Bridget Baker  
by Kim Gurney

It is perhaps paradoxical that the creator of such slick constructions of artifice, currently on view at the João Ferreira gallery, is herself so free of pretensions. The thought of meeting the artist behind a series of creative façades is a little unsettling, but Bridget Baker (b. 1971) is completely transparent about her own life and work. Her articulate visual language, which extends to the verbal, reveals a sophisticated practice rooted in contemplation and probing of herself and the world around her.

The end result is artwork that speaks of real experience, whether directly through actual childhood references or more obtusely through entirely constructed episodes whose hyper-reality conveys an astute commentary on contemporary lived experience. One thing's for sure: Baker creates art with a fire in her belly. This kind of conviction often manifests in significant yet quiet gestures of artistic backbone unknown to the audience, like re-mortgaging a house to fund a heartfelt project. That kind of courageous vision is impressive. Baker is that kind of artist.

More specifically, Baker has for the past decade been fine-tuning her signature style, which characteristically deflates the elitism of the Fine Art world. She initially achieved this using media that flouted ‘high art’ conventions such as household materials and techniques like weaving, knitting and sewing that have domestic associations.

More recently, her métier has also reflected a urge in a new way: Baker has used performance art to engage with a broader audience in public spaces. She is increasingly well known for these savvy interventions, from a 1970s-style young woman roller-skating down Sea Point promenade to hot wax hand treatments through a hole in the wall. But Baker is equally forging a name for herself in photography and whatever other media best suit her conceptual aims.

ARTIST’S STATEMENT

'I will always be concerned about wanting an experience to be intriguing enough for me to come back for more. It seems as if I assume that that is the function of the art process.'
Bridget Baker in Bridget Baker, the catalogue for her February 2006 João Ferreira exhibition

MODUS OPERANDI

Baker is a transgressor who conflates boundaries between various dualities: art and craft, memory and myth, reality and fiction. She uses various media in her work including elements of craft (such as embroidery), photography, installation and performance. Baker says part of the impulse for everyday materials is purely pragmatic but it also challenges her production to take on new materials and techniques and in the process to learn from professionals with different areas of expertise.

This is particularly evident in her current exhibition, where the credits for her collaborators on particular shots extend to nearly a dozen (photographer, patternmaker, seamstress, props, embroidery work, backdrop painters, set-building, special effects lighting, special effects clothing, etc). This mode of working has encouraged Baker to loosen her grip on process and work much more quickly in a decisive manner.

These collaborative credits attest to another Baker signature: her attention to detail. A labour-intensive thread is evident right from her earliest works including intricate embroidery, to her most recent, some of which use embroidery for illusionistic effect (as in a looming wave in The Maiden Perfect). Baker also extends this notion of labour through a concern about the working lives of others.

Baker is an itinerant creator: she has no formal studio space. Instead, she goes wherever the art takes her and sources collaborators, where required, from a local context. She turns her artistic vision to her immediate environment and often makes use of whatever materials are closest to hand. She is not precious about modus operandi, taking each situation on its own merits. She adds: 'I am not someone who can sit in a studio anymore. Ideas need to live completely outside my own environment; the seeds are in my head and they manifest differently.'

Baker has also worked since 1999 as a clothes stylist for the film industry (mostly...
Baker last month (February, 2006) presented a solo show of photographic stills at João Ferreira gallery in Cape Town, with the intriguing title ‘The Botched Epic Attempt to Rescue the Maiden’ combined a dramatic film noir effect with contemporary culture in a medieval scene of mythical proportions. The artist is in fact the motorbike rider in this particular work; she had to be cut out of her jersey at the end of a 15-hour shoot.

The exhibition’s transformation of fictional subject into an iconic representation is reminiscent of Cindy Sherman’s character constructions through deliberate use of props and other devices. These photographic stills walk the precarious line of both underscoring the illusion while simultaneously eroding it by making the visual construction so plain to see. Baker says the various references combine in surprising ways: ‘Their relationship can take you back to another time or history even if it never actually existed.’

Baker says in her exhibition statement: ‘Currently the “sensible woman” is my subject. I entice her into leading a double-life of invincibility. You may say that this type of life is characteristic of a “sensible woman” anyway. But wait, those invisible tasks she...’
Baker initially created work that was obsessively autobiographical. She says autobiography still plays a role in her work - it is just less obvious than before. She says: 'I am creating another narrative for a possible life of my own with characters that don’t exist but I try to project myself onto them... creating structures or environments in which they can operate'. Blue Collar Girl exemplifies this approach: Baker has created a kind of 'ideal woman' in a worker who is both autonomous and autobiographical.

BEFORE THAT

Two dramatic turning points are apparent in Baker’s oeuvre. The first occurred in Bielefeld, Germany, where Baker undertook a six-month residency during 2000. It culminated in a four-roomed exhibition entitled 'As if you've never seen it before®'. A letter from her mother expressing concern for her welfare formed the basis of the first room (you leave me with this). It comprised a continuous line along three walls of 120 buttons. Each button had a word embroidered upon it, sourced from a letter to Baker from her mother.

