

THE VIRGINIA PROJECT
by Michael Nevins



When feminist poet Tina Barry and her ceramicist husband moved from Brooklyn to the tiny Catskill village of High Falls in 2014, she learned that Marc Chagall and his pregnant lover Virginia Haggard McNeil had lived in the same hamlet in 1946-48. Intrigued with the coincidence, Tina especially related to the published experiences of Virginia and her young daughter Jean whose lives mirrored her own in some ways. Jean McNeil had lost her father to depression and psychosis, then to divorce whereas Tina's parents divorced when she was seven and her father was rarely present in her life. Before long Tina began writing prose poems in both Virginia and Jean's imagined voices and as she explained:

What kept the spark lit, was researching about how the women's lives had unfolded, not just during the time they were in High Falls, but throughout their lives. Anger kept it going too. Virginia, if she's mentioned at all, was often referred to as "the maid" or "mistress"; Jean was rarely mentioned...My anger at women being trivialized and forgotten drove the writing and the project.

But who was Virginia? In 1944 after Chagall's wife Bella suddenly died in the Adirondacks of diabetic complications of an infected throat (1944), Marc's married daughter Ida, who with her husband shared a Riverside Drive apartment/studio with him, needed someone to take her 58 year old father off her hands. She found Virginia Haggard McNeil (1915-2006) who was the daughter of a former British consul and in an unhappy marriage with a depressed and failed Scottish painter John McNeil and had a five year old girl Jean. She'd separated from her husband and needed money. For his part, Marc literally needed someone to darn his socks, tend house - and mother him. He appreciated the refined beauty of the tall young English woman who could talk to him in French.

So Virginia moved in and learned to prepare blini and borscht, but she did more than mend his socks - much more. Although she was 28 years younger than Marc, and just a year older than Ida, they began an affair and she became pregnant. He was ashamed to tell friends that he'd sired an illegitimate child with a married gentile and, as she confided to a friend, "For Marc's sake I don't want people to know." Virginia was charged with finding a quiet country place where they could live in relative seclusion.

In her memoir, *My Life with Chagall. Seven Years of Plenty*, Virginia described how during their two years in High Falls, which Marc considered to be a paradise, he produced nearly one hundred paintings, gouaches and drawings. However, when Virginia was nearing term he left for an exhibition in Paris and didn't return until two months after baby David arrived.

In their early years together Virginia and Marc had a genuine loving relationship but she characterized Chagall as "full of contradictions—generous and guarded, naïve and shrewd, explosive and secret, humorous and sad, vulnerable and strong." But after they returned to France in 1946 Virginia felt stifled and craved more autonomy. As she wrote several years later in her memoir:

I am still fond of him [Marc], as fond as ever, and deeply attached to Chagall the artist but his life is no longer his, he is caught up and carried away by an immense machine which is his fame and he likes it. Gone are those rare moments when we could get away from money talk, "prestige," publicity and art extras, when Mark just worked like the devil in some quiet place and had no thought for the money value of his paintings. Those were blissfully happy moments and we loved each other then.

But at other times he treated me very much as a favorite piece of furniture, I was useful and a little bit ornamental too, but I hadn't any soul. I was there to fetch and carry, administer to his needs and help the "machine" to turn round smoothly. I wouldn't have minded so much if the high powered mechanism hadn't interfered with his work. Alas! He was receiving orders for certain types of productions which would fetch high prices. Instead of being his own savage self and painting the wild and beautiful things he is capable of, he consciously turned his hand to certain works which he was encouraged to make and convinced himself that it was what he wanted to do. His greatest desire was to paint from nature. This was firmly and severely discouraged.....The fame machine turns around inexorably and everybody gets richer and more heartless. (Sept. 21, 1952)

Virginia had developed a relationship with Belgian photographer Charles Lierens and when her husband finally agreed to a divorce, she left Marc and married Charles and lived for the remainder of her life in Belgium. She'd filled a seven year gap between

