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REVIEWS

***Diary Drawings* by Bobby Baker**

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I made a strict rule, to do a diary drawing every single day I was there.

(Baker 2009)

The first panel of the exhibition introduces ‘there’ as the Pine Street Day Centre, one of a number of mental health institutions used by Bobby Baker during a time when ‘things started to unravel’ (Baker 2009). Bobby Baker is an internationally renowned performance artist, and Creative Fellow at Queen Mary, University of London, but in 1996 she was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, and as a result was treated by psychiatrists and psychotherapists, and attended crisis centres and group therapy. In an extraordinarily touching, yet also humorous exhibition at the Wellcome Collection, her story was told through 158 exquisite works, forming a graphic narrative painted in ink and watercolour. In charting her journey of recovery through extreme anguish, self-harm, weeping, breast cancer and family bereavement, Baker resonates with other seminal works of self-portraiture and visual autobiography by Michelangelo and Charlotte Salomon. In *Diary Drawings*, the artist’s work can also be seen to situate itself in the realm of comics, and not solely through the technical processes of drawing and inking, but also Baker arguably shares the tradition (begun by Justin Green) of creating image after painful image that forms an extended

autobiographical narrative: 'I didn't ever think of them as cartoon-like, yet quite a lot of people have described them like that' (Lightman 2009).

Bobby Baker's work engages within the tradition of comics both technically and conceptually. Justin Green's *Binky Brown meets the Holy Virgin Mary* first appeared in 1972, and includes the reminiscences of a difficult childhood caught up with elements of obsessive compulsive disorder that manifest in self-harm and continuous feelings of guilt and religious anxiety. Art Spiegelman, creator of Pulitzer-winning Holocaust autobiography *Maus*, recognized Green's maverick approach to comic making. *Binky Brown* was ahead of its time not just in content, but also in display. In his introduction to the republished version Spiegelman describes how 'I first saw the pages that became *Binky Brown meets the Holy Virgin Mary* flapping from a clothesline that hung above Justin's drawing table and seemed to stretch all around his living room.' (Spiegelman 2009)

Notably these works were hung as a sequence of narrative drawings in a domestic setting, on 'a clothes line', in 'his living room', and not in book form. This personalized presentation parallels the content. Spiegelman articulates clearly the debts that autobiographical comics have to Green:

It now seems obvious that the form can achieve great intimacy, but before he came along cartoonists were expected to keep a lid on their psyches and personal histories – or at least to disguise and sublimate them into diverting entertainments.

(Spiegelman 2009)

Bobby Baker studied at St Martin's School of Art, London, only minutes up the road from the Wellcome Trust, from 1968–1972. Similarly to Green and comics' expectations 'to keep a lid on psyches and personal histories' (Spiegelman 2009), Baker remembers feeling distinctly uncomfortable with her college's approach to art-making which: 'Encouraged me to believe that the only valuable work was that of a painter, and that a painter was necessarily divorced from normal life and considerations' (Barrett 2007: 8).

This navigation of the boundaries between life and art continues to be a consideration throughout her working life, frequently paralleling Green. Baker's performances transform and subvert domestic scenarios (frequently using foodstuffs) and have toured worldwide, including Europe, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. The works are often autobiographically-based: in 1976 she recreated her family from meringue, garibaldi biscuits and coconut cake, and then served them to her audience for tea in *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home*. Photographs of her performances introduce this aspect of her work, and line the corridor leading up to the Wellcome Gallery, including her *Daily Life Series*, described by Baker, as 'a quintet of performance pieces, exploring the universal humdrum of everyday life' (Baker 2009). Appropriately for *Diary Drawings* (a show of watercolour

paintings), this includes *Cook Dems*, where she painted a partially dressed man in a variety of kitchen condiments.

Yet the boundaries of art and *art*, as well as life, were being reconfigured in these projects between the difficult years of 1997–2008, and there are some contradictions. Baker’s diary drawings were a vital psychological counterbalance to her performances, returning ironically towards the art school premise and process she rejected:

It’s more private, [than] performing. Talking and doing things, [is] utterly different [but it is] so brilliant to be able to paint. Because it was so private, and all the work I had been doing for years was so public, [and] definitely needed an audience. That is another thing I loved about the drawings, the feeling I didn’t have to show them to people.

