

bridget baker

lost air

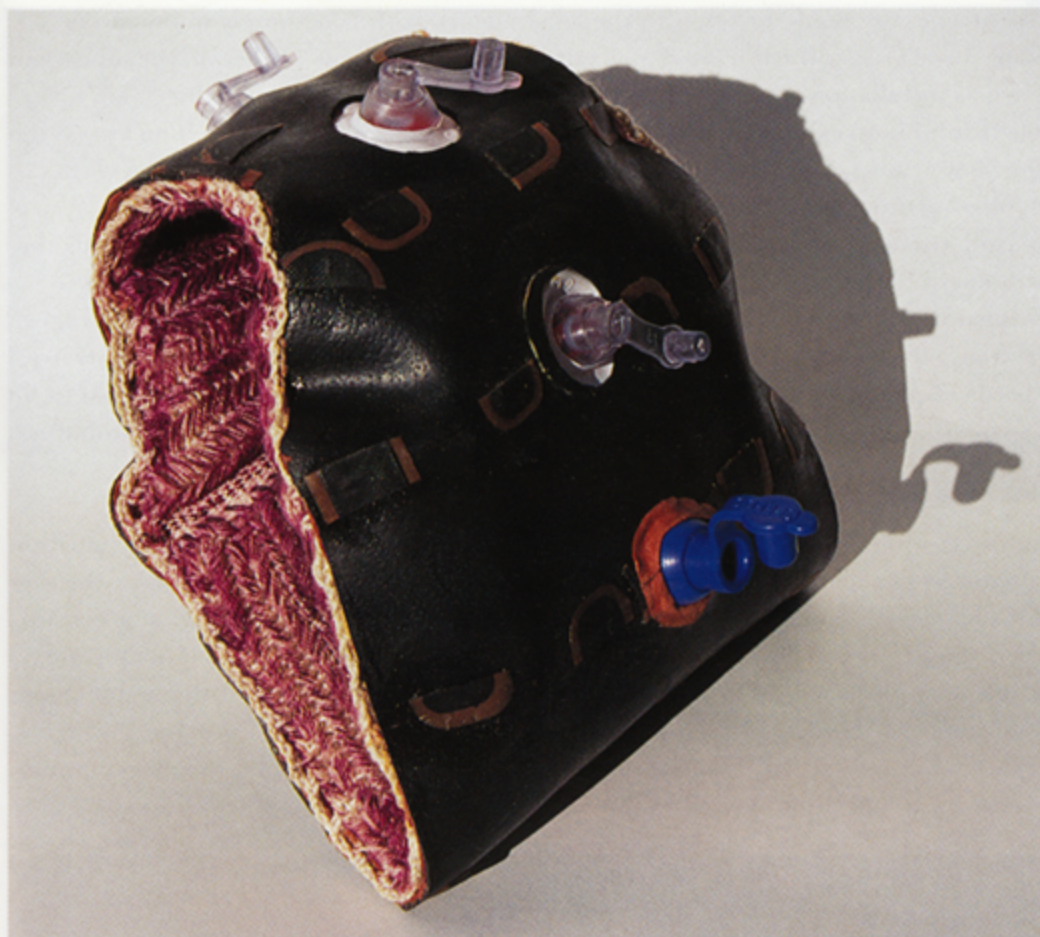


The Shrill Sound of the Telephone at 3 a.m.' was the title of Bridget Baker's first exhibition, held in the Planet Contemporary Art Site in Cape Town, in June 1996, a title that indicated feelings of intense anxiety, signalling the awful probability of bad news. Baker's father died suddenly, of a heart attack, when she was four, leaving the artist with a small and fragile image. In the single photograph the artist possesses of the two of them together, they face each other in a swimming pool: he is teaching her how to swim. Around this little photo and the associations it provokes, Baker has built a commemorative body of work which, although extremely personal, avoids the dangerous trap of

sentimentality through the tough vision and direct approach of the artist.

Armbands – with the breath from our lungs we blow them up and put them on our children's arms so they may be held afloat in water, and gradually gain the confidence and skills necessary to swim and not to drown. But armbands are easily punctured, and have to be patched or replaced to be of use. In *Inflatable* and *Puncturable*, Baker takes two armbands, obsessively applying bicycle repair patches and extra valves as if to prevent any possibility of the leakage of air, and covering one in the soft sheep's wool in which her father traded. In the safe world of the gallery, there is no risk that the armbands will be ruptured, and they stand





on their pedestals looking like embattled anatomical models of a human heart.

Extending the metaphor of vulnerable swimming aids with the props we are taught we need to survive in life, Baker has started constructing a series of 'self-portraits' – semi-inflated 'kick boards' onto which she is embroidering all the certificates she has so far received. But perhaps Baker's most moving piece to date is the smallest – four tiny tins of Vicks VapoRub, used by parents to soothe sick children, with the photo of Baker and her father sinking progressively deeper and deeper to the bottom. The traces of memory – a smell, an action of rubbing – buckle beneath the weight of loss.



Opposite page:

Inflatable 1995

Armband, sheepskin, bicycle repair patches 15 x 20 x 16 cm

Above left:

Puncturable 1995

Armband, rubber, bicycle patches, valves, fabric, shoe polish 18 x 11 x 16 cm

Left:

Self Portrait I 1996

Plastic, valve, thread 35 x 28 x 4 cm

Above:

So It Goes 1996

Tins, photographs, Vicks VapoRub 3.5 cm diam. x 2 cm each