Sara Barker

undo the knot

31 Oct 2020 – 30 Jan 2021

climb, 2020

Susanna Beaumont is a curator, mentor & writer. In 2018 she launched Design Exhibition Scotland and earlier this year, DES a new online journal.

Previous roles include Guest Curator at Jupiter Artland 2012 / 2013 and director of Frith Street Gallery, London 2011 / 2012. Susanna was the founding director of the contemporary art gallery, doggerfisher from 2000–2010.

Room Temperature

undo the knot, Sara Barker's exhibition at Cample this autumn, is an intense, intimate meditation made physical on time and space. A series of eighteen wall-based reliefs, each has been hand-held, held by hand, cradled and crafted by Barker. Some of the reliefs suggest wayside devotional shrines with modest offerings. Others are sturdier, more corporeal, more resolutely 'here and now'. Some suggest portals and thresholds, spheres, dimensions and angles, vistas and views both long and long-stifled. Each could be described as either a small enclosure or a large-scale miniature. And if we were miniaturised along the lines of Alice, having heeded the *Drink Me* dictate, we would chase around a wonder of labyrinthine twists and turns. Under foot there would be layers of thick-set paint of differing textures. Close to hand there would be ornamentation, curls of aluminium, a piece of mesh or a shard of cardboard that would appear the size of a continent.

Working within shallow troughs made of aluminium or steel, Barker typically forges her reliefs within strongly demarcated boundaries with near-defensive walls. These provide Barker with an arena for mapping out high drama, or more muted, barely distinguishable acts of painting. Barker builds up from the surface of the troughs by placing watercolour, varnish, and oil paint atop each other. She invites low whispers of colour, mark making and materials to curdle as they collide, collude, hit it off or retreat. She talks about inviting unpredictable outcomes, staging encounters within the closed, almost claustrophobic confines of these arenas.

The new reliefs included in *undo the knot* are different from Barker's earlier works. Often described as sculptures and typically attached to the gallery wall, they often had the audacity to strike out into three dimensions. Take *Draft overlapped*, from 2012. A shaft of metal heads out into space at 90 degrees. It looks precarious, it is. Brave, even defiant, without doubt. Likewise *Aquaria*, 2012; pared down and skeletal, it leaves the relative safety of the gallery wall for the wider space of the open floor. Often etiolated and frequently pale, these works seem to be seeking the sun and the promise of strength.

As time and timings would have it, Barker began work on the reliefs for Cample Line as lockdown began. In normal circumstances, she would have journeyed across Glasgow from home to her studio. She now found herself moving by foot in minutes between interior spaces at home. Kitchen table, attic, garage; the nature of the activity dictated the space. Working with car paint or varnish demanded the garage; reading and soldering the attic; sketching the kitchen table.

Indeed, normal circumstances would have also involved fabricators who would have worked with Barker to weld, construct, cut and create her work. Instead, in the Cample Line reliefs, we can see much more of the handmade and made-at-home. She has soldered the metal, manipulated by hand the silver foil, the cardboard. Layering, adding, removing. Stepping back to view, stepping forward to amend and adjust. New rhythms for a new age. Barker has, to a degree, delighted in this re-found intimacy with her work. The chance of a late-night close encounter with a work, or at first light, an early morning sighting of a half-completed one. It has allowed Barker to gently interrogate her own practice. Undoubtedly, the domestic proportions of the spaces of Cample Line invite a modesty in scale and beckon in intimacy. Its thick, sturdy 18th-century walls of sandstone, rubble and whin, with the more recent addition of plaster board, offer a safe harbour.

Barker has recently talked about 'wanting to get a handle on production.' Increasingly, she is questioning our seemingly ceaseless production of more things for an already full-up world. And now with our views curtailed, our right to roam halted, Barker has created portable reliefs (might they be shrines to give relief?) that we could step into and through should we let our imagination run, or like Alice and the Looking Glass, like Lucy pushing through cool, heavy fur into Narnia.

From early summer, when movement was again made possible, Barker travelled a number of times to Dumfriesshire from Glasgow to visit Cample Line. More aware than usual of the urban giving way to green rural folds of an emptier landscape; of how the road south cleaves through the land; of how trees appeared hefted into copses, Barker felt unfurled into an unfolding landscape.

Draft overlapped, 2012
Steel rod, brass rod, aluminium sheet, oil paint, canvas, metal filler, glass, 102 x 62 x 46 cm

Aquaria, 2012
Aluminium sheet, steel, canvas, watercolour, oil paint, pastel, filler, rivets, 222 x 77 x 62 cm

Barker reads. She reads as she works. Texts, marked pages and open books sit along her brushes and materials. She seems to exhale the written word as if it were breath. The poetry of Alice Oswald and Amy Lowell and the novels of Ali Smith and Virginia Woolf give her navigational pull, literally lines to follow as well as to read. Text sculpts lines, guides the hand, informs the mood. Barker's reliefs are akin to pages from a diary, sketches sketched, a draft of a composition, a quickly written musical score.

undo the knot is a kind of unearthing, a reveal. A series of archaeological sites filled with the physical, the familiar and the unidentifiable, the less pin-down-able shaky dream, the half-recalled and the fast-dissolving memory. Earthy yet brittle, *undo the knot* gives evidence of time spent, time stretched, time corrupted, ordered and disordered.

