Welcome. This exhibition covers the first fifty years of my life, and is narrated by me, Barbara. Throughout the galleries, you will find my words, and I encourage you to download the audio guide, so that you can listen to my own voice. You can also find my memoir, which has just been published. I started writing this book in 1978: it has been a long and demanding effort.

For me, the impulse to create art came in the form of an inner gift of consciousness and imperative energy. A gift I would ignore at my peril. Performance art revealed itself to be a healing practice which enabled my mind, my body, and spirit to cohere. Initially, my practice came out of the need to heal my erotic and spiritual life. I recognize Eros as the fundamental energy of life, but the self-protective and conventional aspects of me still felt anxiety and doubt. Nevertheless, I continued to be open on behalf of women everywhere, preferring transparency over privacy.

Looking back, what does all this mean to me now?

This art has been the expression of my life! It has been a way for me to deal with pain and isolation. It has been a journey into meaning-making. Through it I have been able to establish my own ground and identity, from which to speak.

This exhibition is supported by the Danielson Foundation.

The artist's memoir, *The Way to Be*, is available for purchase in the Museum Store.
EARLY LIFE

I was born into a charmed California life in 1931.

The country was in the midst of the Depression, but we had enough food and clothes. As a second-generation Pasadena mortician, my father always had work. I remember walking to school, playing outside, and going every year to our summer house in Laguna Beach.

Here are some of my school assignments. One of my classes was about being a good household decorator and purchaser. It was all part of home economics. We would also have classes in cooking and sewing to learn all the things that girls were historically taught at home. Educators thought they were being very modern to move these subjects into the classroom. This was obviously a girl's upbringing, because the boys would be in a machine or woodworking shop instead.

Some of these drawings are for a class I had in flower arranging. We had to gather flowers from our yard, and the job was to make a beautiful arrangement out of what we brought and then draw the bouquet. It was a fun class because it was a no-brainer, right?

PRIMEROS TIEMPOS

Nací a una vida afortunada en California en 1931.

El país atravesaba la Gran Depresión, pero nosotros teníamos suficiente comida y ropa. Mi padre, director funerario en Pasadena, como su padre, siempre tuvo trabajo. Recuerdo que iba caminando a la escuela y jugaba al aire libre, y que cada año íbamos a nuestra casa de veraneo en Laguna Beach.

Aquí vemos algunas de mis tareas escolares. En una de las clases nos enseñaban a ser buenas decoradoras y compradoras para el hogar. Era parte de la llamada economía doméstica. También nos daban clases de cocina y costura para aprender todo lo que antes se enseñaba a las chicas en la casa. Los educadores pensaban que eran muy modernos por haber trasladado esos temas al salón de clases. Obviamente, era una educación para chicas, porque a los chicos les daban talleres de mecánica o carpintería.

Algunos de estos dibujos eran para una clase de arreglos florales. Teníamos que recoger flores de nuestro patio y llevarlas para hacer un hermoso arreglo y luego dibujarlo. Era una clase divertida porque era superfácil, ¿cierto?
I went to Gemini G.E.L., a newly established print workshop on Melrose here in Los Angeles, seeking to make prints. I was naive. I was told that it was not possible to help me because I had no gallerist, it was very expensive, and I was basically unknown. Besides, the famous artist Josef Albers was currently printing there. Miffed, I reasoned that lithographs were from the nineteenth century anyway. This was the twentieth century, and the print medium of our time was the copy machine!

So I leased a big Xerox 914 copier, which was put into my dining room. It immediately took over my life. I printed texts with imagery. I replicated all manner of objects. I wrote with lipstick on the glass and made images of my body, face, and hands, which were the forerunners of my performance work. I could not stop.

