

Bridget Baker

THE WAPPING PROJECT | LONDON

In late October, just before the trees turned skeletal with the onset of the London winter, I took a train to Wapping, a reinvented industrial district on the steely banks of the Thames, to experience an intriguing-sounding new project, *Wrecking at Private Siding 661*, by Bridget Baker. Baker was born in East London in the Eastern Cape and is now based in metropolitan East London.

Her work has always succeeded in reeling me in and leaving an impression that lingers. I value the quietly gladiatorial fashion with which she approaches her own gender, and relate to the sense of familial complexity and cultural displacement in her work. From her early embroidered certificates of merit (a self-consciously awkward reflection on her own socially produced desire to win in order to earn the affection and admiration of family and peers), to her outsize photographic self-portraits as sexy, debilitated Swiss maiden, to the logistical adventurousness of her more recent cinematic excursion, *The Pilot*, she traverses media in the way that explorers used to climb mountains.

Baker's intervention was sited in an old Victorian hydraulic power station that has been transformed into an arts centre with an open-ended agenda and a restaurant café that retains the vast, gritty factory-like interior of the original space.

Following the signs, I stepped through a small hole bashed into the wall of the accumulator tower and, in that dark, forgotten space, discovered a large woven vessel that seemed to have come crashing down through the height of the tower in some epic incident, and land there, stuck in the strange, silent inertness of its objectness, unable to speak or narrate the history in which it was somehow implicated.

In this sense, the thing recalls my favourite novel of 2011, Nicole Krauss's *Great House*, a tale in which human lives and actions are inexplicably woven around a few distinctive pieces of furniture that have somehow absorbed – like the violin in François Girard's 1998 film, *The Red Violin* – the energy of the epochs and eras through which they have travelled. The woven vessel looks something like the basket of a hot air balloon or a similar contraption from some outlandish work of fiction, but it encapsulates an enclosed space. It has the fantastical feel of a steampunk time-travel vehicle or an elevator designed in a previous century – an object forged in another time with a use now rendered defunct by “progress”. The door to the vessel's interior seems to have sprung open in the fall, but the space within does not invite entry. It is small, dark and foreboding, conjuring claustrophobia.



ABOVE LEFT Human transporter basket in use off the coast of East London, South Africa, date unknown. Image courtesy East London Museum archive, South Africa **ABOVE RIGHT** Human transporter basket in use off the coast of East London, South Africa, date unknown. Image courtesy East London Museum archive, South Africa **FACING PAGE** Bridget Baker, *Wrecking at Private Siding 661*, 2010–11, reclaimed bricks, broken Perspex, fluorescent lighting, woven cane, blueprint document, LED lighting, glass bottle, knitted weights, ropes and pulleys, room 6.8 x 3.4 x 20m, basket 1.8 x 1.3m. Installation view, Wapping Hydraulic Power Station, London. Image courtesy Daniel Isherwood



It transpires, by means of the accompanying textual clues, that the object is, in fact, a replica of a “human transporting basket”, which would have been used during the late colonial period to hoist British settlers from ships onto smaller boats in order to transport them to land. “An unfamiliar sight in the British Empire, these baskets were commonly in use in East London, South Africa before the development of the harbour (1890–1930),” reads the accompanying text. From a contemporary vantage point, the very thought of it bears an aura of science fiction, and, indeed, disembarking in East London circa 1885 after a sea voyage of several weeks must have felt a bit like landing on a distant planet.

The East London link is brought even more closely to bear on Baker's familial history of migration by a set of timeworn documents attached to the human transporter – letters that evidence the short-lived history of her family's involvement in the wool trade in East London, South Africa. The botched endeavours and dashed dreams of

those who migrated to South Africa during the colonial period and didn't make it so good are a starkly underwritten flipside of routinely invoked post-colonial narratives of triumphalism, conquest and pillage. In this instance, evidential traces of her forebears' failed Eastern Cape enterprise coupled with the mysterious return to the motherland of this misplaced colonial object might be seen as a form of autobiographical musing in response to Baker's own twenty-first century migration to the country her ancestors left behind at the end of the nineteenth century. Perhaps it is her own sense of lostness and displacement – not only in relation to her place in contemporary London, but in relation to the pieced-together history of her own familial past – that one senses in the haunting aura of this object.

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