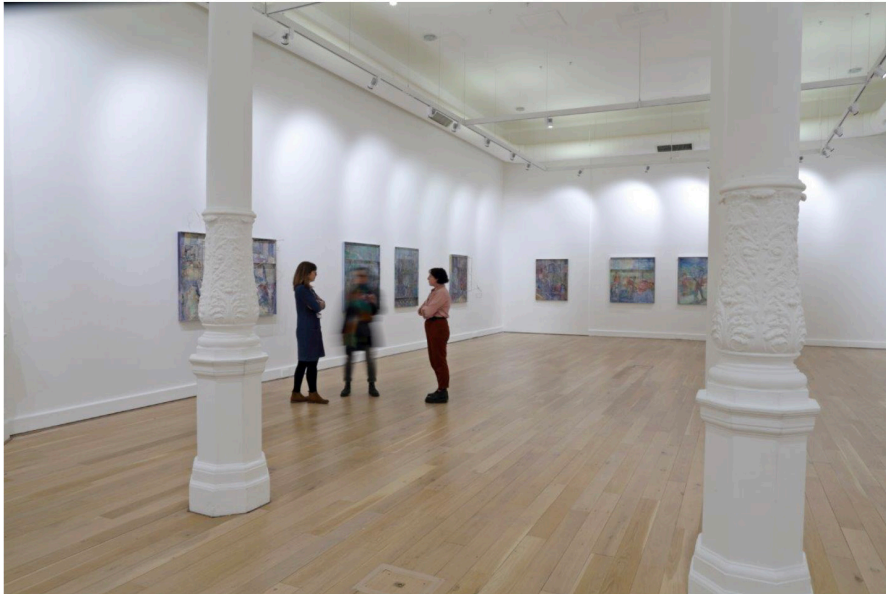


07.05.2020 — Exploration

# Sara Barker: All Clouds are Clocks, All Clocks are Clouds

Leeds Art Gallery, Leeds  
by Holly Grange



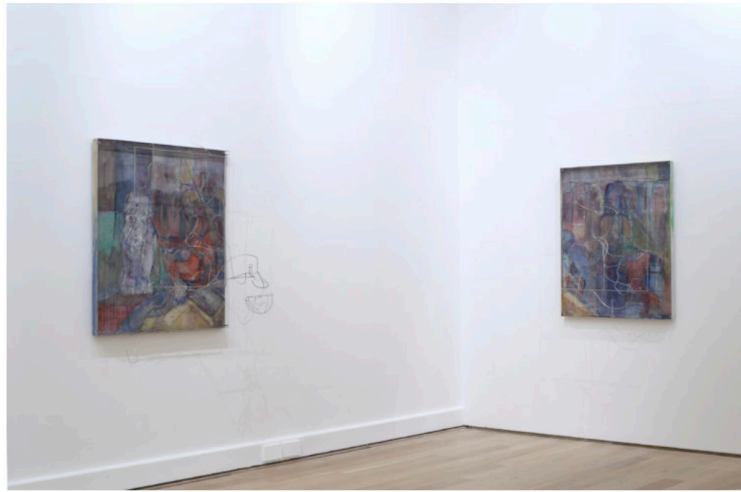
Installation image of Sara Barker: All Clouds are Clocks, All Clocks are Clouds (Leeds Art Gallery, 07 February - TBC). Photo: Simon Warner.

*'The way social distancing works requires faith: we must begin to see the negative space as clearly as the positive, to know that what we don't do is also brilliant and full of love. We face such a strange task, here, to come together in spirit and keep a distance in body at the same time.'*

I keep returning to the line above in the now widely shared essay 'this virus' by poet Anne Boyer, posted nearly two months ago on 10 March 2020. Time and space are two concerns that feel even more central now as we advance through this period of quarantine, and significantly both are fundamental to the practice of Sara Barker, whose exhibition *All Clouds are Clocks, All Clocks are Clouds* now waits behind shuttered doors at Leeds Art Gallery. Boyer's essay calls on us all to conceive of negative space as positive space – an act of care. As exhibitions curator, this is how I am choosing to see the closure of our Gallery's spaces to the public.

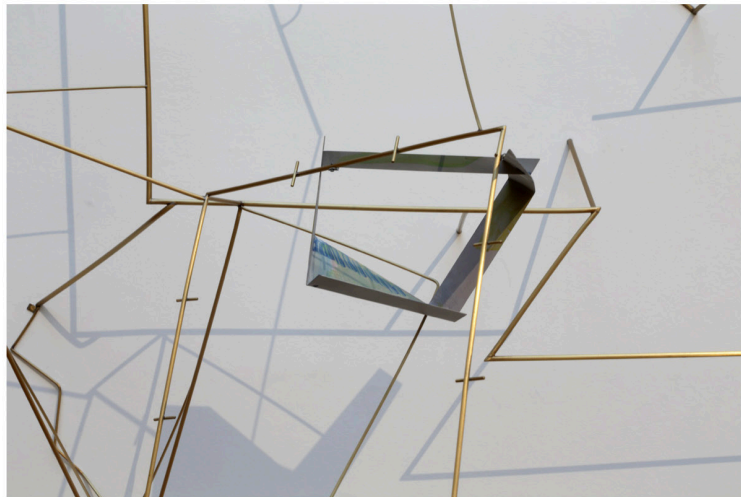
So much has changed within the seven weeks since the gallery has been closed, with Covid-19 both accelerating and magnifying existing social crises and inequalities. I am conscious of how lucky I am to experience the crisis as merely a source of disruption. I am overwhelmingly grateful for this and know that this is not the case for all.