I began to have heaps of assorted prints all over my dining room and no clear idea of what they were or how to present them. Soon I realized many were books. Books are physical artworks that must be held, which is an action rather than mere passive viewing. They are intimate and personally engaging, performative.
Field Piece was intended to be a very large, interactive sculptural environment resembling a monumental field of grass. In its final form, it consisted of 180 tubular blades of “grass.” Each blade stood nine and a half feet tall and was made of semiflexible, translucent, pastel-colored resin. Lights and speakers were triggered by touch switches under the foam flooring. The “field” measured twenty by twenty-four feet, and as each person walked through it, they lit their own way, producing a muted drone sound that came from an oscillator.

Field Piece was an arena of unquestioning acceptance. It was sensuous, hypnotic, and meditative. The intent was spiritual warmth. To wander through it naked, without the markings of social class and classifications, was important to the realization of the idea; the vulnerability and beauty of all human bodies could be clearly perceived in such a setting.

It took four years to finish and cost me over $40,000, which was every cent I had left from my divorce. The work was installed three times in the early 1970s and became badly damaged. This is all that remains today.

Pieza de campo era un escenario de aceptación incondicional. Era sensual, hipnótico y meditativo. La intención fue crear una calidez espiritual. Recorrerlo desnudos, sin etiquetas de clase social ni categorías, era importante para la realización del concepto; en un entorno tal, podían percibirse claramente la vulnerabilidad y la belleza de todos los cuerpos humanos.

Tomó cuatro años completarlo y me costó más de $40,000, que era todo lo que me quedaba de mi divorcio. La obra se instaló tres veces a principios de la década de 1970 y sufrió graves daños. Esto es todo lo que queda hoy.
RITUAL MEAL

You have to let barriers down when you eat together, just like when you make love.

*Ritual Meal* was the first of a genre for me, using food as a medium. There were about as many performers as guests, and the situation was set up to be deliberately disorienting. The guests were led by strangers who never spoke. They were put into surgical gowns and caps and encouraged to make up their faces with greasepaint. Food was served in odd combinations; it was mostly raw and meant to be cooked at the table and eaten by the guests with their hands. All the utensils were medical instruments, which implied operations and bodily fluids. A film of heart surgery and slides showing body systems added to the operating-room environment. The setting became totally immersive via the intense sounds, which were produced by a synthesizer, a flute, a gong, and taped loops of ocean waves, sucking noises, and the constant beating of a heart. Projections of galaxies and peculiar light changes added to the effect. This experience lasted for almost five hours. Nothing of this sort had happened in Los Angeles before. It was my first major performance.

COMIDA RITUAL

Hay que bajar las defensas cuando se come juntos, lo mismo que cuando se hace el amor.

*Comida ritual* fue la primera obra de su género para mí, usando comida como medio artístico. Había tantos actores como invitados, y montamos la situación para lograr un efecto desorientador. Los invitados eran guiados por desconocidos que no hablaban. Les ponían batas y gorros quirúrgicos y los exhortaban a pintarse el rostro con maquillaje teatral. La comida se servía en combinaciones raras, la mayor parte cruda para cocinarse en la mesa y comerse con las manos. Todos los utensilios eran instrumentos quirúrgicos, que evocaban operaciones y fluidos corporales. Completaban el escenario médico una película de una cirugía cardíaca y diapositivas del organismo humano. Era un ambiente totalmente inmersivo, con sonidos intensos producidos por un sintetizador, una flauta, un gong, grabaciones en bucle de olas marinas, sonidos de succión y el constante latir de un corazón. Realizaban el efecto proyecciones de galaxias y peculiares cambios de luz. La experiencia duró casi cinco horas. Nada así había ocurrido en Los Ángeles. Fue mi primera performance importante.
I did this piece over a few days, while driving from San Francisco all the way up to Seattle. My idea for the performance was that I would enter each site we stopped at on our drive and do whatever I went there to do, then leave; however, I would never speak. The all-white outfit, with my hair tucked away, made me appear anonymous and inscrutable. I painted my face red on one half, white on the other.

