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MCC artist of national acclaim stumbled into career by accident

By Janie Magruder

As a child growing up in small-town Maryland, Malena Barnhart had little exposure to art or art instruction. She was into girly stickers and disposable cameras, created a stop-motion animation featuring her Barbie dolls, and later wrote and mailed out a teen fan magazine.

But Barnhart planned to be a writer or a lawyer because she enjoyed the push-and-pull of opposing concepts.

"It wasn't until I was in college that I kind of stumbled into art," the Tempe woman said. "I didn't realize it was idea based."

Now on faculty at Mesa Community College, Barnhart's commitment to critical thinking is among the reasons she recently received an MCC Outstanding Adjunct Faculty award.

The awards recognize faculty that promote inclusion and diversity, use technology to enhance student learning, and show encouragement, care and respect to students, staff and teaching peers.

Barnhart, who teaches digital photography and digital photographic imaging, also was lauded for emphasizing empathy in art creation. She joined the faculty in 2014, a year after earning a Master of Fine Arts in photography from ASU.

Barnhart was nominated by MCC adjunct faculty Ted Decker, a longtime advocate of visual arts and artists who co-founded the Phoenix Institute of Contemporary Art and is its director and curator. Decker teaches art history and professional practices courses, and received an MCC Outstanding Adjunct Faculty award in 2020.

"Malena does extensive research and has a plethora of ideas which manifest themselves in her artwork and in her vibrant practice," he said. "Her students talk about how wonderful a teacher she is. I admire her for being focused on her students and on student learning."

Additionally, Decker said, Barnhart is prominent in the student art community, often inviting students to collaborate on her own work, and she is a new breed of teacher.

"She's a wonderful person, she's energetic, innovative, and someone who cares about her students and their practice and growth," he said.

The award was unexpected, but so meaningful, Barnhart said, especially because Decker nominated her.

"He is one of several instructors I want



MCC interim president Lori Berquam, left, with awardee Malena Barnhart. — MCC photo

to model myself after because he's such a selfless person and does so many acts of kindness," she said.

Barnhart's work has been displayed in many solo and group exhibitions locally, nationally and internationally, and it has received numerous accolades.

"I used to think that art making was art making, but the big realization is that I'm falling into black holes (on the Internet), and that's part of my art practice," she said.

Barnhart uses in her art repurposed cultural materials, a variety of found items and footage including children's stickers, YouTube videos, party decorations and teen posters.

"I value the ability to make work that is angry, critical and not always pretty," she said.

Barnhart's work centers on the process of enculturation and its role in perpetuating harmful gender norms. Her website, malenabarnhart.com, features her videos, installations and 2-D works that question intended messages.

"We learn our culture from what we consume, whether one is consuming princess toys, video games or Pinterest wedding boards," she writes.

In addition to the award, MCC recently promoted her to residential faculty status. The great diversity of art students at the college — from age and backgrounds to education and experiences — makes it a rewarding place to teach, Barnhart said.

"The advantage is being in class with people who are different from you and think differently than you," she said.

"The interesting, intimate conversations we have in the classroom feed into my practice and make me a better person. It's so interesting to be in a room full of people nerding out about art and to talk about it for three hours."