

## Art

## Small is beautiful for Sara Barker at Cample Line

She has created large public sculptures for Jupiter Artland and the University of Leeds, but lockdown inspired artist Sara Barker to start working on a much more intimate scale, writes Susanna Beaumont

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Mouth, 2020 by Sara Barker, stainless steel tray, brass rod, automotive paint, oil paint PIC: Mike Bolam

Undo the knot, Sara Barker's new exhibition at the Cample Line gallery near [Dumfries](#), is an intense, intimate meditation on time and space. A series of 18 wall-based reliefs, each has been hand-crafted by Barker. Some of the reliefs suggest wayside devotional shrines with modest offerings. Others are sturdier, more corporeal, more resolutely "here and now." Some suggest portals and thresholds, spheres, dimensions and angles, vistas and views both long and long-stifled. Each could be described as either a small enclosure or a large-scale miniature. And if we were miniaturised along the lines of Alice, having heeded the Drink Me dictate, we would chase around a wonder of labyrinthine twists and turns. Under foot there would be layers of thick-set paint of differing textures. Close to hand there would be ornamentation, curls of aluminium, a piece of mesh or a shard of cardboard that would appear the size of a continent.

Working within shallow troughs made of aluminium or steel, Barker typically forges her reliefs within strongly demarcated boundaries with near-defensive walls. These provide her with an arena for mapping out high drama, or more muted, barely distinguishable acts of painting. Barker builds up from the surface of the troughs by placing watercolour, varnish, and oil paint atop each other. She invites low whispers of colour, mark making and materials to

curdle as they collide, collude, hit it off or retreat. She talks about inviting unpredictable outcomes, staging encounters within the closed, almost claustrophobic confines of these arenas.

Born in Manchester, Barker studied at Glasgow School of Art and she now lives and works in Glasgow. She has had solo shows at Leeds Art Gallery (2020), Mary Mary in Glasgow (2017), the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh (2016) and Ikon, Birmingham (2016). She has also undertaken a number of outdoor commissions including a permanent commission for the University of Leeds as part of its new Engineering and Physical Sciences development (2020) and for Jupiter Artland, Edinburgh (2015 and 2013). Barker typically works with a combination of materials including steel, aluminium, brass, glass and automotive paint to create both wall and floor-based artworks, which move between two and three dimensions. Her work brings together different surfaces and forms and the structural nature of her sculpture is combined and contrasted with the painted image and the freedom of gesture and mark-making.



Installation shot showing Sara Barker's exhibition, *undo the knot*, at Cample Line PIC: Mike Bolam

The new reliefs in the Cample Line show are different from Barker's earlier works. Frequently described as sculptures and typically attached to the gallery wall, her previous works often had the audacity to strike out into three dimensions. *Take Draft overlapped*, from 2012. A shaft of metal heads out into space at 90 degrees. It looks precarious, it is. Brave, even defiant, without doubt. Likewise *Aquaria*, 2012; pared down and skeletal, it leaves the relative safety of the gallery wall for the wider space of the open floor. Often etiolated and frequently pale, these works seem to be seeking the sun and the promise of strength.

As time and timings would have it, Barker began work on the reliefs for Cample Line as lockdown began. In normal circumstances, she would have journeyed across Glasgow from home to her studio. She now found herself moving by foot in minutes between interior spaces at home. Kitchen table, attic, garage; the nature of the activity dictated the space. Working with car paint or varnish demanded the garage; reading and soldering the attic; sketching the kitchen table.

Indeed, normal circumstances would have also involved fabricators who would have worked with Barker to weld, construct, cut and create her work. Instead, in the Cample Line reliefs, we can see much more of the handmade and

made-at-home. She has soldered the metal, manipulated by hand the silver foil, the cardboard. Layering, adding, removing. Stepping back to view, stepping forward to amend and adjust. New rhythms for a new age. Barker has, to a degree, delighted in this re-found intimacy with her work. The chance of a late-night close encounter with a work, or at first light, an early morning sighting of a half-completed one. It has allowed Barker to gently interrogate her own practice. Undoubtedly, the domestic proportions of the spaces of Cample Line invite a modesty in scale and beckon in intimacy. Its thick, sturdy 18th-century walls of sandstone, rubble and whin, with the more recent addition of plaster board, offer a safe harbour.

Barker has recently talked about "wanting to get a handle on production." Increasingly, she is questioning our seemingly ceaseless production of more things for an already full-up world. And now with our views curtailed, our right to roam halted, Barker has created portable reliefs (might they be shrines to give relief?) that we could step into and through should we let our imagination run, or like Alice and the Looking Glass, like Lucy pushing through cool, heavy fur into Narnia. From early summer, when movement was again made possible, Barker travelled a number of times to Dumfriesshire from Glasgow to visit Cample Line. More aware than usual of the urban giving way to green rural folds of an emptier landscape; of how the road south cleaves through the land; of how trees appeared hefted into copses, Barker felt unfurled into an unfolding landscape.



Dart, 2020 by Sara Barker. Plywood tray, brass rod, automotive paint, oil paint, tinfoil PIC: Mike Bolam

Barker reads as she works. Texts, marked pages and open books sit along her brushes and materials. She seems to exhale the written word as if it were breath. The poetry of Alice Oswald and Amy Lowell and the novels of Ali Smith and Virginia Woolf give her navigational pull, literally lines to follow as well as to read. Text sculpts lines, guides the hand, informs the mood. Barker's reliefs are akin to pages from a diary, sketches sketched, a draft of a composition, a quickly written musical score. Undo the knot is a kind of unearthing, a reveal. A series of archaeological sites filled with the physical, the familiar and the unidentifiable, the less pin-down-able shaky dream, the half-recalled and the fast-dissolving memory. Earthy yet brittle, undo the knot gives evidence of time spent, time stretched, time corrupted, ordered and disordered.

*Undo the knot is at Cample Line near Dumfries until 30 January 2021, <https://campleline.org.uk>*