

**BOBBY BAKER**

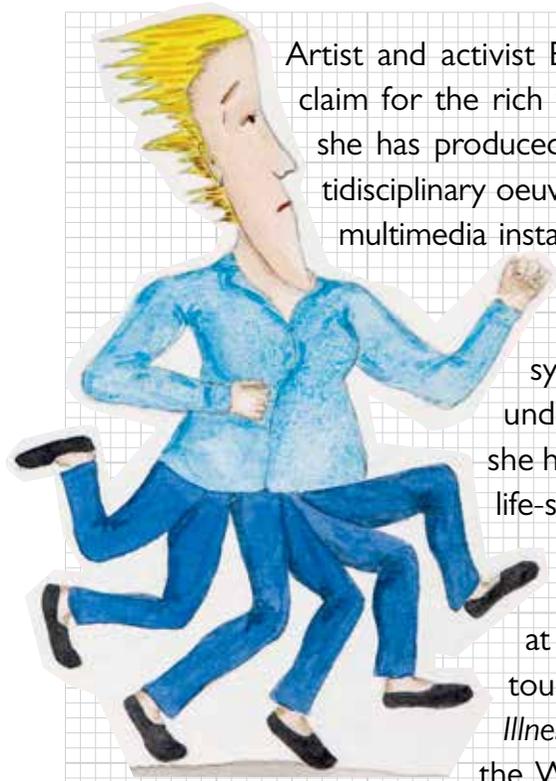
JARS OF  
CHUTNEY

<E



---

Cook Dems © Bobby Baker, 1990. Photo © Andrew Whittuck.



Artist and activist Bobby Baker has earned enormous acclaim for the rich variety of radical yet humorous works she has produced over more than forty years. Her multidisciplinary oeuvre includes performances, drawings and multimedia installations which often revolve around the use of food as artistic medium. In a career spanning four decades, Baker has systematically explored the complexities underlying domestic, everyday experience; she has danced with meringue ladies; made a life-size version of her family out of cake; and driven around the streets of London in a truck yelling “Pull yourself together!” at passers-by through a megaphone. Her touring exhibition *Diary Drawings: Mental Illness and Me, 1997–2008* premiered at the Wellcome Collection in London in 2009

and was recently presented at the Nordic Annual Conference on Mental Health in Stavanger (Norway). The book of the same that accompanies the exhibition won the Mind Book of the Year Award in 2011. That same year Baker earned an honorary degree from Queen Mary, University of London, following an Arts and Humanities Research Council Creative Fellowship. The academic and artistic recognition which the artist has achieved in recent years is clearly illustrated in her latest works, *Mad Gyms and Kitchens*, commissioned as part of the London 2012 Unlimited project for the Cultural Olympiad, and *Great and Tiny War*, created for 14–18 NOW: WWI Centenary Art Commissions as part of the activities organised to commemorate the centenary of World War One.

Bobby Baker is also the artistic director of Daily Life, an organisation funded by Arts Council England which supports the creation of art that strives to change the perception of mental health and promotes the talent and vision of artists, actors, writers and musicians who have experienced some form of mental disorder. As a result, Baker occupies a unique professional and personal position in the worlds of both the arts and mental health. Her artistic output and the work she pursues through Daily Life demonstrate the potential of art to transform our understanding of ourselves and our relationship with the world around us.



Bobby Baker, *Pull Yourself Together*. Image © Hugo Glendenning, 2000

When I left art school in the early 1970s I was disillusioned by the elitist and chauvinist culture of the art world. There were hardly any women artists in galleries or books, and I struggled to fit my ideas into contemporary art forms such as painting or sculpture.

Then I had this sudden and exciting idea—to make art out of cake. It was so funny, so rebellious, so interesting in its newness. And so liberating to discover my own language to make work about what it was to be a young woman in the modern world. In those days it was so normal to be patronized and underestimated as a woman that I found the only way to deal with it was by using humour and subversion in my work. My applications to the Royal College of

Art were repeatedly rejected—cake as art and performance were unacceptable. So I just got on with making work where I could, aiming to reach the widest audience possible.

