

Life, art and her mother

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By A.K. Whitney, Staff Writer

A small white dog lies on the armrest of the couch near the doorway of Slater Barron's backyard studio on Long Beach's Westside. Watching over the bichon frise is a life-size canvas cutout of a woman. The woman is barely 5 feet tall, has wispy gray hair, and is wearing a red sweatsuit. Her head is cocked to one side, and her expression is friendly but a bit bemused, as if she is wondering what is going on.

"She keeps me company in the studio," says Barron of the cutout, which is a portrait of her mother Williamina.

Williamina Slater died in a sanitarium in 1991, after suffering from Alzheimer's disease for 14 years. Barron's father, Louis Slater, was also a patient at the sanitarium, and also had Alzheimer's. He died in 1987.

There's something about watching two of the people you are closest to in the world slowly and torturously lose their minds that makes you all the more protective of their legacies, and Barron coped for decades with the wrenching experience by memorializing them in her art.

This year, however, that outlet stopped being enough, and Barron recently self-published "Remembering the Forgetting: An Artist Shares Her Experience, 1977-2007."

Barron will talk about and sign her book today at 2BD Living in

Long Beach. (An exhibit of some of the work she did of her parents, also called "Remembering the Forgetting," is on display at USC's Institute for Genetic Medicine through Oct. 26.)

Part biography, part artistic installation - "this book is both fiction and nonfiction," Barron writes in the introduction - "Remembering the Forgetting" covers a lot of ground, but focuses mostly on the years her parents were ill.

The book is foremost a love letter to them, briefly detailing their histories - Louis, a Russian Jew who came to America with his family to escape the pogroms, met Williamina in New York, where she, a Scottish immigrant, had decided to leave the Highlands to become a Broadway dancer. The two fell in love quickly, and had two daughters.

Barron was born Mary Lou Slater in New Jersey in 1930. She was a Navy officer in the Korean conflict, got a degree in sociology and worked as a social worker. She married a Marine, and his work took the family all over the world, including to France, where an art class inspired Barron to become a painter.

In 1974, Barron discovered the artistic medium she has since become identified with in the arts community - lint. More specifically, clothes-dryer lint, the kind you have to clear out of the filter or else risk a fire. In 1974, Barron and her husband were living in Orange County with a houseful of teenagers, which meant a lot of laundry.

"I had four children, I had a lot of lint," says Barron, who divorced her husband a few years later.

The inspiration to use lint as artistic material not only turned a chore into something fun, it also forever branded Barron as "the lint lady."

KCET TV host Huell Howser has called her that since he did a segment on her in 1988 (he plans to do a follow-up next month, which should air in September). Being the lint lady also got Barron on Johnny Carson, in Time magazine and in Art in America.

But just three years after her discovery, Barron realized that her material of choice - faded, easily disintegrated - was a metaphor for what was happening to her parents. In 1977, Williamina started showing the symptoms of Alzheimer's - confusion, constant questions and a decline in personal grooming. Caring for her was too much for Louis, who it eventually became apparent was dealing with the same problems.

In the late '70s and early '80s, however, Alzheimer's was not very well understood, and doctors hesitated to make such a diagnosis. But even without a definite diagnosis, Barron and her older sister, Jean, wound up making the tough decision of having their parents placed in a sanitarium. Once there, Williamina and Louis Slater were safe and well cared for, but there was no stopping the disease.

Barron turned her pain at their disintegration into lint installations such as "The Six-O'Clock News," which showed two hunched older figures watching television in their living room, and a series of portraits of Williamina Slater, known as "Mother."

The "Mother" series spanned 1983-1991, but Barron says she never showed Williamina her work.

During a moment of lucidity, it would have hurt her, Barron says. And, by the time the series reached the end, she had "faded in on herself."

The amount of time Barron spent at the sanitarium also brought her into contact with other patients. They inspire the second half of "Remembering the Forgetting" - this would be the fictional part Barron refers to in her introduction - and consists of made-up

histories of more than a dozen people, male and female.

These histories each take the form of a poem and a collage, and to Barron, giving these individuals a colorful history is as powerful a legacy as the one left by her parents.

And what of Barron's own legacy? With a book, a body of artwork, four children and seven grandchildren, it seems assured. But will there be a time, maybe not in the immediate future, but maybe in a few years, when Barron's memory-crammed studio seems unfamiliar to her?

Barron says she has been aware of her own Alzheimer's risk for years. She and Jean, she says, were controls in a study. Both felt reassured by research showing that hereditary Alzheimer's tends to show up when you're in your 50s. However, when Jean died in 2001 at 72 years old, an autopsy revealed she was in the beginning stages of Alzheimer's.

Barron, 77, says she does what doctors recommend to people concerned they may develop Alzheimer's - she exercises, eats healthy foods, and keeps her mind active.

"But there's really nothing you can do to prevent it," she says.

Her voice is calm and matter-of-fact. She is sitting in a chair at one end of the worktable that sits in the middle of the studio. It is cluttered with art supplies - a bag of lint, paper candy cups, canisters of acrylic.

The dog, at the sound of her mistress' voice, raises her head off the armrest. And the cutout of Williamina Slater still looks bemused.