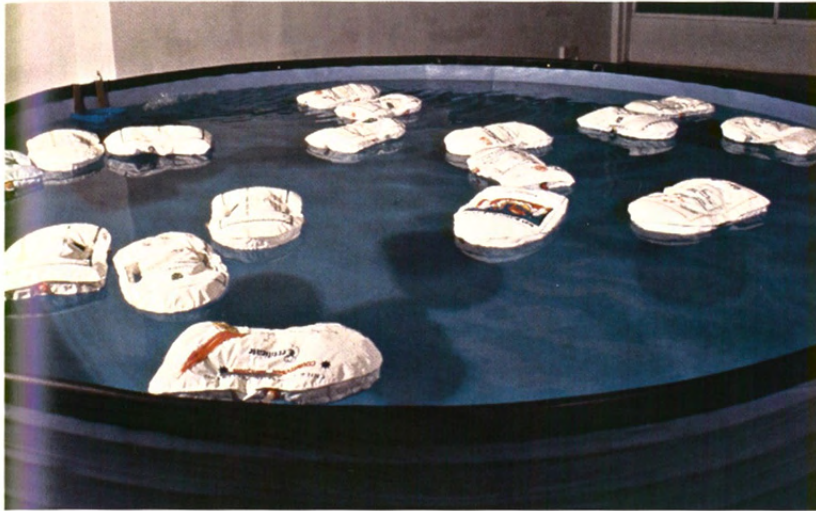


BRIDGET BAKER



I **Bridget Baker—BAFA (Stell.), BA Hons. (FA) (Stell.), MFA (UCT) cand.** 1996–97
90 cm x 274 cm diameter
Porta-pool, 17 embroidered kickboards, plastic, cotton, valves
Installation view: Hänel Gallery, Cape Town
Collection: Old Mutual
Photographer: Ulrich Wolff
Image courtesy of the artist
© Bridget Baker

II **Bridget Baker—BAFA (Stell.), BA Hons. (FA) (Stell.), MFA (UCT) cand.** (detail) 1996–97
90 cm x 274 cm diameter
Porta-pool, 17 embroidered kickboards, plastic, cotton, valves
Installation view Hänel Gallery, Cape Town
Collection: Old Mutual
Photographer: Ulrich Wolff
Image courtesy of the artist
© Bridget Baker

III **So It Goes** 1996
Tins, photographs, Vicks Vaporub
3.5 x 2 cm each
Photographer: Bridget Baker
© Bridget Baker

Bridget Baker was born in 1971 in East London, Eastern Cape. Her father died when she was five, and her mother remarried the following year to an evangelical Christian minister. The youngest of four siblings, Baker has said of her upbringing, “My mother escaped into Christian never-never land, taking us with her.”

Since apartheid was still firmly in place, as a white pupil Baker went to the then “whites only” Clarendon Girls High School in East London and attended numerous classes, from Sunday School, to ballet, to swimming, receiving certificates of attendance or honor along the way, which she kept as mementos of her childhood.

On leaving home to go to art school at the University of Stellenbosch, near Cape Town, in 1990, Baker actively moved away from “repressive Christian notions” of belief and faith. When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings began in 1996, she also became increasingly aware of the real nature of the apartheid society and the terrible damage that it had inflicted on the country.

Baker says, “The TRC created public opportunities for ordinary people to speak out about the political and private atrocities that had happened to them during the apartheid years. This was a sanctioned space to apologize and to be heard for the first time.” The stories that emerged during the TRC hearings of mothers whose sons simply disappeared without a trace resonated strongly with Baker’s own sense of personal loss.

When her father died, her mother had believed that in order for the family to survive his death, mourning should be vetoed: The youngest children did not go to the funeral, and life just carried on. Says Baker, “In terms of the death of my father, I now wanted to acknowledge that I missed him.”

In *So It Goes* (1996) four tiny round tins filled with Vicks VapoRub, the ointment rubbed on the chests of sick children, were mounted on the wall. In each tin Baker placed small images of the only photo she had of herself and her father together, in which he is teaching her how to swim. In the first tin the photo is visible. By the last, it has sunk from sight beneath the VapoRub.

For Baker’s second solo show, at the Hänel Gallery in Cape Town in 1997, the artist floated kickboards, inflatable swimming aids, on the surface of the water of a portable swimming pool. Baker had hand-embroidered each with fac-similes of one of her achievement certificates, earned when she was growing up.

As a child, Baker had believed these achievements, such as the Special Award for Enthusiastic Service and Support, given by the Clarendon Girls High School in 1989, would help keep her afloat through the stormy seas of life. Once out of the cocoon of mediated information, it was clear to Baker that, like an easily punctured kickboard, these skills were of limited value.

BRIDGET BAKER



Bridget Baker's protagonist the Blue Collar Girl is an alter ego for the artist, a heroine who is endlessly resourceful. She is a modern nomad who must carry out her mission wherever in the world she finds herself. One might draw a parallel with the experience of the contemporary artist who is frequently invited to participate in art events in a far-off country, where she is expected to produce an art intervention that both reflects her own artistic production and engages with the specifics of the new place.

"When you are overseas you are always looking for spaces into which you can project the 'myth making,' the narrative you are working with," Baker has said. "The fact that the environment is unknown to you projects the validity of that mythical narrative. You don't necessarily have a real understanding of those spaces. It's a matter of: 'This is my view of the city, this is what I am seeing as an outsider.'"

And what is the Blue Collar Girl's mission? In each new place she must find an appropriate way to inscribe her message to the world, branding that place with her slogan "Only you can. ©." Baker was brought up in a family with strict Christian values, and took this phrase from the Bible, though its very modern phrasing sounds like an injunction of empowerment from Oprah.

It is also part of the mission to leave the message in a remote place that requires the skills of a stuntwoman to reach—in Valais, Switzerland, the actress playing the Blue Collar Girl was dropped by helicopter into a snow valley and is a mere dot in the central frame of Baker's triptych. It is only in the third and final scene of the piece that we see a close-up of the "Only you can. ©" message carved into the ice.

All of Baker's Blue Collar Girl series are photographic triptychs: narratives that read as a film sequence. The first panel of each triptych sets the scene. In the second, our heroine is seen in a long shot, dangerously undertaking some difficult-to-distinguish action. In the third the camera moves in for

a tight close-up of the message, confirming that the Blue Collar Girl's mission has indeed been accomplished.

In 1997 Baker made an autobiographical installation in which inflatable—but easily punctured—kickboards were embroidered with the certificates earned for childhood and student skills, and installed floating on a portable swimming pool. Entitled *Bridget Baker—BAFA (Stell.), BA Hons. (FA) (Stell.), MFA (UCT) cand.*—Baker's installation read as the self-doubt of a young woman wondering whether she had been adequately equipped to face life. Ten years later the artist's immaculate presentation of her highly resourceful Blue Collar Girl series shows that those skills were not so useless after all.