Bridget Baker


No longer quiedy “small and active”, as she has described herself. Bridget Baker has learnt to claim space and visibility over the years. Her early work was notable for its painstakingly wrought objects, in which the detailed needlework and embroidery she incorporated became a type of signature, and seemed to echo the intimacy of her reflections on her identity. However, more recent work reveals a sense of snyety and self-confidence that translates into material as bold as 8-is witty and wistful.

A three-month residency in Bielefeld, Germany, in 2000 marked a turning point for Baker and her work. The resulting solo exhibition, As if you’ve never seen it before, was an intimate study of self, both in relation to her mother as well as the (art) world. Although the subject matter in this instance was not wholly dissimilar to that of previous work aspects of the work critically challenged her former means of production, and began to reveal a more serious, more activist. The installation, You kneel with this, so I become small and active, sometimes wondering whether I’m stuck, occupied four rooms of a cellar under a printing factory. The work’s starting point was a letter from her mother expressing concern for Baker’s future, with each room of the installation becoming a closure in Baker’s response. In the first room, You kneel with this engaged formal tone of the letter, comprising a continuous line across three walls of 100 buttons, each covered with cloth from a perfumed handkerchief and embroidered with the words of the letter, in her mother’s handwriting. The second room, So I become small and active was an interaction work in which Baker’s role significantly shifted to one of performance. It consisted of a series of Polaroids documenting interactions in which members of the public present Baker with an award. Baker had purchased a trophy for this purpose, and requested an assistance of people, including the mayor, a butcher, a chef and a librarian, to present her with it while posing for a photograph. In the exhibition, the Polaroids were displayed on a tchaided frame like a type of game.

The third room, Sometimes wandering, featured three montages: one showing a video work shot from a camera fitted into a hole in Baker’s bag as she went walking, another involving showing film footage of her mother on honeymoon in Paris, and the smallest monitor showing footage, also by her father, of her mother winning “Miss Castle Line” on their honeymoon sea voyage. The fourth room, Whether I’m stuck, housed an installation which had to be viewed through binoculars, revealing 85 chronological video stills processed onto cloth-covered buttons, suspended in a semi-spiral from the ceiling. Baker is seen entering the camera’s point of view and occasionally looking towards the camera for four stills before looking away. On the opening night, Baker presented a graffiti wall outside the exhibition space, on which she introduced her (copyrighted) dictum. “Bridget says” with an addendum. “Bridget says” whose life are you repeating? inviting the audience to respond. The latter intervention was to hail the birth of the “Official BB Projects” declarations on life according to “Official BB” wisdom. These included the Official BB Oak Leaf Project (2001) - a self-imposed, self-financed residence in Stellenbosch in the shop window of the Kwikkies drieslakers, where she punched oak leaf patterns out of used ATM slips daily from 7pm to 5pm, the Office BB Telescope Project (2001) for the exhibition hjemmet, which required a telescope to locate a string of hidden messages that Baker had installed around the V&A Waterfront, and the Official BB Mitters Project (2003) which involved installation-gear receiving a free hot wax treatment if they were willing to blindly insert a hand through a hole in the wall and have it covered in a custom-knitted BB woolen mitt.

Baker’s “Only You Can” campaigns take the “Bridget says” and “Official BB” projects a step further. Extra Soles (2001), a DVD produced for Greg Smith’s Very Real Time project, features three people walking in Cape Town’s inner city who, sporting extra soles on their shoes, embarked with encouraging messages, leaves imprints of these transformative insights on the pavement as they walk, and bewilder their audience for having no apparent source. Similarly, The Return of the SWMV comprises a triptych of 88 photographs featuring the “Sunday Morning Wonder Woman”. Clearly clad in chewing gum green treading skatoo gear, the SWMV leaves behind a prophetic imprint on her skates, sending a message to humanity that reads, “Only you can”.
