miller left her, is calling; the phone company has not removed his name. She is surprised to discover this, but she rarely uses the landline. She admits she cannot bring herself to take his voice off the recording. She cannot imagine deleting his voice.

A few weeks pass. On a January morning, I find myself at the end of a long hallway in a pre-war apartment building. "Welcome," Agnes says, taking my coat, "come on in." The entrance hall functions as a storage space for her paintings — dozens are propped against the wall, in a neat, symmetrical way. The flat, like Barley's work, has a minimalist feel.

There are subtle reminders of Miller. When I admire the square dining table of dark wood, she tells me he made it. She points out the handmade wooden base of a lamp and a chair in the bedroom that looks as if it belongs on the set of The Crucible. She is friendly and warm as she talks about how little has changed in the flat since his death. "I painted the walls and redid the floors. That's about it," she says.

She shows me a series of works on paper that she refers to as Vertical Gardens. "This work I made in Connecticut when I was together with Arthur," she says. "I look back on it now and I see it is all about connectedness and pure love, a reflection of the contentment I experienced at this moment in my life. It's work I definitely would say is unconsciously infused with this beautiful sense of harmony that came from Arthur."

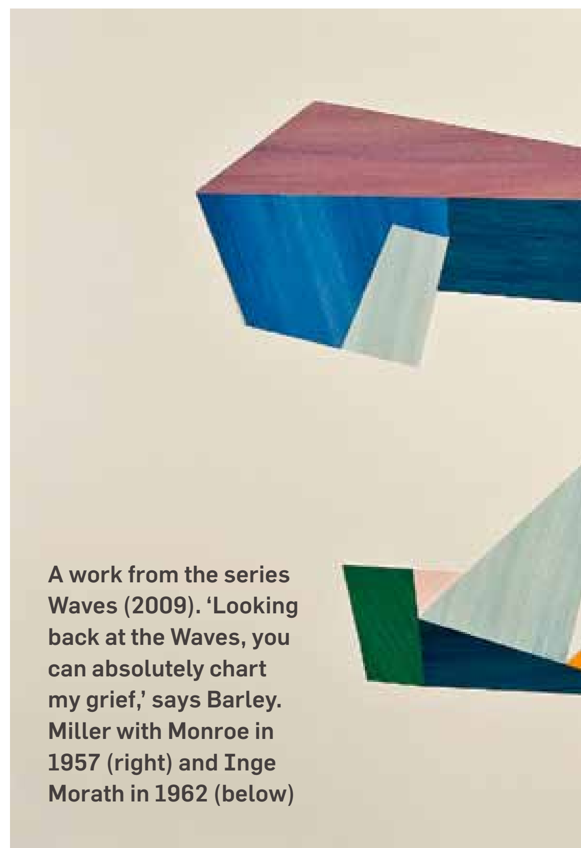
She was living with Miller in Connecticut, and they had a very disciplined daily life: waking up, having breakfast together, then going to their respective studios to work. They would meet for lunch, take a walk, he would read in the afternoon and she would work until it was time for dinner. "It was very structured."

Miller would visit her in her studio. "We talked a lot about each other's work. He loved to read to me — and talk about what he was working on. And he liked to follow my work as well."

They would have long conversations, probing views about love and life. "In this strange way we were both seeking something very essential, and for both of us the process was about distillation. Arthur talked a lot about how plays are meant to be heard — they are auditory experiences. And he really sculpted the words. Arthur was all about hearing. He had to speak the words that he wrote, to get it down to exactly what he was trying to communicate."

She tells of a time when she visited him in his studio and he was writing about her painting. "I don't know what made him do that, but he had written one sentence and he read it to me aloud and I said 'Yes!' And it led to a huge conversation about the work."

What's the sentence? Agnes goes into the bedroom, returning seconds later with the piece of paper he typed, amused by her certainty in recalling that moment. "I even had the audacity to correct him!" she laughs.



A work from the series Waves (2009). 'Looking back at the Waves, you can absolutely chart my grief,' says Barley. Miller with Monroe in 1957 (right) and Inge Morath in 1962 (below)

It reads: "On Agnes Barley's painting". Beneath the heading are two typewritten lines: "These works are not pictures but rather imagined captures of space in which objects under tension interact. The intention is to approach fundamental situations in reality."

Remaining evidence of their dialogue is that the word "objects" is crossed out with a single line and "structures" is handwritten in its place. The word "situations" has a line through it and is replaced with the word "relationships".

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> BEFORE I ACKNOWLEDGED IT, I WAS FALLING IN LOVE'

By way of explanation, she says: "'Object' is finite. It was too finite for me. It became an incredible conversation, but in retrospect I wish I'd just shut up." She laughs again.