(Lightman 2009)

Diary Drawings marks a return to an art form that was ‘so private’ and which did not ‘need[ed] an audience’, reminiscent of painting that was ‘divorced from life’ (Barrett 2007: 8). As a result the conflicting premises of wariness and deliberate exposure are maintained within the exhibition at the Wellcome Trust. Displayed but inaccessible, the original art remains intact, private and protected: with page after page modestly housed in their green ring-bound sketchbooks, remaining closed in glass cabinets. The metaphor of a closed book serves the exhibition well, reminding the viewer not only of their privileged intimate position – these are *diary* drawings after all – but also the chasm between inside and out. This suggests the discrepancies between how a person appears to others, how they see themselves, and how they feel about their life. It reminds the viewer of the acting that happens not just on the stage, but is relied on in order to function in everyday life. A panel reads: ‘During this stage, extraordinary developments took place in my work and life ... a three week season ... at the Barbican became a sell out ... and *How to Live*, a major Wellcome Trust-funded project was met with capacity audiences and critical and public acclaim’. However simultaneously Bobby was producing works such as *Day 480* (figure 1), a weeping self-portrait. Bobby acknowledges there are other works she has chosen not to show: ‘[It is] a sort of dilemma. There are 711 of them, [it is] hard, I don’t think I would destroy any, [but] there are some I would rather people didn’t see’ (Lightman 2009).

How else can these diary drawings be considered as part of the canon of comics? Baker’s production of an extensive series of narrative drawings parallels the techniques of comic artists. The diary drawings exude a vivacious enjoyment of colour, which might seem contradictory to the unsettling content. Yet in examining her working process it becomes evident how she could make work that is a painful delight. Within comic production there are often two stages, pencilling in the image, and *then* inking (and in this case also using watercolour paint) and, often, different people can do this. It



Figure 1: Day 480, © Bobby Baker 2008, photograph © Andrew Whittuck.

could be argued that Baker was, in effect, two very different people when she made the work, since she was in very differing frames of mind:

Because of this immense pressure of work, [I] very rarely painted them at the time and the painting of them could be just extraordinary and completely changed an image ... From the beginning, from the first, second day when I was painting them they became objects of beauty. I do love painting. I just had an enormous pleasure of drawing and painting ... just like drawing a life drawing and you just become absorbed in the making and the beauty of it. You capture something, but maybe [it] doesn't always work ... that addictive quality.

(Lightman 2009)

The positive and vibrant colour jars with the anguish of the narratives, and humour replacing the anger that may have initially inspired the image.

In addition the act of making marks can be related to the genre of 'autographics' with its emphasis on the physicality of the artwork. In their introduction to *Autographics in Self-Regarding Art*, Gillian Whitlock and Ann Poletti ask:

How does the self-portrait draw upon the textures of gouache to represent trauma? ... Autographics implies an interpretation of self-portraiture that deliberately attends to textuality and texture.

(Whitlock and Poletti 2008: v–vii)

The physical manifestation of the work contributes to the viewer's experience. Charlotte Salomon's *Life or Theatre?* is an extended visual narrative, with many similarities to Baker's *Diary Drawings*. It is made up of over 780 paintings that fictionalize her life, charting the protagonist, Charlotte Kann, coming to terms with her family's history of suicide during a dangerous time for Jews. Unlike Salomon, who was deported and killed, the artwork, and thus Kann, survived. In Carolyn F. Austin's essay 'The Endurance of Ash: Melancholia and the Persistence of the Material in Charlotte Salomon's *Leben? Oder Theatre?*' the author opens with the discovering of a hair, presumed to belong to Salomon, found painted onto the gouache on one page (Austin 2009: 102). Salomon has left a part of herself, as a relic, in her work. The autographic nature of *Diary Drawings* is subtler: Baker's work incorporates trauma in the rich, loose, yet also precise paintwork which is both controlled, and soars outside of the inked lines. Although her performances use foodstuffs, which are more innately textural, it is in her paintings that Baker's visual language has to extend to express her experience. Watercolour, accompanied by the paper's absorbency, exploits this type of paint's potential to 'spill', and 'leak': it aptly and accurately portrays the tensions of a public and professional façade being maintained, throughout a time of private, intense, and emotional

upset. Watercolour, with its tendency to merge, is apposite to 'divorcing' (graphically-speaking) from life and line.