The second room (so I become small and active) comprised Polaroid snapshots arranged on the ground like a game. They recorded a series of moments of Baker being ‘awarded’ a silver trophy by 45 members of the Bielefeld community from the mayor to a chef, which she captured on Polaroid and gave participants a copy in exchange for posing. Baker inserted herself through this intervention into a non-judgmental community in her quest for finding a sense of belonging. She also gave permanence to the fleeting encounter and thereby celebrated 'the moment' as significant.

The third room (sometimes wondering) was an intimate installation of footage taken from a hole in a bag while Baker was walking. The second monitor showed 8mm footage from her mother's honeymoon on a cruise ship where she won a beauty contest - all filmed by her father, who died when Baker was very young. The footage was played on a tiny monitor.

And the final room (whether I’m stuck) consisted of stills from a video of Baker walking into the frame of a camera, looking towards it, and walking away. These series of stills were transferred onto buttons that were suspended from the roof in a spiral shape, the sequence containing her direct gaze exhibited closest to the viewer and visible with the naked eye. The rest of the buttons were only visible through a set of binoculars hanging nearby. This experience also gave rise to various signifiers of Baker’s subsequent practice - a series of phrases like 'Bridget says®' that she accompanies with copyright markers.

The second significant turning point was just one short year later in 2001 when Baker used interactive performance for the first time. She sat in the window of a drycleaner’s store in Stellenbosch and laboriously die-cut ATM slips, that she collected in the environs, into the shapes of oak leaves. Passersby could and did get involved. Baker says it was a challenging project that led her to seriously question what kind of audience she was speaking to with her work.

The experience was also the beginning of her ‘Official BB Projects’. These projects usually involve some intervention in public space that highlights how the bureaucratic side of life can be given more meaning through personal agency and choice. Baker says they were effectively ways of making the relatively mundane more meaningful and the Stellenbosch leaf project in particular spoke to blue-collar workers who resonated with its meaning. Other ‘Official BB Projects’ include ‘Homeport’ (2001) and the ‘Official BB Mittens Project’ (2003). In the latter, visitors had to push their hand through a hole in the wall where an anonymous person (Baker) would proceed with the treatment.

AND BEFORE THAT

Baker initially created work that was obsessively autobiographical. She heavily referenced memory through devices such as smell - for instance Vicks vapour rub in So it goes (1996). Baker says she consciously knew she was making work about her past and childhood and often sourced materials from her personal history.

This autobiographical thread focusing on younger life experiences reinterpreted through adult eyes was also the subject of her MA at Michaelis School of Fine Art. Baker carefully embroidered facsimiles of academic and other certificates earned during her school years onto inflatable kickerboards and installed them in a portable pool. This with the take on how inadequate our training can be for real life experience is made even
Baker's first solo exhibition in 1996 was called 'The shrill sound of a telephone at 3am'. Her works in this show were described as 'hovering poignantly between craft and art, commemoration and gift, quest and obituary' (quoted by Clive Kellner in *Liberated Voices*, 1999: 135). Whereas the kickboard series was a playful take on legitimacy conveyed by an established authority, Baker has subsequently turned the tables and now confers authority on whatever she chooses through her various trademark phrases. 'Bridget says' and 'Only you can' are her tools of authentication. 'Only you can', which is currently the subject of a patent application, refers back to the 'Bokkie' signboards prevalent in the Cape during the 1980s that warned against causing fires in the mountainside. More broadly, Baker's phrases refer to glib advice meted out repeatedly that can become meaningless and trite. On the up side, these phrases also key into the fact that people have choice, which Baker says uplifts people to feel a little freer in their lives. 'Only you can' formed an important element in a DVD called *Extra Soles*, which Baker produced as part of a 2003 residency. It documented three different workers in Cape Town who wore shoes with messages embedded on the soles of their shoes. Their footsteps left a glycerine imprint of the message behind; the narrator followed these tracks to their source.

**NEXT UP**

Baker always has a few irons in the fire. She plans to take a selection of her current photographic stills exhibition to 'LISTE - The Young Art Fair' in Basel, Switzerland in June. She will also expand the ‘Blue Collar Girl’ series in new locations. Baker is responsible for costume design for the *Altyd Jonker* theatre production, directed by Jaco Bouwer, which will be presented at the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees at the end of March 2006. From there it will undertake a national tour. She will later this year undertake a two-month residency in Sierre, Switzerland, at the CRIC Centre de Reflexion sur l'Image et ses Contextes.

**CURRICULUM VITAE**

Bridget Baker was born in East London, South Africa, in 1971. She is based in Cape Town and currently works as both a visual artist and a clothes stylist in the film industry. She has exhibited locally and internationally.