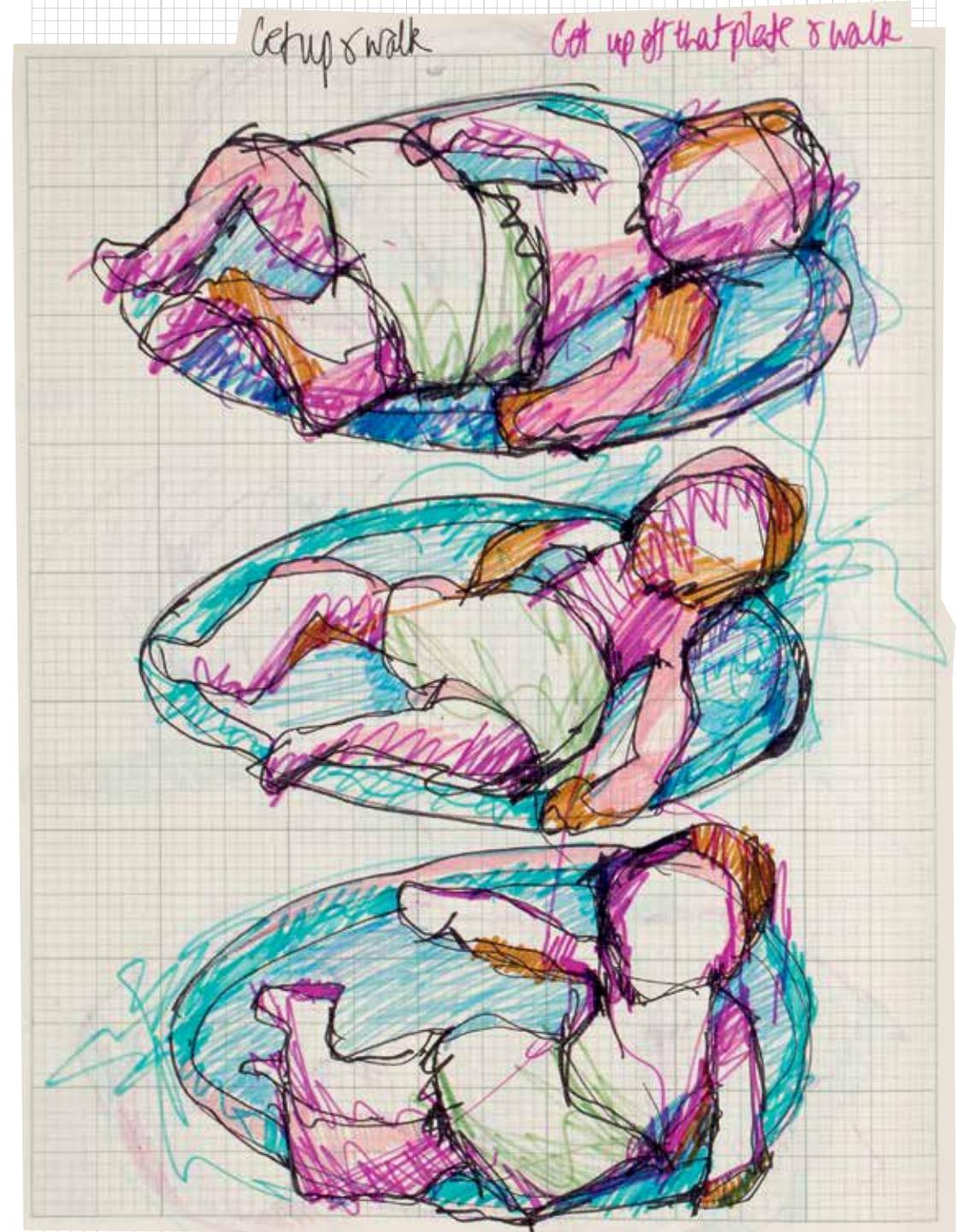
Despite the ongoing growth in scale and popularity of my work, it has consistently been perceived as female and eccentric. The wit, or satire, that I use to make the work accessible has allowed entrenched cultural pundits to willfully overlook the rigour. As a female artist of my generation with a voice that does not get heard in the mainstream art world I've felt increasingly frustrated and marginalized in recent years.