Baker's work can further be compared to comics with each drawing/photograph being considered a panel. These images are framed, literally, with a glass picture frame. Below each image is a small panel that gives the date, *Day 25*, and often the text from the image. There is also an additional external panel, which introduces each sequence, and where it fits within the whole story. When asked about comics Baker remarks:

I suppose I don't read comics now but I used to read comics obsessively, in the early years, [those were] girls comics. I didn't associate myself with doing that, it never occurred to me to do that. The paintings I was passionate about were much more fine art background, so when I was doing these, I didn't ever think of them as cartoon-like, yet quite a lot of people have described them like that. They are sequential, almost like a strip, and drawings are all the same size. It was interesting I hadn't thought about that.

(Lightman 2009)

Unfettered by gutters and borders the drawings are on a wall, in a gallery, and not in a book, so require the viewer to negotiate them face on, one to one. The viewer in this engagement is totally absorbed in the experience of looking. This is particularly apt with the self-portraits, when displayed at head height, since this leads to an appropriate equivalence:

Whenever the look that originates in the mirror stays live and direct in the final image then the viewer should have a vicarious experience of being the artist – standing in the same relation he or she stood in the mirror and the picture.

(Cummings 2009: 27)

The process of looking at a self-portrait and the artist's own experience has other parallels: 'Self-portraits raise the question of their [the artist's] own existence, but also of our common mortality' (Cummings 2009: 27).

Furthermore, in a show where pictures are covered in glass, there is always the slight possibility of seeing just a glimpse of oneself, transposed onto Baker's face and body. In *Day 25* (figure 2), the top layer of skin with the facial feature is ripping off, revealing a wide-eyed skeleton, with wild blond hair: 'The gap created by the severing of the body and mind is a terrible gap, a nothing' (Pollock 2007: 254).

This image is reminiscent of Michelangelo's self-portrait (figure 3) at the centre of *The Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel, where 'He shows himself a ragged epidermis, limp as chamois leather, an empty overcoat hitched to a rubber mask ... he is not so much portrayed as disembowelled' (Cummings 2009: 60–61).

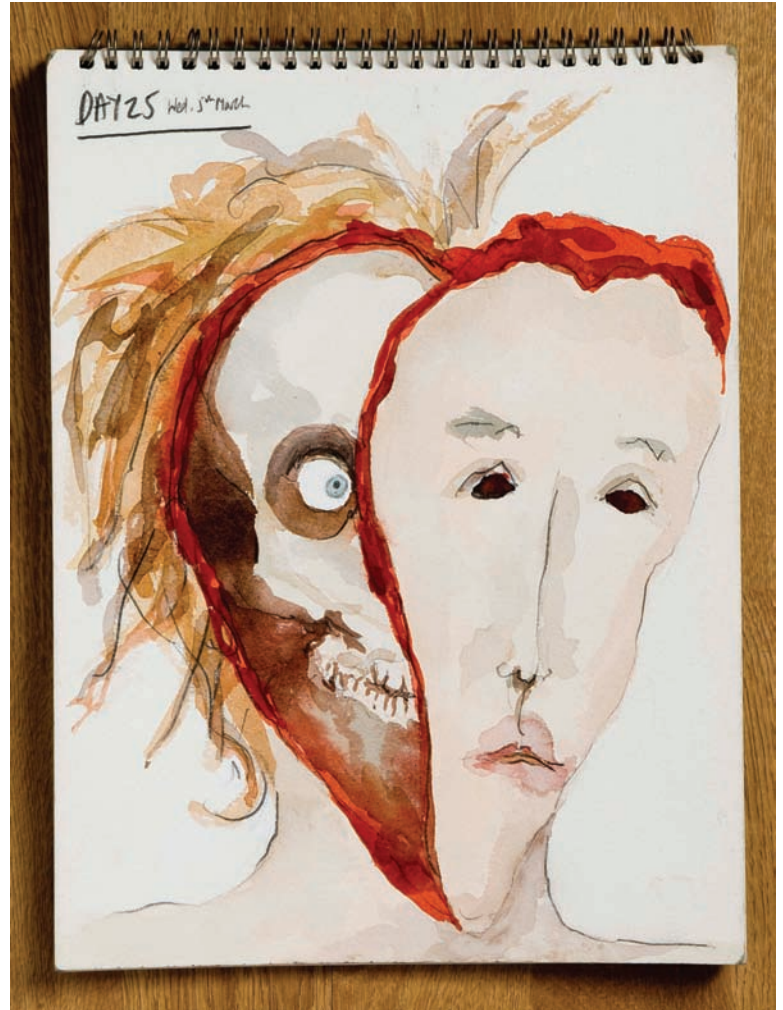


Figure 2: Day 25, © Bobby Baker 2008, photograph © Andrew Whittuck.