**Education**

1990 - 1993: BAFA degree (sculpture), Stellenbosch University
1995 - 1996: B. Hons.(FA) degree, Stellenbosch University
1996 - 1997: MFA candidate at Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, South Africa

**Awards and Scholarships**

1999: Department of Trade and Industry bursary
1996 - 7: Irma Stern Scholarship from University of Cape Town
Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) bursary
1995: Maggie Laubser Bursary from Stellenbosch University
Research Bursary from Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)
1993: Artist of the Year Award, University of Stellenbosch

**Solo Exhibitions:**

2006: ‘But being a sensible woman, she subdued her terrors and turned over and went to sleep again’, João Ferreira Gallery, Cape Town
2001: ‘Official BB Project’, University of Stellenbosch Art Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa
2000: ‘As if you’ve never seen it before’, Artists Unlimited Gallery, Bielefeld, Germany
1997: ‘Bridget Baker - BAFA (Stell.), BA. Hons. (FA)(Stell.), MFA (UCT) cand.’, Hänel Gallery, Shortmarket Street, Cape Town
1996: ‘The shrill sound of a telephone at 3am’, The Planet Contemporary Art Site, Observatory, Cape Town

**Group Exhibitions:**

2005: *The Blue Collar Girl (Delhi)* performed in New and Old Delhi, India
The Blue Collar Girl, Cape Town 2005
Triptych detail: lambda and diasec
Dimensions: 545 X 2415 mm
Photographers: Pieter Hugo and Mario Todeschini

The Blue Collar Girl (Maputo) performed at the Maputo Harbour and in the city, Maputo, Mozambique

Official BB Mittens Project performed at ‘Liste ’05, The Young Art Fair’, Basel, Switzerland

Official BB Project in absentia MMV performed at the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunsteves, Oudtshoorn

‘GNO’, photographic group show during the Month of Photography, João Ferreira Fine Art, Cape Town

2004: The Blue Collar Girl (Gent) performed at the Flanders Film Festival, The Vooruit Art Centre, Gent, Belgium

Extra Soles, a video production exhibited at ‘Contra Mundi’, AVA Gallery, Cape Town

The Blue Collar Girl (Cape Town 2004) performed at the Old Mutual Building, Cape Town


2003: ‘Picnic’, Bell-Roberts Gallery, Cape Town

‘Very Real Time’, a one-month international group public art project, Cape Town, which also produced the DVD Extra Soles

Official BB Mittens Project, an intervention at Gallery Puta, Cape Town


‘Buzzards’, a collaborative performance piece with Marlaine Tosoni (SA) and Mara Verna (Canada) at the Klein Karoo Art Festival, Oudtshoorn, SA

2001: ‘Homeport’, an international harbour city public art project, V&A Waterfront and Cape Town Harbour

‘Liberated Voices: Contemporary Art from South Africa’, The Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Centre for Visual Arts at Stanford University, California, USA


‘Holland South Africa Line’, the Baggagehal, Loosd 6, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

‘Liberated Voices: Contemporary Art from South Africa’, The Austin Museum of Art, Austin, Texas, USA


‘Softserve’ - a multi-media evening art-event held at South African National Gallery, Iziko Museums, Cape Town

‘Oos Wes, Tuis Bes’, Oudtshoorn Arts Festival, Oudtshoorn

‘Channel’, a video-art exhibition at the AVA Gallery, Cape Town

‘Unplugged IV’, The Rembrandt Van Rijn Gallery, Newtown Precinct, Johannesburg


‘Family Ties’, PGSI Project, Sandton Civic Gallery, Johannesburg

‘Club’, an interactive club-culture event, Nico Malan Theatre, Cape Town


‘SA Lifetimes’, South African Art Festival, Munich, Germany

‘The District Six Public Sculpture Project’, District Six, Cape Town

‘Unplugged II’, The Rembrandt Van Rijn Gallery, Newtown Precinct, Johannesburg

1996: ‘3x10’ at The Hänel Gallery, Shortmarket Street, Cape Town

Designed and created ‘In Memory of Those We Love’ installation at The Twinkly Sea Project (Mother City Queer Projects), The River Club, Observatory, Cape Town

‘Future Prospects’, Newtown Galleries, Johannesburg

‘Portraits’, The Planet Contemporary Art Site, Observatory, Cape Town

1995: ‘Kaping’, fringe show at the 1st Johannesburg Biennale, Newtown Precinct, Johannesburg

‘Site’ at Trust Bank Centre, Stellenbosch

1993: ‘Graduandi’ exhibition, University of Stellenbosch Gallery, Stellenbosch

Public collections

South African National Gallery
BHP Billiton
Old Mutual

Selected Catalogues/ Publications

D’Amato, Mark & Frank Herreman (eds) in Liberated Voices: Contemporary Art from South Africa (1999)

Enwezor, Okwui in Trade Routes: History and Geography
Murinik, Tracy in *10 years 100 artists: art in a democratic South Africa*, edited by Sophie Perryer
Pollack, Barbara in *ARTnews*, April 2001: 'The Newest Avant-Garde'
Smith, Gregg & Sarah de Bondt (eds) in *Very Real Time*
Soudien, Crain & Renate Meyer (eds) in *The District Six Public Sculpture Project*
Van den Berg, Clive, Kathryn Smith & Lucia Berger (eds) in *KKNK 2002*
Williamson, Sue & Ashraf Jamal in *Art in South Africa: Future Present*