I am therefore thrilled that Clara Zarza has chosen to curate this exhibition that so eloquently articulates many of the major themes within my work. This exhibition is an invitation to reflect on the constructed and important politics of the everyday lives of women, and the home.

Bobby Baker  
London, January 2019



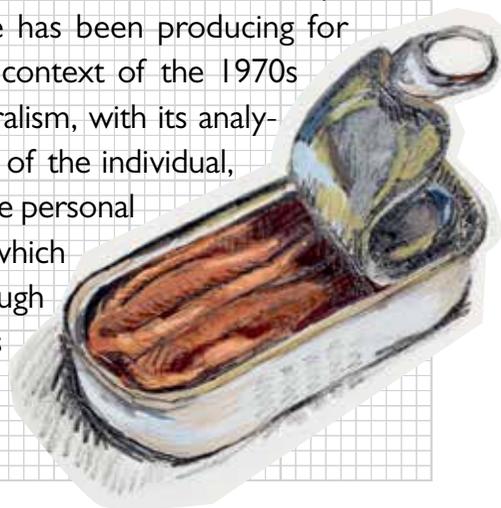
Bobby Baker, *Displaying the Sunday Dinner*.  
Image © Andrew Whittuck, 1998



When artists explore their own experience, it isn't always out of a narcissistic desire to put themselves on show, to share their most intimate secrets and lure us into taking a peek at their private world protected by the comfortable distance of the spectator. When artists talk about their fears, anxieties and difficulties, we shouldn't automatically reach for sensationalist interpretations that view them as tragic figures, with an exceptional individualistic streak and turbulent life, and their art as a form of catharsis or mechanism of survival. Let's not forget that artists reflect, select, edit and re-present, that art is not merely a reflection of reality that provides us with a certain understanding of a subject without calling for any deeper interpretations.

Stories of suffering and survival through the practice of art are told over and over again for the specific purpose of engaging the spectator with work which, it is presumed, would be impossible to understand otherwise. This assumption stems from conceiving of artists as "eccentric" people—especially if they don't conform to the implicitly established notion of the white, heterosexual, Western, middle-class, healthy male—and from viewing their adoption of the autobiographical strategy in terms of a confession or testimony, and therefore ignoring the importance of mediation and the construction of the work.

However, when Bobby Baker repeatedly explores her private and everyday life using frank and coarse yet eminently humorous language, she does so as an individual who occupies different social spaces: a British middle-class woman / mother / artist / psychiatric patient / cancer sufferer. The performances, installations and drawings that she has been producing for more than forty years reflect the historical context of the 1970s and 1980s, decades marked by post-structuralism, with its analysis of the role of culture in the construction of the individual, and by feminist theory, with its advocacy of the personal as political, of the everyday as an arena in which the relations of power are played out. Although Baker's work in this particular context has gained considerable international acclaim, the



themes and configuration of her works continue to be described as peripheral. This identification of the artist's subject matter as "marginal" or "eccentric"—themes traditionally not associated with autobiographical material—has not only conditioned the reception of her work but also its presence in the canonical spaces of the art world.

