

**H**ave you ever really looked at the inside of a kiwi? Or a fig? Or a peach? I mean *really* looked at the way the skin wraps around to protect the flesh — and the flesh seems to nourish the seed that nestles snugly in its center?

If not, now's your chance. In an exhibition called "L'Origine du Monde" at Riverrun Gallery, Lambertville artist Illia Barger exposes all the intimate secrets of the juicy inhabitants of our fruit bowls and vegetable crispers. And she does it on linen canvases that range from large to mural size so you feel you can walk right into that peach and be swallowed up in its sweetness.

Barger, the daughter of two artists, grew up in a circa 1784 grist mill in Carversville, Bucks County, Pa., until she went on full scholarships to Bennington College and later Cooper Union, where she earned a bachelor of fine arts degree.

"Then I came back here and did murals and faux painting, but six years ago I decided to stop that and put two feet into painting," she says.

Although she still lives and works in New York some of the time, she's now moved back to this area, sharing a studio with a sculptor friend in Lambertville.

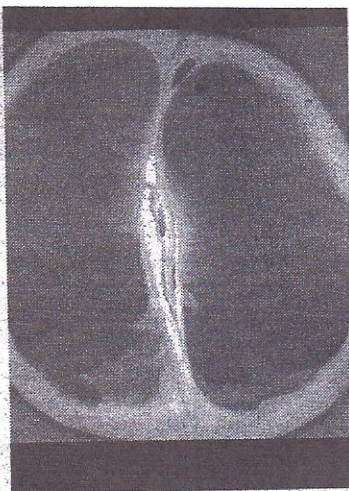
She's been working on this collection of fruits and vegetables for the past year and a half, moving in closer and closer all the time. The earlier paintings in the exhibit show some background and a little bit of the skin of the fruit. In the most recent ones, the fruit or vegetable is right up to the plane with some of it even going off the edge of the canvas. It's as if you can't get any closer.

Barger says one reason for these gigantic closeups is that her eyesight is bad.

"When I did still lifes at Cooper Union I had to get up so close to see anything. Now I actually pick up the fruit and hold it in my hand to see it while I paint," she says.

"It's in your face — like look at the beauty and the subtlety and natural form that you are about to eat. When I cut into it, I have a lot of reverence for it," she says. "Just the fact that it has not been seen in the light of day — that I'm the first person that has ever seen the inside of that kiwi."

Because fresh fruits and vegetables don't last very long once



"Aurora" by Illia Barger is part of an exhibit of the artist's works on view at Riverrun Gallery.

they're cut, Barger has to work fast to catch them in their initial freshness. "I paint wet-on-wet all at once and never clean the brush," she says. "It's a very careful laying-on of the paint using the brush as a tool in many ways. It's like landing a plane. You have to guide what's on the brush — how much paint, how much medium, where you're going to put it, how you're going to lay it on."

Barger builds her own stretcher frames and stretches her own canvas (except her term for it is "wrestling the canvas" because of their monumental size). She primes them with rabbit-skin glue and titanium white base. She makes her own varnish from crystals and turpentine.

Her latest two paintings, finished just about an hour before I visited her studio, are 48-by-46-inch cross-sections of a pair of kiwis. Seeming to gain a fresh insight into what she has just created, she mused, "These two are like a couple, aren't they? Like a man and a woman. There are so many symbolic, metaphorical associations in nature."

She was in the process that day of gathering all the paintings and drawings for the Riverrun exhibition. Propped against a wall was a slightly smaller painting of a lush tomato. A local German-Stripe organic tomato she called it. And hanging above it, a many-times-more-than-lifesize painting of a stalk of celery. There were more kiwis and a cross-section of a fig that would make Georgia O'Keeffe's sensual floral closeups look innocent.

In addition to the paintings, there is one figurative drawing

# fine arts

## Taking a close look at the seedy side of fruit

By JANET PURCELL  
Special to The Times

of a reclining female nude, as well as six drawings of the flesh of grapefruits and oil on paper renderings of the intricacies of walnuts in their shells.

Although Barger says these works are "not about an object, they're about color and form," what they most seem to be about is our being able to witness and

to contemplate the "ongoingness" of life, of nature creating and recreating itself over and over again.

Barger is represented in a number of collections, the most notable of which are the Greek Consulate in Manhattan and the Selma Burke Museum of Art in Winston-Salem, N.C.

**G17**

"L'Origine du Monde" will continue through Nov. 27 at Riverrun Gallery in the Laceworks, 87 S. Main Street, Lambertville. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday and Wednesday-Saturday; noon-5 p.m. Sunday. Closed Tuesdays. Call (609) 397-3349.