Figure 3: Detail of The Last Judgement (c.1538–1541), Michelangelo Buonarroti.

The work questions the essence of self-portraiture – is it the public or private face that is painted? Skin is only what is seen, the superficial layer, the pink resigned countenance of the individual features: it is passive to the ‘disembowelled’ eyes that hold the power, ghoulish and terrifyingly cruel in the universal skull. This marks the movement between the artists’ ‘own existence’ and the shared ‘common mortality’. Baker has ripped apart her painted self-portrait and touches upon the crisis of autobiographical art, its limits of representation and claims to veracity – a truth felt (privately) but not seen (publicly).

Another link to comics within the exhibition of *Diary Drawings* is that the original images themselves are not presented, thus paralleling the production of multiples within comics manufacturing. Instead of the original paintings being displayed, the exhibition is formed of photographs taken by Baker’s husband, photographer Andrew Whittuck. The distances and limitations are precipitated, recalled and exploited as aspects of performance are incorporated. These photographs ‘protect’ the originals, both metaphorically and physically. The additional level of editing and the enhancing of the colours produce images that are luminescent and clear. These are carefully cropped to include the edge of the sketchbooks and the kitchen table behind (the spot where many of the works were made). All are touching reminders of the domestic setting and a drama happening in real time, in a family home; by involving family members the show’s production, like Baker’s performances, makes reference to ‘the universal humdrum of everyday life’ (Baker 2009). Similarly to Justin Green’s work in his living room, they reinstate the distinctly personal aspect of the project. Yet by the time the work is exhibited it has become distanced and externalized. Baker even recognizes this link to her performances in the curation of drawings and her approach to the show:

It’s just like theatre I hadn’t really realized about the light, [and] light conservation issue, [it] had to be low because ... those were standards of preserving pictures. With ours, you could put them on full blast. It is unusual [that] it is so bright in the gallery.

(Lightman 2009)

Thus the white lightness of the room, allied with the numbered panelled stages of the narrative, intimates a sense of progress and recovery. It is a narrative to be directly and indirectly experienced:

Baker herself has said recently that her images of her own mental suffering, some of them very painful to look at, are made more bearable for the viewer through the distance of their being photographed, framed and exhibited as art.

(Barrett 2007: 5)

Diary Drawings is ‘theatre’ with a pastoral sensibility. This again links Baker to Justin Green, who explains his comics were ‘Not intended solely for your entertainment, but also to purge myself of the

compulsive neurosis which I have served ... many others are slaves to their neuroses ... these tormented souls will no longer see themselves ... in isolation' (Green 2009).

Both artists seek to create a community and heal themselves; for Baker her *Diary Drawings* make her experiences 'bearable' to herself, and simultaneously she ensures they are bearable to her audience too. Of one drawing of her self-harming she says: 'Possibly I drew that one with the tiny beautiful cuts as a way of making it bearable, making it beautiful' (Lightman 2009).

The artist, and Baker's daughter, Dora Whittuck has curated a show that could have been very dark, into one about hope, 'it is so bright in the gallery' (Lightman 2009), and healing. There are leaflets on where to get help, numbers for phone lines and, in keeping with the private/public tension of the show, a book for comments, *and* a box for more private comments, both of which are checked regularly. Bobby explained: 'I had such a feeling of safety because of Dora – she is a practising professional in the NHS'. SANE, a charity established in 1986 to improve the quality of life for people affected by mental illness, estimates one in four of us could become affected at some point in our lives; in making work about a health problem that is often kept hidden and displaying it in a public, free exhibition, Baker is again re-engaging with boundaries of privacy, and opposing art-making being 'divorced from *normal* life' (my emphasis):

Mental illness is that bad ... The mission I am on is not to hide that – because it is innately invisible people assume you are weak, assume you are malingering, they make so many judgements and assumptions, and I did myself until I got immersed in such a big degree of suffering, and it is that bad ... [but] you can move on.

(Lightman 2009)

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