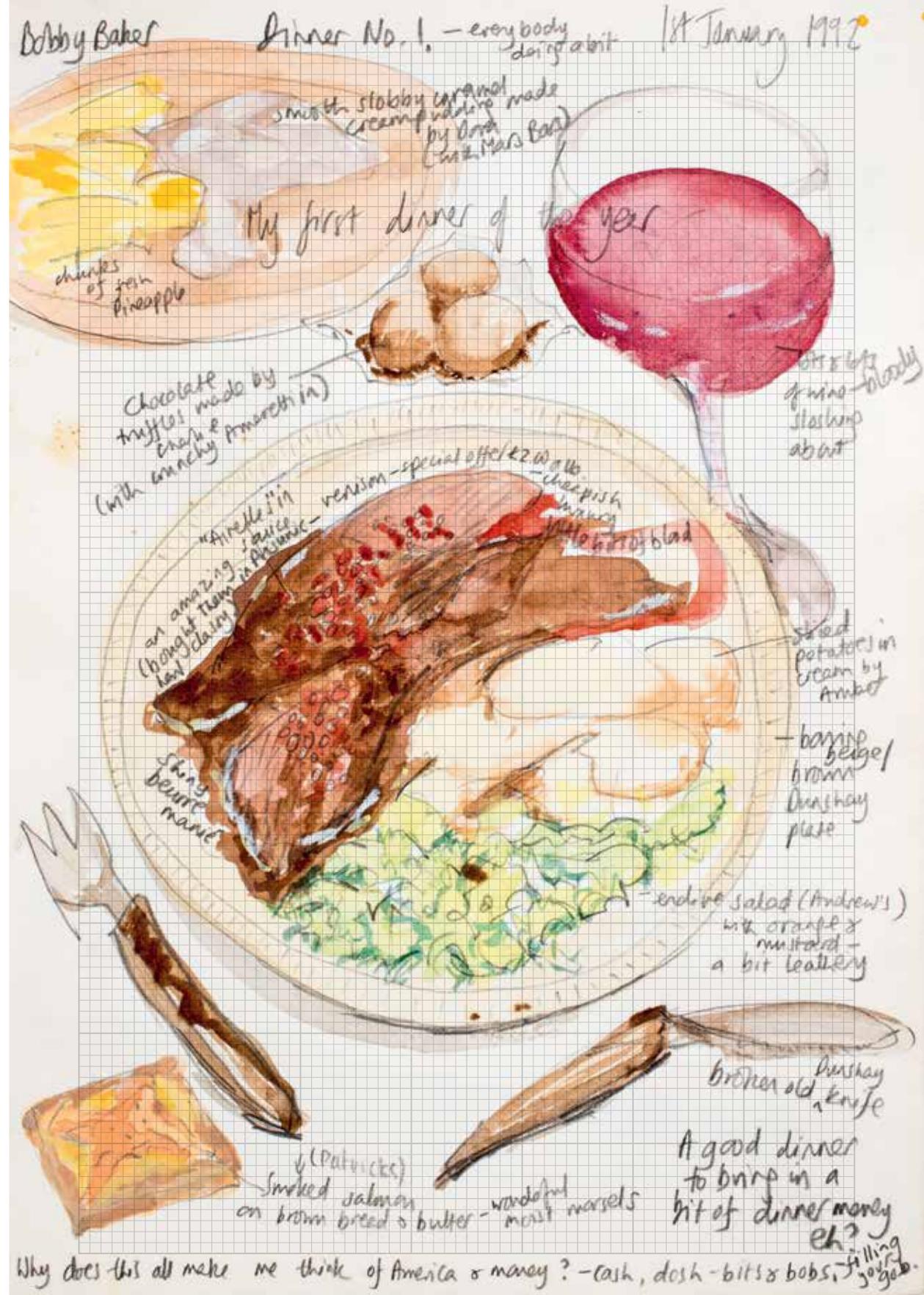
The show *Bobby Baker: Jars of Chutney* offers an insight into the artist's richly varied work, highlighting its enduring resonance today and providing Spanish audiences with their first opportunity to explore the series of drawings, watercolours and prints which she has systematically produced throughout her career, presented here in the broader context of an artistic practice focused primarily on performance and the use of food as an artistic medium. The exhibition includes never-before-exhibited series, such as the *Timed Drawings* notebooks (1984–1985)—drawings literally produced against the clock by an artist, mother and housewife with very little time on her hands—and well-known works such as the acclaimed *Diary Drawings* (1997–2008), containing a selection from more than seven hundred extraordinary drawings made by the artist over the course of eleven years, starting in 1997, when she became a patient at a day centre following a mental health crisis. Baker also presents two of her most recent works: the beginning of her project *Epic Domestic* (2019), which stems from the idea of creating a Domestic Revolutionary Party; and her performance *Drawing on a (Grand) Mother's Experience* (2015), an updated version of her historic 1988 *Drawing on a Mother's Experience*, in which she offers relevant reflections on the experience of becoming a mother, now viewed through the privileged prism conferred by age. Thus, the exhibition not only enables La Casa Encendida to present Baker's work for the first time in Spain, but provides audiences with the opportunity to explore it in great depth, beyond the personal testimony, as a space or tool for reflecting on everyday life, on the power and tensions hidden in the minute details that make up our daily lives.

