

Conjuring Paintings' Innermost Thoughts at the Barnes Foundation

In Andrea Hornick's audio tour, the figures of paintings converse and come to life.

A.M. Weaver February 9, 2017



Andrea Hornick at the Barnes Foundation for her *Unbounded Histories* project (photo by Lauren Altman, image courtesy the Barnes Foundation)

PHILADELPHIA — For the past 15 years, contemporary artist Andrea Hornick has been creating fictional narratives based on early Renaissance portrait paintings of women. For this series, titled *Journey*, she channels the sitters of the portraits via a shamanic

drumming ceremony to identify the animal spirit of each female subject. She then repaints these historic portraits incorporating the animals, creating ironic, satirical works that are also spiritual in their aim to channel the power of the unknown.

Whenever Hornick displays her portraits, she organizes them in clusters of three. They are each accompanied by a poem, which is narrated on an iPad and becomes a tool for the viewer to decipher the painting's imagery and its history. The poetic stories also detail Hornick's shamanic journeys. For example, the howler monkey serves as her spirit guide in the repainting of Mary Magdalene, who originally appears in the medieval altarpiece "Master of the Sterzing Altarpiece German, School of Ulm" (1450). Hornick writes, "The howler monkey sees Mary Magdalene's altruism and emboldens her to give to herself and express loudly while listening, instructed by his jungle cry; serious playing ensues..." A farcical scene unfolds in which basketballs bounce and ham sandwiches are served to Queen Isabella of Portugal and Madame Bonnier de la Mosson.



Three works from Andrea Hornick's *Journey* series. From left to right: "Howler Monkey Sees Mary Magdalene's Altruism and Emboldens her to Give to Herself and Express Loudly while Listening, Instructed by his Jungle Cry"; "Madame Bonier de la Moson Luxuriates in the Protective Embodiment of Sun Bear; his Hibernation-Harnessed Fortitude Lends Her a Lack of Poise Needed to Play Diana the

Huntress”; “Queen Isabella and Baby Elephant Listen Expansively in Quest for Wisdom on Self-Pampering in the Midst of Cultivating an Awareness of Portuguese Basic Needs” (image courtesy Savery Gallery)

Hornick’s poetic and multidisciplinary process is explored in *Unbounded Histories* at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. Her exhibition is part of the museum’s efforts to integrate contemporary art practices with its historical collection, as it’s invited artists to reinterpret the quixotic installation style Albert Barnes is known for, where artworks and artifacts from diverse cultures are juxtaposed regardless of chronology or origin. Hornick adds to Barnes’s alternative approach to exhibition design by overlaying the experience with a journey through sound. In her spoken-word narrative, she engages works by Picasso, Renoir, Courbet, Corot, Cézanne, and the like, creating a rich dialogue with the paintings via a download on your cell phone.



Andrea Hornick drumming at the Barnes Foundation (photo by Lauren Altman, courtesy Savery Gallery)

Hornick's approach in *Unbounded Histories* was an organic one, in which she randomly selected clusters of paintings she liked throughout the museum, forging relationships between them based on formal and enigmatic properties. Her goal is to construct narratives that ultimately free the viewer from preordained ideas and to have them scrutinize the works by letting their imaginations roam.

As with her series *Journey*, Hornick used shamanic drumming to conjure the animal spirits and tap into the inner ruminations of painted subjects for *Unbounded Histories*. In Hornick's poems, animal forms, as well the figures in the paintings, transcend specific works and reappear in her discussion of other ones. In the first room, we are told that the bulls of Picasso's "Composition: The Peasants" (1906) descend from their painted landscape of golden hay into the gallery with flowers in their mouths, while the bored woman in Corot's painting joins a tea party with Seurat's nudes in "Models (Poseuses)" (1886–1888). A metal 18th-century hinge mounted sideways on the wall is identified as bullhorns that allude to female fallopian tubes as a sign of fertility. As the narrative comes to a close, ending the journey in room one, the bulls from Picasso's "The Peasants" freely romp in and out of the paintings in the hope that the museum guards do not notice.



Georges Seurat French, “Models (Poseuses)” (1886–1888), oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 98 3/8 in. (image courtesy the Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)

In Gallery 23, a rabbit nibbling a carrot in Henri Rousseau’s painting “The Rabbit’s Meal” (1908) is said to assist Saint Catherine, who is in a painting from another gallery, to reach heaven. Meanwhile, in a different Rousseau painting, “Unpleasant Surprise” (1901), an urn-shaped, naked female figure and dark brown bear take on a foreboding and erotic quality. Hornick channels the bear and warns the woman of a nearby hunter with a gun, which she cites as a symbol of the machine age, while equating the lake, woman, and bear with nature. The woman in Rousseau’s painting then escapes to William Glackens’s “Decoration” (2014), beseeching Buddha and Lakshmi, goddess and wife of Vishnu, for help. When the woman returns to Rousseau’s painting, she is equipped with new knowledge and neutralizes the hunter’s power.



Henri Rousseau, “Unpleasant Surprise (Mauvaise surprise)” (1901), oil on canvas, 76 5/8 x 51 1/8 in. (image courtesy the Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)

In Hornick’s narratives, truth and fiction become intertwined and the imagination is an active agent in experiencing the works of art as objects and soundscapes. I found myself laughing aloud at times, even while taking Hornick’s meditated journey through the collection seriously. As I walked through the galleries, I notice many bored youth on traditional tours of the collection. If only their professors had the insight to take Hornick’s *Unbounded Histories* tour, I am sure the young people would gladly embrace being freed from a strict historical review, which was probably Barnes’s dream.

Andrea Hornick: *Unbounded Histories continues at the Barnes Foundation* (2025 Benjamin Franklin Pkwy, Philadelphia) through February 19.