

Her art shaped by loss in plane crash

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Photo: Paul Joseph Brown/Seattle Post-Intelligencer
"A tragedy is kind of a personal earthquake," says Jacqueline Barnett.

Last year, in the early evening of the 31st of January, [Jacqueline Barnett](#) and her husband, Wayne, had just finished dinner in their gracious Queen Anne home when the phone rang.

Today when the phone rings, she almost always feels a lingering chill, but that night, she answered it casually, without hesitation.

"Nothing really bad had ever happened to me," she said. As a successful painter happily married to an illustrious law professor, parent of five grown children and grandparent of 12, she had, she realizes now, a golden life.

The news she so easily picked up the phone to hear didn't come as a complete surprise. Earlier that night, she'd seen a report on TV describing the crash of Alaska Airlines flight 261 en route to Seattle. No one aboard survived. Awful, she thought, but passed on to other things, because the disaster wasn't personal. She didn't know anybody on that flight.

And yet she did. Two of her granddaughters, Coriander Barnett-Clementson, 8, and [Blake Barnett-Clemenston](#), 6, were on the plane, along with Barnett's former son-in-law, Dr. [David Clemenston](#), his new wife and their two children.

"I heard the news, had an image of the girls being ripped from the sky and went into shock," she said. **The children's mother, Dr. Claire Barnett**, was unreachable in Florida and due to arrive the next day in San Francisco. Barnett and her husband met the plane, not wanting their daughter to learn from strangers the horrible way her life had altered.

"A tragedy is a kind of personal earthquake," she continued. "Shocks come in waves with aftershocks. My studio was the only place I could be without feeling either numb or overwhelmed."

For Barnett, 56, painting was more than a distraction. It allowed her to focus her grief and transform it into bruising shapes and fierce, furious color. Painting took the enormity of her loss from her and gave it back in a form she could tolerate, even accept.

Before the crash, Barnett's paintings were expressively abstract, with no narrative, figures or recognizable subject matter of any kind.

"I paint the colors and forms of feeling," she said. "Typically, those feelings have tended to be exuberant, even joyous. After the crash, I couldn't paint myself back into my golden life. It was over. I couldn't perceive any feeling that wasn't shaped by the loss of my grandchildren and the sorrow of my daughter, so I went with it and let the crash be my subject."

From what she calls the "incomprehensible magnitude" of the event, she has created two series of oil paintings on canvas and monotypes.

The first, collectively titled "Impact," was shown last fall at San Francisco's Bradford Campbell Gallery. The second, titled "Rising and Falling," is on view at Seattle's Foster/White Gallery, [123 S. Jackson](#) St. in Pioneer Square, through July 29. Paintings and monotypes from "Impact" will be exhibited in January at [Seattle Pacific University's](#) Art Gallery.

Barnett sees the "Impact" series as more immediate than "Rising and Falling," but both series have an emotional force that's startling.

"Impact" is full of abstract faces. They are planets imploding, leaking and giving way, the natural order upended. The canvas space is deeply interior. The forms paint takes are the kind that flash inside the eyes when they're closed: hot, interior dramas.

"Rising and Falling" at Foster/White is a step back. The scenes portrayed here are emblems of scenes that occurred in the world.

The monotype "Emblem" (22 inches high by 30 inches wide) shows two bundles floating in a sun-baked, orange sky. In real life, the children fell out of the sky. In the painting, they float forever, protected by love and memory.

The painting "Emptiness" (26 inches high by 28 inches wide) is spare for Barnett, with painfully thin lines etched into blank spaces. The lines create a frail cluster of urns at a funeral home, blank and rimmed at odd angles with blue.

Faces appear in "Rising and Falling" in the gray/black monotypes titled "Soft Eyes," a yoga term for tender detachment. "I have a daughter who's a poet," Barnett said. "She told me if I try to fix something, I'll be overwhelmed, but if I look at it with soft eyes, I can take it in."

The painting "Courage" (54 inches high by 56 inches wide) is an attempt to look with soft eyes at the actual event. Splintery lines crash into a horizon line, sending up rippling shock waves around them, the visual equivalent of deafening noise.

Even though the subject is disaster, the paintings aren't the least leaden or depressing. They have a scrappy, contentious energy that seems to have poured itself out in an instant and gone on to root and flourish.

"The need of a grief-stricken person is to connect," she said. "Close in on yourself and you'll die. Life goes on, but the person with a huge loss feels stuck. Painting helped me keep my heart open, but that wasn't enough. Scraping down to exist, I found friends and compassion, and that's what I've tried to express."