

# STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY

The Scotsman

'I like my work to be at that point between threatening and fun, or repulsive and fascinating'

18<sup>th</sup> February 2009

Interview by Susan Mansfield



## **Claire Barclay's retrospective at the Fruitmarket shows a group of small objects from previous larger works stretching back ten years**

THERE is a lot of balancing in Claire Barclay's art. Objects hang, lean and occasionally teeter. It's not uncommon to walk around one of her installations with a sense of trepidation that something might fall on your head.

In fact, the concept of balance is crucial in her work. Her installations are assembled gradually by adding one component after another as if balancing two sides of creative scales: a metal dumbbell, a bale of hay, a strip of fabric, a feather. The objects get smaller as the work nears completion and the balance is more finely tuned.

She describes the process in relation to one of the new large-scale works created for her current retrospective in Edinburgh, an installation of metal frames, weights, vinyl mats and crafted wood. "Every single thing you do is altering the mood of the work. The mats, frames and wood look quite smart, then you bring in the metal pieces and it looks quite sinister. Then other more playful things play off that. You get to the stage when you have an ambiguous balance between opposing forces. I like my work to be at that point between threatening and fun, or repulsive and fascinating."

It's only in the exhibition space that the components come together, making the days before an opening somewhat fraught (office staff at the Fruitmarket joined in to cover hay bales with lime render to complete another large-scale piece). But when I met Barclay a few days before opening night, she was calmly confident.

"It is stressful but because you're in control of what happens you can scale down, scale up or just exclude things altogether if they're not going to work out. It's the most creative part of the work in a sense, it's only when everything comes into the space that it starts to come alive. The work is all about how things interact with one another."

Over the past ten years, Barclay, 40, has quietly but assuredly established an important place in Scottish contemporary art. An early graduate from Glasgow School of Art's environmental art degree and MFA course, she is a contemporary of Ross Sinclair and Martin Boyce, coming just after Douglas Gordon and Christine Borland, just ahead of David Shrigley and Jonathan Monk. She has shown at the British Art Show and Art Now at the Tate, and was one of three artists in Scotland's inaugural show at the Venice Biennale in 2003. She grew up in Paisley, and never wanted to be anything other than an artist. "But I didn't really know what being an artist would entail," she says. "I was very much thinking about painting and making representations of things. Art school blew that out of the window."

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She describes arriving in David Harding's environmental art department at the beginning of the conceptual explosion in Glasgow as a bewildering experience. "It was all new to me. I muddled through. I'm not sure how well I fitted in to what they expected. I think my practice has a definite conceptual element to it but I don't think people would describe it as conceptual. I'm sure David Harding despaired at most of us really!

"There was a lot of arguing about what exactly environmental art means. In a way it felt like we were a department of misfits. But everybody has come out and done their own thing and found a way of following their heart."

The self-starting spirit of artists in Glasgow owes something to Harding and his determination to inspire students to think outside the art gallery. Barclay benefited from showing in artist-run space Transmission and in Bulkhead, run by Nicola Atkinson between 1997 and 2001, who curated, among other venues, a shop window in High Street. Though now she is represented by Edinburgh-based doggerfisher, she continues to enjoy working within that homegrown infrastructure, and showed new work last autumn in a stable block in Pollok Park with artist-run gallery Washington Garcia. She cites her work for the show Out of the Woods, at the CCA in 1997, as the moment when her style crystallised into its present form – installations of structures and objects, some large, some small, holding contrasting themes in tension: male and female; manufactured and handmade; dirt and matter; form and function. Much of her work contains references to our relationship with the natural world, whether commodifying it in New Age paraphernalia, or trying to harmonise with it in homespun eco-building schemes.

Key objects within the installations are handmade and highly crafted, usually by Barclay herself, who has learned pottery, woodturning and macrame-making in the course of her career in order to complete specific projects.

"As an undergraduate, I used a lot of found objects, but during my MFA I realised they had lots of specific references always and that I wanted to make things that were more ambiguous. Ideally, I would make it all myself. It's important that you understand the scope and limit of processes and materials in order to exploit them to do what you want to do. But sometimes you have to get other people involved."

For the first time, in the Fruitmarket Gallery show, which is one of her biggest to date, she will show a group of small objects from previous larger works stretching back ten years: a "book" made of leather; a set of interlocking metal bowls; a collection of irregular black "crystals". Curator Fiona Bradley believes that these not only stand alone as sculptures, but that they are key to Barclay's practice: they are the place where an idea first takes root.

Barclay says: "It's been ten years since I've seen some of these things. It's been quite odd because you've got such an intimate connection with them when you're making them, they're so familiar and yet they've been off the radar for so long. I can see the little seeds of how I started thinking about certain things locked into these different works."

It brings an element of retrospective into the show for Barclay, whose work is rarely shown again because it is made specifically for each exhibition space. "It seemed like a good moment in time to do this for me. To look back on these as well as looking forward to more ambitious works."

These small works highlight the sculptural aspects of her work, the importance of touch and weight and shape and material, as well as deliberate craftedness. "I did have a problem with marrying what I was naturally wanting to do with the conceptual rigour of the (Environmental Art) course," she says. "I'm not really that bothered about the definition of what I do, sometimes I wonder: is it really just a big

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exploded sculpture?

"It took me quite a number of years, showing outside of Glasgow and living outside of Glasgow for a while, just to gain confidence that my approach is some sort of messy intertwining of a kind of conceptual practice with a more intuitive practice that doesn't have a literal meaning or reading, it doesn't offer that up."

What it does offer up, in its carefully constructed balances and tensions, is a kind of thinking space where we can reflect on elements of how we live: work and home; polished and homespun; traditional and modern. "The knack," says Barclay, grinning, "is to get it to the right balance just before the opening."

• Claire Barclay: Wide Open is at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, until 12 April.

## **CURATOR FIONA BRADLEY ON CLAIRE BARCLAY:**

"I THINK what makes Claire's work so interesting for an audience is the way she uses the familiar and makes it into something unfamiliar. It's quite approachable work, but it gives up its secrets quite slowly. It always gives you a way in, but it asks more questions than it answers.

"There is a sense of narrative, when you spend time with it you start to spin a story around it.

"Her work is highly crafted but it is not primarily craft-based, it is ideas-based but the ideas are carried in finely-crafted material. The combination of the two gives it a peculiar power. Claire is not in any way fey.

"There is a tendency to associate anybody interested in craft with pottery mugs and knitted cardis, but these works are tough – they bite."