I had a sense of presence as I moved, yet I was invisible. Who or what is being, when almost all social modifiers and identification clues have been stripped away? I was trying to hold the position of mere being, not run from it. It scared me to do this. It felt as though I was without skin. I was presenting my inner self, knowing that I would attract attention. I hoped I was up to the task.

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Hice esta pieza a lo largo de varios días, mientras iba en auto desde San Francisco hasta Seattle. Mi idea para la performance era entrar en cada sitio donde nos detuviéramos por el camino, hacer lo que tuviera que hacer allí y marcharme, pero sin hablar nunca. El atuendo blanco y el cabello cubierto me hacían parecer anónima e inescrutible. Me pinté la mitad de la cara de rojo y la otra de blanco.

Tenía sentido de presencia al moverme, y sin embargo era invisible. ¿Quién o qué es el ser cuando se han eliminado casi todos los modificadores sociales y los signos identificadores? Yo estaba tratando de mantenerme en la posición de meramente ser, no huir de ella. Me asustó hacer esto. Sentía como si no tuviera piel. Estaba presentando mi ser interior, sabiendo que atraería la atención. Esperaba estar a la altura de la tarea.
NUDE FRIEZE

I realized this performance at F-Space, an artist-run space that my classmates from the University of California, Irvine, and I had founded in Santa Ana. Nude Frieze was designed as a construction site. I, as the architect, sat in the center of the space and instructed a foreman, who in turn directed a group of workers to suspend five naked people on the wall with silver duct tape and heavy staples, forming a human frieze around the room. Other workers pencilled in a field of lines between them, so that when the bodies were removed, a blank space would remain in the shape of the figures that had been there.

I was feeling the pain of the Vietnam War. Dissenters and deserters were being sought all over the country and in Canada. F-Space had become a safe place for new art, and I thought it should be acknowledged as what it was—a sanctuary. The piece came together out of these elements: experiment and sanctuary.

FRISO AL DESNUDO

Realicé esta performance en F-Space, un espacio independiente que fundamos en Santa Ana mis compañeros de la Universidad de California en Irvine y yo. Friso al desnudo se diseñó a manera de un área de construcción. Yo, como la arquitecta, me sentaba en el centro y daba instrucciones a un capataz, quien a su vez dirigía a un grupo de obreros para que suspendieran a cinco personas desnudas en la pared con cinta adhesiva plateada y unas grapas muy fuertes, formando un friso humano alrededor de la sala. Otros obreros trazaban a lápiz un campo de líneas entre los cuerpos, de modo que al sacarlos quedaría un espacio en blanco con la forma de las figuras que habían estado allí.

En aquel tiempo yo sentía el dolor de la Guerra de Vietnam. Estaban buscando a los disidentes y desertores por todo el país y Canadá. F-Space se convirtió en un espacio seguro para el arte nuevo, y pensé que debía reconocerse como lo que era, un refugio. La pieza se concretó en torno a estos elementos: experimento y refugio.
INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY

For this performance at the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles, I wanted to persuade some of the women who spent their days in nearby MacArthur Park to come to the gallery and sit on a bench for the day. I would take their place in the park and see what their life and experience were like. I was quite apprehensive and frightened because I was intruding into another world and had no idea what I’d find.

These women I sought—Alice, Bertha, and Olive—were the furthest extension of my own consciousness. I felt that I, too, had been or was one of them. Was this my worst fear about aging—to be destitute, unhoused, and on the street? My life as an artist made it seem entirely and frighteningly possible. I felt and wondered, Why am I here and they are there? What made my life safe and theirs so vulnerable? What was the triggering thing that forced them one day onto the street? Did it happen slowly or quickly? Was there a point at which suddenly no one cared to help?

It scared me. I felt more than curiosity; I identified, and that was my pain.

INDICIOS DE INMORTALIDAD

Para esta performance en el Woman’s Building de Los Ángeles, quería persuadir a varias mujeres de las que pasaban sus días en el cercano MacArthur Park para que fueran a la galería y se sentaran en un banco todo el día. Yo tomaría su lugar en el parque y vería cómo era su vida y su experiencia. Estaba muy aprehensiva y asustada porque me estaba introduciendo en otro mundo y no tenía idea de lo que encontraría.

