CAPE

Bridget Baker's 'Official BB Project' at the US Art Gallery
by Sue Williamson

Stellenbosch is famous for its oaks, and when Bridget Baker arrived in May this year to take up an invitation from the University of Stellenbosch's Fine Art Department to plan an exhibition in their gallery, the autumn leaves had already started to fall.

Baker had come to live in the town for three months, with no pre-set ideas of what she would do for her exhibition, but knowing she did not want to make studio work. "I wanted to explore the artmaking process as a communal act. How does a community of passersby (and not the art elite) respond to the diverse ways of making art by making it in a public space?"

Those falling leaves ... "They, as well as the community's industrious involvement in disposing of the leaves, fascinated me. Seemingly conventional activities used in the process of disposal, such as raking, sucking, blowing and vacuuming, form part of the harvesting of the dead leaves." Conceptually, Baker chose to link these leaves with a second symbol of a hard-working society - falling ATM slips.

Setting herself up in the window of Kwikkleen Dry Cleaners, Baker punched oak leaf shapes from these slips, harvested from banks around the town, and invited members of the public to get involved by signing them. "By sitting in the window, I met a thief (he signed a leaf), met the 'town's child' (a homeless boy who seems to know and like everyone in the town), bank managers, the people who offload at Shoprite next to Kwikkleen. I got what I wanted out of my time here, without a doubt. It is a very small place, Stellenbosch, and people find out who you are really quickly. They also let you know that they know what you're up to."

On the opening night of the exhibition at the US Art Gallery in Dorp Street last week, it
was the art-going public that was invited to take part in Baker's leaf project. A plastic hydroponic tunnel filled the part of the gallery which was once an old church. In the rear section of this, a team of volunteers busily took visitors through the process of stamping out, signing, numbering and tagging a leaf. A partition divided this space from the rest of the tunnel, but through the partition wall protruded a nozzle with a switch. Completed leaves held to the nozzle - which turned out to be a leaf sucker were transported to the next space, a space the owner of the leaf was now permitted to enter. Here, BB herself sat in her white overalls, still hard at work at a small table. Buckets hung from the roof of the tunnel at crazy angles, ready to receive the leaves being blown through from the adjacent space. Should one's leaf fall into the correct bucket, the artist would make a "kite" out of it, attaching a long tail. All kites hung against the wall in an adjacent room.

In yet another room was a small piece consisting of two electric fans with their blades replaced by rods with twists of leaves at the end. Facing each other, they engaged in an endless duelling match, reminiscent of the motorised vases of flowers which collided with each other at Baker's last public appearance on 'Holland South Africa Line' (see ArtThrob Reviews January 2001).

At that time, having just spent six months in Germany and Holland, Baker said she had missed the chaos which is an intrinsic part of life in South Africa. Her art processes are a stimulating expression of this chaos. On one hand, there is an attempt to impose a kind of wacky order through a strict set of rules, and on the other to induce a large number of people to play along. In this way, Baker introduces her audience to the idea of art as an enjoyable, if unforeseeable, part of everyday life. None of this would work as well and as satisfactorily as it does if Baker did not pay the closest attention to every detail of her project, from the specially designed BB logo to all the other numbering and stamping processes which replicate the most annoying side of being a good citizen and doing what one has to do to achieve what one wishes.

To quote Baker’s press release: "The Official BB Project' explores the nature of the artmaking process as inclusive/exclusive: randomness, taking chances, voting, playing the lotto, applications to art schools, change, success and failure."

If you missed the fun of the opening night, you can still see the after-the-party residue in the form of leaves, kites, videos, duelling fans and other detritus. But next time BB puts on an event, don't miss out.

Until September 12

US Art Gallery, corner of Dorp and Bird Streets, Stellenbosch
Tel: (021) 808-3524
Email: usmuseum@maties.sun.ac.za
Hours: Mon - Fri 9am - 5pm, Sat 9am - 1pm