19 October 2020

reason, 2020

Our views curtailed

Are they landscape paintings.

Dart, 2020

tranquilliser / river runs /
drift / pick / flake / scatter

mouth, 2020

spout / kettle / bird / bite / poised

GAP, 2020

screen / rock / sand /
stitch / wood-like mosaic

JOINT, 2020

borders / grit / foil / tension

List of works

1. *JOINT*, 2020
   Stainless steel tray, stainless steel rod, automotive paint, oil paint and stick, varnish, tinfoil perspex
   60 x 49 x 9 cm

2. *wait*, 2020
   Stainless steel tray, brass rod, automotive and gloss paint
   23 x 33 x 8 cm

3. *Split*, 2020
   Stainless steel tray, stainless steel rod, automotive paint, oil paint, tinfoil, 20 x 20 x 5 cm

4. *Dart*, 2020
   Plywood tray, brass rod, automotive paint, oil paint, tinfoil
   49 x 38 x 4.5 cm

5. *losses*, 2020
   Plywood tray, brass rod, gouache, oil paint, perspex, 25 x 17 x 6.5 cm

6. *climb*, 2020
   Brass metal work, 13 x 8 x 4 cm

7. *reason*, 2020
   Plywood tray, brass rod and sheet, gouache, oil paint, perspex, tinfoil
   33.5 x 40 x 6.5 cm

8. *BUNKER*, 2020
   Plywood tray, steel wire and rod, gouache, perspex, 40 x 39.5 x 4.5 cm

9. *PULL*, 2020
   Stainless steel tray, stainless steel rod, automotive paint, oil paint, rag, perspex, 43 x 50 x 16 cm

10. *mouth*, 2020
    Stainless steel tray, brass rod, automotive paint, oil paint
    38 x 40 x 8.5 cm

11. *Hairs*, 2020
    Stainless steel tray, stainless steel rod, automotive paint, oil paint, varnish
    38 x 40 x 8.5 cm

12. *Will*, 2020
    Stainless steel tray, stainless steel rod, automotive paint, oil paint, varnish
    54 x 44 x 17 cm

13. *toy*, 2020
    Stainless steel tray , stainless steel rod, automotive paint, oil paint and stick, varnish, perspex
    50 x 60 x 15 cm

14. *End*, 2020
    Stainless steel tray, stainless steel rod, automotive paint, oil paint and stick, varnish, 30 x 23 x 6 cm

15. *hold*, 2020
    Cardboard tray, brass rod, pencil, varnish, 28 x 20 x 6 cm

16. *GAP*, 2020
    Stainless steel tray, stainless steel rod, automotive paint, oil paint
    45 x 55 x 6 cm

17. *outline*, 2020
    Stainless steel tray, stainless steel rod, automotive paint, oil paint and stick, varnish, 50 x 60 x 10 cm

18. *tangle*, 2020
    Plywood tray, stainless steel rod, gouache, automotive paint, oil paint, pencils, varnish, 68 x 52 x 18 cm

PULL, 2020

Sara Barker

b. 1980, Manchester, UK, lives and works in Glasgow, UK

Sara Barker studied History of Art at the University of Glasgow and painting at the Glasgow School of Art. Recent solo shows include *All Clouds Are Clocks, All Clocks Are Clouds*, Leeds Art Gallery (2020), *The faces of Older Images*, Mary Mary Glasgow (2017), *CHANGE-THE-SETTING*, The Fruitmarket gallery, Edinburgh and Ikon, Birmingham (2016). Her work has been included in group shows, which include: *She sees the shadows*, DRAF x MOSTYN (2018), *NOW*, Scottish Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh (2018), *Condo*, New York, Mitchell Algus Gallery, New York (2018), *Virginia Woolf, an exhibition inspired by her writings* (2018), *Women to Watch*, Phillips, London (2017), *Surface Work*, Victoria Miro, London (2018).

She has undertaken a number of outdoor work commissions including a permanent commission for the University of Leeds as part of the university's new Engineering and Physical Sciences development (2020) and for Jupiter Artland, Edinburgh (2015 and 2013). She is represented by The approach, London and carlier | gebauer, Berlin.

Barker's work blurs the lines between sculpture, painting and drawing, as well as between figuration and abstraction and between imagined and physical spaces. Not quite sculptures and not quite paintings, Barker's work typically explores the boundary between those disciplines. Working with a combination of materials including steel, aluminium, brass, glass and automotive paint to create both wall and floor-based artworks, the structural nature of her sculpture is combined and contrasted with the painted image and the freedom of gesture and mark-making. The notion of threshold long present in Barker's work places the viewer between interior and exterior, between experience and memory, between what we see, or have seen, and what we feel.

Split, 2020

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Briony Anderson

CAMPLE LINE

Cample Mill
Cample, near Thornhill
Dumfriesshire DG3 5HD
+44 (0)1848 331 000
info@campleline.org.uk
www.campleline.org.uk