Estas mujeres que busqué (Alice, Bertha y Olive) eran la extensión más lejana de mi propia conciencia. Sentía que yo también había sido, o era, una de ellas. ¿Era esto lo que más temía la vejez (la indigencia, la falta de hogar, vivir en la calle)? Mi vida de artista lo hacía parecer total y alarmantemente posible. Me preguntaba: ¿Por qué estoy yo aquí y ellas allá? ¿Qué fue lo que hizo segura mi vida y tan vulnerable la de ellas? ¿Qué fue el detonante que un día las empujó a la calle? ¿Sucedió lenta o rápidamente? ¿Hubo un momento en que ya a nadie le importó ayudar?

Me asustaba esto. Sentía más que curiosidad; me identificaba, y por eso me dolía.
FEED ME

I would sit in a room naked. Around the room, I’d place body oils, flowers, coffee, tea, wine, food, books, music, and marijuana. People would be invited to enter one at a time and were urged by a recorded audio loop to “feed me.”

I was seeking a voluntary, mutual exchange AND I wanted participants to get my consent for what they offered. The piece revealed the wonderful variety of interactions available between people beyond just sex. The performance provided an opportunity to manifest the strength of female vulnerability before a public witness.

I sat down on the mattress, and the piece began. It was neither photographed nor recorded in progress since it was meant to be a private encounter with each participant. Feed Me began at sunset and continued until dawn.

ALIMÉNTAME

Me sentaba desnuda en una sala. Por la sala colocaba aceites para el cuerpo, flores, café, té, vino, comida, libros, música y marihuana. Se invitaba a los asistentes a entrar uno en uno, y una grabación de audio en bucle los exhortaba a “alimentarme”.

Yo buscaba un intercambio mutuo y voluntario, Y ADEMÁS quería que los participantes obtuvieran mi consentimiento para lo que me ofrecían. La pieza reveló la maravillosa variedad de interacciones posibles entre las personas más allá del mero sexo. La performance me dio la oportunidad de manifestar la fuerza de la vulnerabilidad femenina ante un testigo público.

Al sentarme en el colchón, la pieza comenzaba. No se fotografió ni grabó mientras ocurría, ya que suponía un encuentro privado con cada participante. Alimentame comenzó al atardecer y continuó hasta el amanecer.
PURE FOOD

I was drawn to a field in Costa Mesa, about forty miles south of Los Angeles. I loved that field. It had everything: a vast view of the sea, the Pacific Coast Highway running below it, buildings nearby, oil wells.

I decided to go there to sit early in the morning. I chose a spot in the middle that felt right and occupied it for the entire day. Mostly, I meditated and received light energy for eight hours. My body became a stela, a sundial, a monument to the moving arc of the sun. The self disappeared, and what was perceived instead were the incredible, delicate vibrations of life, which charged through me and out into the universe. All sound penetrated me in the miracle of totality.

As the day ended, I packed up my things and left. This daytime piece had been as rewarding as Feed Me had been at night.

ALIMENTO PURO

Me llamaba la atención un campo en Costa Mesa, a unas 40 millas al sur de Los Ángeles. Me encantaba ese campo. Lo tenía todo: una amplia vista del mar, la Pacific Coast Highway que corría debajo, edificios cercanos, pozos de petróleo.

Decidi ir y sentarme allí temprano en la mañana. Escogí un lugar en el centro que me pareció adecuado y lo ocupé todo el día. Sobre todo medité y recibí la energía de la luz durante ocho horas. Mi cuerpo se volvió una estela, un reloj solar, un monumento a la trayectoria del sol. El yo desapareció y lo que percibía eran las vibraciones delicadas y asombrosas de la vida, cuya carga pasaba por mí y hacia el universo. Todo sonido me penetraba en el milagro de la totalidad.