As a gallery curator, I'm thinking about artists and creatives for whom this crisis poses a threat to their livelihoods and security, and trying to envision what sort of art world will emerge after the lockdown and how might we adapt to this. From a gallery perspective, how could we reconsider our programming to respond to what is needed by our communities post-crisis, when the ripple effects will surely be felt for months or perhaps years to come. How might galleries become restorative civic spaces that exercise an 'ethics of care'? Time will tell.



Sara Barker, 'Crushed to Powder Returned to Earth', 2020. Painted aluminium tray, jesmonite, stainless steel rod, automotive and oil paint and pastel. Courtesy of the artist, The Approach, London and Carlier Gebauer, Berlin.

Time is something that the artist Sara Barker is endlessly fascinated by. In particular, how the chronological passage of hours, days and years may appear on clocks and calendars to be a steady, quantifiable phenomenon, even while our perception of time shifts constantly. A reminder that measured clock time and experienced time are two different things, both with their own flow. This is a fact I have been reminded of over the last seven weeks, as I have often simultaneously felt a sense of life both speeding up and slowing down.



Sara Barker, 'Geographies of Dust and Air' (revised) 2020. Photo: Simon Warner. Courtesy of the artist, The Approach, London and Carlier Gebauer, Berlin.

The modernist artist Paul Klee described his method of picture-making as 'taking a line for a walk'. This quote comes to mind when I look at Sara Barker's work; I am keenly aware of the passage of time as the work was made, from the way her lines are drawn. Barker's hybrid sculpture-paintings delicately trace lines in physical space, and she is also interested in how space can exist in our minds, in our memories, and in literature. This link with literature is crucial to Barker's practice. As Barker describes it, when a writer describes a place that is imagined or remembered, a version of that space is created in the mind of the reader. So too with art. Barker's literary inspirations are diverse, from the modernist writing of Virginia Woolf to the luminous details captured by Imagist poets such as Ezra Pound and the short stories of Japanese writer Kōda Aya. She has selected some of these formative texts for Art-Lover's Book Club, a special partnership between Leeds Art Gallery and Leeds Libraries, which will take place online on Zoom every second Wednesday of the month (more details below).

I encourage you take a few moments from your day to look at the image below of Sara Barker's 'pulled apart and patched' (2020). You cannot move around it and experience it in the many clever ways that Barker intends, or fully grasp the varying ways she toys with how the human eye perceives depth using a multitude of devices to compress, reflect and refract light and space. What you may be able to get a sense of is

the tactility of the textured surface, thick with painterly narratives. Barker sands and layers up these metal trays with jesmonite, car paint, and what she mysteriously calls 'matter'. She then makes marks by cutting and scratching into these layers and applying a tapestry-like surface of semi-opaque brush marks to create a brilliant luminosity.



Sara Barker, 'pulled apart and patched', 2020. Painted aluminium tray, jesmonite, stainless steel rod, automotive and oil paint and pastel. Courtesy of the artist, The Approach, London and Carlier Gebauer, Berlin.

Viewed from different angles, we find our gaze split and divided by way of semi-translucent Perspex panels, metal extrusions and skeletal rods, which expand out of the painted surface, casting shadows far beyond their physical dimensions. Writing this makes me think about how a photograph of an artwork can never replace the embodied experience of inhabiting a space with it, but for now it will have to do.

As the title of Barker's exhibition reminds us, despite our best attempts to apportion and order time by carving it up and measuring it, this merely provides us with an illusionary sense of control. Barker speaks of the 'duality' involved in art-making, of 'making and experimenting within a system that has boundaries' while accepting the often 'unpredictable, messy and fluid' aspects of life. Perhaps a sense of this duality is what art can provide us with at this time, both the looking at it and the making of it. Or as Olivia Laing captured perfectly in her *Guardian* piece 'Feeling overwhelmed? How art can help in an emergency', art and literature can provide us with 'a different kind of time-frame, in which it would be possible both to feel and to think, to process the intense impact of the news and perhaps even to imagine other ways of being'.



Sara Barker, 'Watchful Island', 2020. Painted aluminium tray, jesmonite, stainless steel rod, automotive and oil paint and pastel. Courtesy of the artist, The Approach, London and Carlier Gebauer, Berlin

Sara Barker: *All Clouds are Clocks, all Clocks are Clouds* at Leeds Art Gallery is currently closed to the public. Visit the website for a [virtual exhibition visit](#). Details of reopening to be announced.

Holly Grange is exhibitions curator at Leeds Art Gallery and Yorkshire and Humber editor at Corridor8.