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Illia Barger, Artist

Illia Barger speaks with the rapidity of an auctioneer and the body language of a performance artist, demonstrating the strenuous moves required for mural painting. “It is better than doing yoga,” she reveals.

The myriad of projects Barger tackles is just enough to harness her boundless energy. In June she was spending her days painting a public historic mural in Trenon, and her nights in the solitude of her studio by the Delaware River in a home she shares with her daughter Shamael. There she was finishing a sophisticated painting of a Japanese tree on silvery blue silk that is destined for a dining room in Princeton and a giant floral canvas for a show at the Cheryl Hazan Gallery in Manhattan.

“I am used to painting alone in a studio or home. It is amazing the positive energy you get from doing something like this,” she says of her public mural. “It is like an oxygen tank.”

The mural depicts the first reading of the Declaration of independence in Trenton. She was awarded the project as part of a Geraldine R. Dodge grant funded by Target and Commerce Bank.

The daughter of a musician/painter mother and sculptor father, Barger studied drawing and painting at Cooper Union in Manhattan, receiving the prestigious Pollock-Krasner grant.

“That allowed me to paint for a year,” says Barger, who spent time in Brooklyn in the 1980’s and the East Village in ‘90s. Now her commissions take her all along the East Coast.

One regular client recently flew her to Kennebunkport, Maine, to show her the space where she is to paint an 8-foot-by-4-foot canvas. The only requirements: something airy and inspired by the sea. She describes her plan with enthusiasm, using her hands: giant sails being caught in the wind, light hitting them in just the right way. You’d never get anything predictable out of Barger.

“My murals have affected my fine-art painting,” she says. “I love large works.” And her clients love their large impact.