Al final del día, recogí mis cosas y me fui. Esta pieza diurna fue tan gratificante como lo fue Aliméntame en la noche.
Jean Milant of Cirrus Editions, an old friend of mine who showed *Field Piece* at his gallery more than fifty years ago, asked me to come over and work together on some new prints. I went in, and he had this scanner and said, “Here, just put your hands like this!” So that became one of the prints. When I saw what was happening, I started using my hands differently in almost no time at all.

He had this prior Xerox print of mine, which he held over my hands while they were on the glass. So you can see my face from the earlier work, and now my hands. As a result we have a digital print incorporating a Xerox image. The two technologies are coexisting.

When I look at my hands, I don’t think of them as ugly. I almost don’t think of them as old. Old people’s hands are so powerful. They reflect what they’ve been doing with their lives. They tell a story.

Jean Milant, de Cirrus Editions, un viejo amigo que mostró *Pieza de campo* en su galería hace más de 50 años, me pidió que fuera para trabajar juntos en algunas impresiones nuevas. Cuando llegué, él tenía un escáner y me dijo: “Mira, ¡solo pon las manos así!” Y esa fue una de las impresiones. Cuando vi lo que sucedía, empecé a usar mis manos de manera diferente casi de inmediato.

Jean tenía una impresión Xerox mía anterior y la sostuvo sobre mis manos mientras yo las colocaba en el vidrio del escáner. De modo que se puede ver mi cara de la obra anterior y mis manos del momento. El resultado es una impresión digital que incorpora una imagen Xerox. Las dos tecnologías coexisten.

Cuando miro mis manos, no las considero feas. Y casi no las considero viejas. Las manos de los viejos son muy poderosas. Reflejan lo que han hecho con sus vidas. Cuentan una historia.
In my mid-thirties, I began to make a series of mostly black paintings. I rolled each with matte black, on top of which I painted an understated but noticeable small figure in color. The entire painting was then covered with glass and enclosed in a narrow aluminum frame. The result was a mirrored conceptual painting, a signifier, but not the thing. The clues clearly read as a painting, but the viewing experience was disarming, impossible to see into. It was a mirror of life.

It's hard for me to remember how I got that idea. It was related to the American artist Jackson Pollock. When Pollock did his drip paintings, he wasn't sitting down and making a painting; he was doing this action. And I thought to myself, “The art was embodied in that action. And therefore, that was more important than the painting itself.” My paintings reveal whatever happens in front of them. I was working on them as performance art was starting to be on the minds of artists all around the world, and on my mind as well. I was headed in that direction.

A mis treinta y tantos años comencé una serie de pinturas mayormente negras. Primero pasaba un rodillo con pintura negra mate y encima pintaba en color una figura pequeña y sutil, pero perceptible. Entonces cubría toda la pintura con un vidrio y le ponía un marco estrecho de aluminio. El resultado era una pintura conceptual espejada, un significante, pero no el objeto. Por los componentes se leía como una pintura, pero la experiencia visual era desconcertante, imposible de penetrar. Era un espejo de la vida.

Me cuesta recordar cómo tuve la idea. Tenía que ver con el artista estadounidense Jackson Pollock. Para hacer sus pinturas con la técnica del chorreo, Pollock no se sentaba; estaba realizando una acción. Y me dije: “El arte estaba encarnado en esa acción. Y por lo tanto, eso era más importante que la pintura en sí”. Mis pinturas revelan la acción que sucede delante de ellas. Cuando las trabajé, por todo el mundo los artistas empezaban a considerar el género de la performance, y yo también. Estaba encaminada por ese rumbo.
This material was published in 2023 to coincide with the Getty Research Institute exhibition *Barbara T. Smith: The Way to Be*, on view at the Getty Center from February 28 to July 16, 2023.

To cite this information, please use: *Barbara T. Smith: The Way to Be*, published online 2023, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, [www.getty.edu/barbaratsmith](http://www.getty.edu/barbaratsmith).