Miller understood her work, which means he understood her. "Arthur and I had a connection in a way that he could intuit… I didn't ask him to write this. I happened upon him one afternoon at the typewriter and he said, 'I'm writing about your work', and I said, 'Oh, let's hear it', and that led to a conversation…"

Whether or not Agnes was conscious of being a muse, it seems that she was. Early on in their

PREVIOUS PAGES, MAIN PICTURE: JONATHAN TORGOVNIK FOR THE STUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE. TOP LEFT: LFI. THESE PAGES, TOP LEFT: CARY WHITTIER. TOP RIGHT: SAM SHAW/REX. BOTTOM: DENNIS STOCK/MAGNUM

relationship, Miller gave her The Turpentine Still, a short story he'd written that had not yet been published. "It was very much a bit of a love letter. It was, in a way, the first time that he said that he loved me, because he says 'I love you' to a character that so clearly represents me. Being able to anticipate where his heart would go in this context, and knowing that it met my heart there exactly, is pretty extraordinary."

She says she knew instantly when they met that they would be friends for life. It took a while for the romantic feelings to develop. Bigsby's biography indicates that it was Miller who pursued her, for many months. Eventually she moved into the house in Connecticut. They relied on each other, and the book documents Miller's good spirits from being with his new companion, noting that he proposed in December 2004.

Arthur Miller had been married three times. First, to Mary Slattery, with whom he had two children (Jane and Robert); famously, for 5½ years to Marilyn Monroe; then for 40 years to the photographer Inge Morath, who died in 2002. With Morath he had a daughter, Rebecca, a film-maker and author married to the actor Daniel Day-Lewis, and a son, Daniel.

Despite the stories about Rebecca rejecting Agnes after her father's death, she told one interviewer that she was happy he had a companion towards the end of his life, while acknowledging her ambivalence: "If it was your friend you'd probably be thinking, 'Oh great, you know, terrific that you have a companion' and the rest of it, but I think children feel that they own their parents."

After the period of Vertical Gardens, Miller's health worsened. His illness, bladder cancer, progressed quickly and Agnes nursed him. "It wasn't a choice. That's just what you do."

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A prominent mark of Barley's work is her focus on ideas about place. "I think that we're products of our landscapes. Our ideas of beauty, love, humanity are shaped through cultural topography and actual topography. Think of what it's like to be a desert people versus a mountain people. I'm definitely someone who grew up by the sea."

Born in 1970 in Jacksonville, Florida, she had a "joyful" childhood. Her mother, Mimi, was a full-time mother, her father, John, an architect. She has three sisters and a brother who is an actor. Being expressive was always in her nature.

Many of her early emotional experiences have spatial associations. She recalls her father holding her, how the curves and shapes and emotions were fluid. What she's describing is a physicality associated with feelings — recalling not just the emotional memory but the physical one. On Sunday evenings her family would have dinner at her grandparents' and Agnes would sit beside her grandfather's bed while he was sleeping. "As a five-year-old, I really liked to synchronise our breathing. It wasn't something I did consciously, but I did it repeatedly, probably for a year or two." She pinpoints the connection with ⋙→

MILLER'S WOMEN

In 1940, when he was just 24, Miller married his college sweetheart, Mary Slattery, and they had two children, Jane and Robert. Sixteen years later, he wed the film star Marilyn Monroe (top), having had a brief affair with her several years before. Filming The Misfits with his wife (he wrote the screenplay, she starred) proved to be a troubled time for them both, and they divorced before the film's premiere in 1961. The photographer Inge Morath (above) became his third wife a year later, and they were together until she died in 2002. They had two children. Daniel was born with Down's syndrome, put in a home and separated from the family, a fact that only became public knowledge in 2007. Their daughter Rebecca, a writer and film-maker, is married to the actor Daniel Day-Lewis, and both have a good relationship with Daniel Miller

her work. "I feel like those breaths were the first lines I ever drew. I think of them as lines."

It was a slow progression to becoming a painter, but this creative curiosity led her to art schools in New York and eventually to Austria. In 1990, she was accepted by the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. She was 19, learnt to speak German, and stayed on in Vienna for seven years.

"Have you had lunch?" she asks. We move from the living room to the kitchen and discuss her time in Austria as she puts together a salad. She was at the academy for six years and recalls this period with affection. She submerged herself in the culture and history, had a serious boyfriend who later became a priest, and studied under renowned painters and professors.

The decision to move back to New York was taken on impulse. During a stopover from a trip back home for Christmas, she decided not to get on the flight. "I knew I was done." We finish lunch and move back towards the living room, returning to the work she had begun to explain earlier. I'm not sure when she speaks of "exploring ideas of place and identity" if I am absorbing all the concepts she has intended, and I want to understand.

