

BY CHRIS SHARRATT IN REVIEWS | 25 SEP 17



Sara Barker

Mary Mary, Glasgow, UK



Sara Barker's latest solo show, the first in Glasgow gallery Mary Mary's new, larger space a couple of blocks west from its previous city centre home, is a small surprise. While best known for her usually floor-based sculptural assemblages that combine delicately precarious glass and metal elements with painterly interventions, in 'The Faces of Older Images' it is painting that seems to have the upper hand. Perhaps most surprising, given that much of the Glasgow-based artist's previous use of paint has involved abstract marks and flourishes, the four wall-based reliefs (all 2017) which provide the focal point of this exhibition all feature human figures in hazily defined landscapes. Rendered in thinly applied automotive paint on aluminium sheets folded at the edges to form large industrial-looking trays, these impressionistic works, with their visible brush marks and gestural drips have, as the exhibition's title hints, the feel of half-glimpsed stories, the clarity of their message faded through time.

While the works' presence as paintings is strong, that's not to say that Barker, who studied painting at Glasgow School of Art, has foregone her usual arrangements of metal rods and Perspex cut outs. Here, though, they appear like additional layers of information or some kind of unfathomable puzzle that overlays and complements the evocative if still unspecified narrative of landscape and the human place within it. Figures are both dissected and framed by the tangle of brass and stainless steel squiggles and geometric patterns, each piece exerting an enigmatic presence which is only enhanced by the mysteriously poetic titles.

In *3 Fabric Figures on the Heath Changes the Sky*, the painted figures are roughly silhouetted in the foreground, their backs to the viewer as they look out over a bucolic rural scene of rolling hills and blue skies; earthy greens, browns and pinkish-reds suggest fields and pathways. The aluminium tray is divided vertically in three, a figure in each section, while horizontal 'shelves' slice the image into a series of rectangular compartments, resembling a domestic display cabinet or minimalist

shelving system. Protruding from the painting, thin metal rods and two Perspex 'windows' add to the sense of distance, of looking in on this scene – of time as a physical space.

The approach is continued in different configurations throughout the exhibition across three of the gallery's walls. *Double Son of Rubble* – the largest work at nearly 3 metres high and 2 metres wide – reveals a curving brick wall, two ghostly figures, blurry blocks of muted colour and white spray-paint patches and drips. Here the rods are more regimented and robust, a combination of thicker steel tube and almost-wire brass that provides architectural structure and grid-like order to the composition.



Sara Barker, *Down their carved names the rain drop ploughs*, 2017, automotive paint, folded aluminium, stainless steel rod, perspex, 190 x 240 x 28 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Mary Mary Glasgow; photographer: Max Slaven

The most explicitly figurative of the works is also the most beautifully titled: *Down Their Carved Names the Rain Drop Ploughs*, the last line from the Thomas Hardy poem *During Wind and Rain*, written in 1917. (Barker often finds inspiration in late Victorian and modernist literature, such as the works of Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and Amy Lowell.) Two lightly

dressed men dominate the painting, their bare feet working some kind of primitive-looking plough. They could be Amazonian tribespeople or farmers in the developing world but the work's title suggests they are long gone – in Hardy's poem the raindrop is ploughing the furrow of the 'carved names' on a gravestone. Yet there's ambiguity in the image; they appear both of the past and the present, a confusion of time that is further suggested by the chaotic-looking configuration of metal rods that snake around them. It's this feeling of the permanence of landscape and our own fleeting place within it that this collection of works most vividly evokes.



Sara Barker, 3 fabric figures on the Heath changes the sky, 2017, automotive paint, folded aluminium, stainless steel rod, perspex, 180 x 240 x 28 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Mary Mary, Glasgow; photographer: Max Slaven

Main image: Sara Barker, Double son of rubble, 2017, automotive paint, folded aluminium, stainless steel & brass rod, perspex, 200 x 290 x 57 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Mary Mary, Glasgow; photograph: Max Slaven



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