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# Sara Barker

## CHANGE-THE-SETTING

Until **5 June 2016**

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Sara Barker is one of the most consistently inventive artists of her generation. Trained originally as a painter, she has over the past 12 years developed a radical visual language in which process and image intertwine to make work which combines painting, sculpture and drawing.

Barker studied first Art History and then Painting in Glasgow from 1998 to 2003, and hit her stride as an artist in 2006, with a residency in Cove Park and a New Work Scotland commission at Collective Gallery in Edinburgh. Since then she has developed her practice through a number of important group exhibitions, regular solo exhibitions, and public commissions, each new work building on the discoveries of the last. This is the first exhibition to include existing as well as new work, and offers an interesting insight into the development of her ideas.

### Exhibition supported by

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ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

Barker's working process begins with painting, either on canvas or sheets of metal. She is a confident, gestural painter, with an instinctive sense of colour. Her palette speaks often of the outdoors – the blues and greys of sky and sea, the greens of the natural world, the acid 'pop' of more urban colours. Until relatively recently, only certain parts of each painting have interested her, and she has cut into them, reducing them to narrow strips. These strips she then takes out of their original flat, painted context, and works with in three dimensions, combining them with each other and with metal rods and strips to make spindly structures with a curious tensile grace. The earlier works on show here – *Words are form* (2010), *Watercolour seen* (2010) *representing a sketch* (2012), *Love Letter* (2012) – have been made in this way, and are assemblages of three dimensional painted lines. Sometimes free standing, sometimes on the wall, and sometimes balanced precariously between wall and floor, these works seem almost to be sculptures made from paintings.

Extremely slight structures, these works occupy space, but also describe and contain it. Both container and thing contained, frame and framed area, the works are a representation and an embodiment of negative space. As you walk among them, you are surrounded by a shifting sequence of emptinesses, squares and rectangles that move together and apart in more or less abstract and figurative combinations. They are on a human scale, and sometimes their titles – *Woman at a Window* (2012) – give clues as to how to begin to look at them. Mostly, however, they confront you on their own terms, encouraging you to spend time with them, retracing their lines and reimagining their forms.

These works, made between 2010 and 2013, seem improvisatory in nature, light of touch, making themselves up as they go along. The more recent works with which they are shown seem much more substantial and deliberate. Yet they are similarly deconstructed, or rather dissimilarly deconstructed. Negative has become positive – the frames are full, the painted areas are expansive planes rather than narrow strips, the painterly passages even occasionally resolve into moments of figuration as we glimpse a woman in the shadows of *the work we do while we wait* (2016). The three dimensional lines are still there, although they are less rectilinear and float free of the painted planes to hang in front of them, like the bones of a sculpture or the beginnings of a drawing.

Reality and illusion jostle for space in these more recent works, especially those in which parts of a painting are replaced by mirror, and those which burrow into the outside wall of the gallery. Barker may have stopped cutting paintings up, but we are still asked to put the works together in our head, divide positive from negative, material from immaterial, layer the various planes from which each work is made back together as we look at them.

Upstairs, there is an abrupt change of scale, with six major works that each seem to test out a new way of being a work. Much larger painted panels converge and diverge, much thicker three dimensional lines tumble over each other, resolving momentarily into letters or some other form of notation, empty frames are filled with painted perspex landscapes, their representational authority in one case literally undercut by a pair of painted scissors.

Sara Barker describes her working practice as meditative and intuitive. This is as true for these later, larger works as for the earlier, more obviously improvisatory structures. Unlike before, however, these large works begin as maquettes, Barker painting, folding, assembling and disassembling on a small scale in her studio until she has something that seems, in her terms, to work. Each maquette is then scaled up in a workshop, the metal trays, panels and rods welded and burnished, the perspex or glass cut and attached, before Barker begins working on them again, with paint. Painting is now the last as well as the first process, the element of each work that remains in flux until the moment each work is finally finished.

*Borderline* (2016) was never a maquette. Part painting, part screen, part wall, it was made full size in the space, its four painted surfaces (each side of the large sheets of perspex fixed each side of the armature that gives it its structure) painted in situ as the rest of the works were installed around it. Improvised at scale, collapsing process and image, it enacts much of the graceful awkwardness intrinsic to all Barker's work.

Although only *Borderline* was made in the space, all of these large works were made for it, and they exist in relation to it as well as to each other and the viewer. Installed together, they orchestrate our understanding of the space, keeping us moving, setting the pace. Beautiful and baffling, they seem both familiar and utterly strange, 'subtle structures', as part of one of their titles would have it, indeed.