

BOBBY BAKER



An Edible Family in a Mobile Home

A conversation between

BOBBY BAKER

and independent curator, **Gemma Lloyd**¹

GEMMA LLOYD You originally created the sculptural installation *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home* in your prefab Acme house in 1976.² How did you come to live there?

BOBBY BAKER Well, I didn't have anywhere to live and I applied for a place from Acme and was offered a prefab. Most Acme houses at that time needed extensive renovation but I got this instant little home.

GL What kind of work were you making at that time?

BB I was doing the *Meringue Ladies World Tour* (1973–ongoing) – a troupe of hand-piped meringues I performed with. The Royal College of Art kept rejecting me so I'd just done an art teacher certificate at Goldsmiths. I was a disaster at teaching but my dissertation was a performance and installation called *The Life Room* (1974). I made twenty-seven paintings of a woman metamorphosing into a giant cake, and then a tree. In the middle of the room, there was a mattress with a life model made from cake, which got eaten.

The minute I got the prefab, I thought, now I'm going to make a life-size family out of cake and open it to the public. I was living alongside families and so it was a clear decision.

GL You decided to show the family in your own home. There's a long lineage of artworks created within domestic spaces – Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* (1923–1937) was an early example ...

BB I hadn't heard of that. At St. Martin's School of Art where I studied painting I'd already become interested in food, and for my dissertation I wanted to write about how to make chocolate mousse. I read accounts of Claes Oldenburg's work *The Store* (1961) made with Patty Mucha, his first wife. It took the roof off the top of my head – giant sculptures of everyday consumer items in a mock store in Manhattan, which people could buy! I wanted to pinch that idea but make it out of food and

make it local and accessible, even though that term wasn't used back then. I've always wanted to make work that people see in and around their own environments. The art world wasn't as democratic as it is now, and I was living in an area surrounded by families with young children that I wanted to acknowledge.

GL It's striking how enterprising you were. You were only 25 at the time.

BB At Goldsmiths there was a series of seminars by the art historian Barbara Reise. Her ideas were thrilling. Tate holds a collection of her writings. She talked about six essential ingredients for a work of art, and one of the ideas that electrified me was that to succeed an artwork should have integrity – of concept, form, context.

And with the prefab, I aspired to that – it was a real house in a real environment, and I wanted local people to come. I'd abandoned the traditional art world because I found it elitist, sexist, and had discovered performance art where I was welcomed and free to do what I wanted.

GL Over your five-decade long career, you've persistently exposed the undervalued and stigmatised aspects of women's daily lives, there's a tendency to retro-fit that narrative to *An Edible Family*, but at the time you felt it was about family relationships and people trapped in certain roles. Can you say a bit about your early ideas around feminism?

BB I chose the name Bobby because I wanted to be a boy – it was a rum deal being a girl. My mother's role was undervalued.

The turning point was making artwork out of cake, initially *Baseball Boot Cake* (1973). It was my own language, it wasn't steel girders. It was humble, and pathetic, and it got destroyed. I felt subversive, anarchic. I used to laugh a lot at ideas I had and thought, "Could I do this?" And then I'd do them.

I couldn't clearly articulate my ideas so I went to evening classes by the philosopher Janet Radcliffe Richards, who was writing the book *The Sceptical Feminist*. Her conversations were pivotal.

My work got picked up by the ICA and during the 70s I did a lot of work there and met people like Helen Chadwick who

commissioned me for the Hayward Annual in 1979. Then I was selected for *About Time* in 1980³ and realised that other women were making work in different art forms. It was

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exhilarating to be part of a movement, a community.

GL The remake involves a huge team of people. How much help did you have with the original?

BB Embedded with my passion about the integrity of an artwork I assumed I had to do all the work myself. It never occurred to me to have any help. It was an enormous amount of work but my partner at the time, Andrew, helped paper the ceiling because he's very tall. I remember thinking, “Oh, I've cheated.” I got over that idea long ago. I love working collaboratively now.

GL You've sourced newspapers and magazines from 1976 to cover the interior walls and furniture for the remake. Some of the content will be a stark reminder of the everyday sexism that was so prevalent then.

BB Women lived with that – you might have challenged it but it was your reality. The whole of my life's work stems from that early feeling of injustice, lack of opportunity and the undervaluing of care work. Society still doesn't adequately support families, parents, or domestic labour. When I had my first child I realised, “Oh, my God, I have no status.” I was outraged, and that outrage continues. I don't think ‘the domestic’ really does it justice, it's fundamental to humanity. For a time I wasn't counted as an artist, even in the world of feminism. It was taboo to have children then, in the art world.

GL What does it mean to do this in Manchester at the Whitworth? Does it resonate differently with the Pankhurst Centre being just around the corner and the city's history of suffrage and social reform?

BB Manchester feels like a dream city to place

the installation, with its venerable red-brick architecture and public spaces – alongside its rich history of industrial revolution, political activism and reform. The prefab building, built post-war as temporary housing for displaced families, stands out starkly on the Whitworth's sculpture forecourt against the grand Victorian facade.

Manchester, a city of labour and social debate, feels like the right place for this. Its festivals and socially engaged arts scene make it ideal for a show about housing, women, families, poverty, and social history – from the suffragettes onwards. The park surrounding the gallery was made public during the Industrial Revolution to give workers access to fresh air – which also feels like the perfect environment.

It's a free show, and I hope it sparks debate. The Whitworth is a fabulous gallery – I could live in its cafe forever.

GL What are you working on now Bobby?

BB Ever since *An Edible Family* I've been making work about everyday life based on my own experiences. I've been banging on about the subject my whole life. So I decided the next step was to create my own Domestic Revolutionary Party fit for the 21st Century, EPIC DOMESTIC. It launched pre-pandemic at La Casa Encendida, Madrid in 2019, featured in the Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition in 2022; was emblazoned across billboards in the UK as part of The Gallery⁴ created by Artichoke in 2023; and was staged as a takeover at The Tetley as part of Leeds 2023 Year of Culture. Preparation is now underway to take the Party to the masses. Take a look at the poster inside this handout and watch this space – Vive la révolution!

¹ Gemma Lloyd is an associate curator of Daily Life Ltd., the organisation established to support the production and presentation of work by Bobby Baker. bobbyartistbaker.org.uk

² Acme was founded in 1972 by Jonathan Harvey and David Panton to provide affordable spaces for artists to live and work in. acme.org.uk

³ *About Time: Video, Performance and Installation by 21 Women Artists* was curated by Catherine Elwes, Rose Garrard, and Sandy Nairne at the ICA, 30 October – 9 November 1980.

⁴ *The Gallery* was created by Artichoke in collaboration with public artist Martin Firrell and in partnership with the UK Out-of-Home industry including Clear Channel and JCDecaux. *The Gallery Season 2: The State We're In*, featuring Bobby Baker, was curated by Bren O'Callaghan. thegallery.org.uk



THE DOMESTIC REVOLUTIONARY PARTY BEGINS...