"It's not so unlike writing," she calls out from the entrance hall, where she is retrieving a painting. "Even when it's abstract, there is a narrative that exists. The paintings have a vocabulary, like poetry or music."

Internal landscapes are a big theme in Barley's work. What does the term mean? "For me, it defines a certain sense of being. What is the setting of my existence? It deals with essential questions. I describe it as an internal landscape because so much of my work is based on ideas of place. I experience a sense of being in a spatial way."

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Agnes Barley did not paint for 3½ years after Arthur Miller died of heart failure on February 10, 2005. "The only work I did took place in one day, a series of drawings." I follow her into the bedroom, where she shows me some of the pencil drawings, done six months or so after Miller died. She produced 30 in one afternoon, an unintentional catharsis.

"It's interesting. It's a moment in my life where I'm really having to confront all the questions — Where is life? Where is meaning? Where is memory? Where is death? (and I say 'where' because that's how I think of everything) — and it's so telling that the work reduced to straight lines and the most direct connection between two points."

There is nothing superfluous. She explains that you could fold the line and it would become

A work from Barley's recent series Shadow Structures (2010). What Miller wrote about her art, she says, showed his profound understanding

a circle. It was a moment of enlightenment, soothing in a dark time. "It was a gift from Arthur."

When Barley was ready to paint again, she did two collages that were literal interpretations of the pencil drawings. She lays out on the table in the living room a body of collage work that she describes as "fleeting moments of perfection — the architecture of the wave opened a meditation on where one exists, where is memory, where is meaning, where is connection".

These collages are from the Waves series, and on a secondary level they are romantic meditations. "Arthur and I both loved the water. I grew up on water, swimming, and Arthur loved the water, so I thought, okay, I'm going to make some waves for Arthur. Ultimately, I created an ocean of waves."

Did they help cope with the grief? She pauses. "It was not conscious at the time, because I felt I was on a strict pursuit, but looking back at the Waves you can absolutely chart my grief." Hearing herself say this, she adds: "I've never approached art as therapy. It deals not with any one moment in my life but my core beliefs."

"That," she says pointing to a collage from Waves, "was something I had created for Arthur. And then to decide to dismantle it was actually a really frightening moment."

Are the Deconstructed Waves about moving on? "Definitely, because I had to recognise that Arthur was not just one wave. What is one wave? I couldn't hold him as a single wave — he's just part of the surface of my being. I could not just try to hold the wave intact for my entire life."

A more literal interpretation of the wave would be that he was the single love of her life, and when he died she didn't think she would love anyone else. "Well I haven't," she says, definitively. "But I would like to. Life is full and promising and hopeful. I couldn't live as this singular wave as well." She pauses. "I had to be more, you know?"

It is dark and we have been talking for hours. We are looking at her most recent series, still in progress, which she is thinking of calling Shadow Structures. There are two pieces, reflections, side by side. "The paintings were unexpected portraits of Arthur and I, our facing reflections, like two shadows falling from a single point of love. As my work continues, I see them as foundations. As if through pure desire, my eye or fingers traced and found a solid reality of shadows. I am trying to use this mythical depth as a substructure in more layered constructions to come."

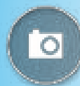
When the biography is mentioned, she is willing to set the record straight but does not want to critique the book. She makes it clear that, before they met, she had *not* thought Miller was dead. "That's not true. I spoke with someone previously and it was misinterpreted. I thought of him as a gigantic literary figure. I was trying to convey that I thought of Arthur in mythical terms."

When the subject of the age difference between them is raised, she acknowledges that it was indeed unusual. "I will just say," she begins, her feet tucked beneath her on the sofa, "the connection was instantaneous. It took me a while to understand that it was in fact very profound and indeed romantic. But it was instantaneous."

Was she scared of it? "No."

And her family? "They knew I would follow my heart. When I was with him, it was like a circuit closed. It was a total surrender — fearless surrender. But you know, before I acknowledged what was happening — which was happening whether or not I chose for it to happen — I was falling in love with him. We met and it was a few months before we came together romantically. So from this vantage point — where I knew I could dive in or not dive in, or try to steer it towards friendship — I did contemplate where I should take this."

It is easy to understand why Agnes wants to protect her memories — any woman would acknowledge that love is a deeply personal landscape. She will read the biography at some point, but she is not in a hurry and does not seem anxious about it at all, secure with keeping what was real and pure and idyllic, and letting the rest go ■



To take a tour of Agnes Barley's online gallery of artwork, visit thesundaytimes.co.uk/agnesbarley

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