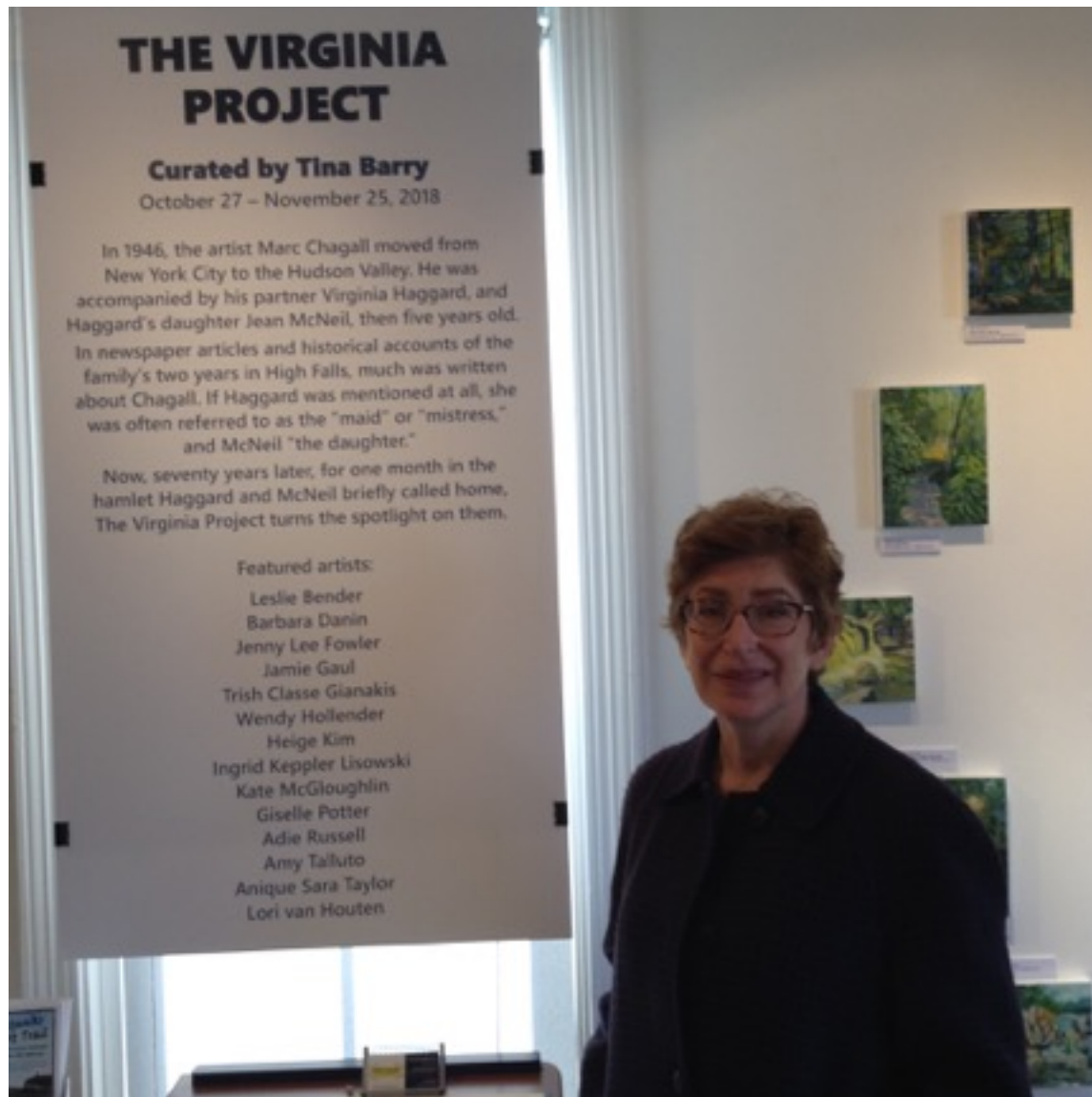
Chagall's two wives and her affectionate memoir was written seven years after she left him for the photographer - who was only one year younger than Chagall.

Just like after Bella's death, Marc was devastated and within four months another housekeeper was hired. Known to all as Vava, she insisted that they marry. She was extremely controlling and there were tensions with Ida whom she had cut out of Marc's will, but Vava remained with Chagall until his death in 1985 at age 97. Today Virginia's daughter Jean McNeil is approaching age 80 and lives in southeast England where she is a well-known landscape painter.



Virginia and Jean in High Falls

Early in 2018 Tina Barry invited fourteen woman painters, most of whom lived in the Catskill region, to create their own reactions to her poems. Both Tina's words and their pictures were exhibited as *The Virginia Project* at The Wired Gallery in High Falls (10/27-11/25/18).



The painting by Amy Talluto (shown above) was one of her three responses to the following verse in which Tina Barry imagined Virginia's feelings upon first viewing what would become their country home:

The real estate agent wore a fedora, smashed almost flat, a cartoon hat too small for his head. He advertised the quality of his coat with a label sewn near the cuff of one sleeve: 100 percent wool. Beneath it, a shirt stretched so far the buttons barely held; I could have rested my mind on the balloon of his belly.

With the windows open, light poured in, a pure yellow Catskill's light Marc would have loved. We drove from Walkill, to Bethel, Warwick and Mt. Hope. We drove to Kingston, Cottekill, Olive Bridge and Accord. None of the homes suited. "Your husband's some kind of artist, right?" I nodded. "Well, he said, I have a house. It's small and kinda beaten down, but it has another little house next to it. Maybe your husband could do whatever he does there?"

In High Falls, a small village of wooden homes, cows grazed, cats on front porches turned their bellies to the sun. He parked the car on a narrow side street. With his hand on my elbow, we picked our way along, the air phosphorescent with fir trees and the clean, mineral smell of water. "Look up," he said. Miles above us the falls roared down as if God had slashed the sky and emptied the oceans.



Chagall usually was affectionate to Jean but she represented competition for her mother's affection and he insisted that she be sent away for schooling. In another short poem Tina Barry, now in Jean's voice, describes how a kindly school teacher took pity on the lonely girl:

My teacher Mrs. Schwartz takes me to the Barnum and Bailey's circus She takes none of the other girls This is my first circus I am so tired because I couldn't sleep Mrs. Schwartz drives and sings Frere Jacques and we both sing Frere Jacques A woman drives next to us and smiles I move close to Mrs. Schwartz I want the woman to think I am Mrs. Schwartz's daughter

When we get there two clowns are smoking cigarettes outside One sees me and squeezes his big red nose Behind a curtain I can see a bearded lady who is smaller than I am There are pictures of man twins that share one lady and dead bodies in jars that I do not want to see elephants wear flowers around their necks and march in a circle One big tiger climbs up a little ladder A man with a big curly mustache wants him to jump through a ring of fire The tiger does not want to jump so the man cracks the whip

Tina Barry's prose poem inspired Giselle Potter to paint *Circus* (below).



The following are some artist's reactions to Tina Barry's poems.







100. 100. 100.



101. 101. 101.



102. 102. 102.



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