\*\*\*

BOBBY BAKER: JARS OF CHUTNEY



Bobby Baker, Kitchen Show. Image © Andrew Whittuck, 1991



One drawing every day, even though there's no time, even if it remains unfinished. A discipline learned at art school but hard to keep up in the years marked by the immediate demands of motherhood and housework, a hefty counterweight to the abstraction required for creative work. Bobby Baker, whose rich artistic output spans more than forty years, tells us how between 1980 and 1988 the birth of her children gave rise to an interlude in her work as an artist. Referring to this unexpectedly long period, Baker says, "I found it extremely hard to see myself as an artist once I had children. I lost my sense of 'self' and status alarmingly quickly" (Barrett and Baker, 2007, p. 47). However, during the years of this interlude she did produce one work, *Timed Drawings*, a set of six notebooks of which five are exhibited here for the first time.

In these dated and literally timed drawings, which bear witness to the lack of time and impossibility of maintaining a regular regime as regards her artistic practice, Baker captures her daily life as a mother and housewife. Some drawings took just two minutes to complete; the more elaborate ones took all of fifteen minutes. The series illustrates the particular gaze that characterises Baker's work, with its focus on seemingly insignificant details and the desire to show things that shouldn't be shown. In Baker's view, the conventions dictating what is irrelevant, embarrassing or awkward are mechanisms for concealing the complex tensions underlying everyday matters. The *Timed Drawings* do not narrate great events or construct a story, but instead focus on minute details, like the ingredients of a meal, a moment of celebration or the joy discovered in a kebab or cup of tea, but also the disappointment at the taste of a stew that has taken great effort to prepare. Baker talks about the pride and pleasure she finds in keeping her surroundings so neat and tidy, in making or mending a jacket, or in the delicate drawing of the nape of her son's neck after cutting his hair. This contrasts with the growing expression of exhaustion and despair we find as we turn the pages of the notebooks, when the powerful image of the artist hugging herself in a drawing entitled



"Comfort Yourself" morphs into bodies deformed by expressions of anger and isolation.

Years later Baker would go back to this practice in the more systematic, elaborate and radical series entitled *Diary Drawings*, an installation comprised of more than seven hundred extraordinary drawings made by the artist over the course of eleven years marked by mental and physical illness and by the institutions, processes and figures that treat these illnesses. In this series, Baker addresses her experiences at a variety of day centres, psychiatric wards and cancer services, as well as at the hands of "crisis" teams. She also speaks about the impotence of the voiceless patient when confronted with the authority of the "expert" health professional. The artist's mediation in this work, which goes far beyond the personal testimony, is underlined by its configuration as an installation, as for this exhibition Baker decided to photograph a selection of the drawings and accompany them with explanatory texts carefully edited by the artist herself and her daughter, Dr. Dora Whittuck (a clinical psychologist). These fascinating and poignantly beautiful drawings highlight the silence surrounding mental illness and the body through blood-streaked faces that morph into rivers of tears, masks or a valley besides a church; scenes that show sensations of isolation, observation, intervention, humiliation and loneliness, as well as that of the mechanised individual overwhelmed by work. Once again, Baker's work explores exclusion and invisibility, as well as the points of resistance or obstacles that the limits of the inappropriate, the unseemly and the prohibited impose on narration.

The tension between what is narrated and what is omitted, and the multiple layers of meaning hidden in little household chores and daily actions form the central theme of this exhibition. In an interview with Adrian Heathfield, Baker emphasised her interest in highlighting and communicating the value of shockingly underestimated actions and moments, discovering "everyday life [...] the many daily aspects of how we live and how we express ourselves" (Barrett and Baker, 2007, p. 85). In the performance *Drawing on a (Grand)*

## BOBBY BAKER: JARS OF CHUTNEY

*Mother's Experience*, included in this exhibition, the artist focuses more on seemingly banal details than on major events. For instance, in her account of the day she gave birth while moving house, she says nothing of the actual process of childbirth, putting the audience's mind at rest with the words "I won't go into anything, you know, don't worry". However, she does describe in minute detail the meal she made for the friends who came over to help her pack prior to moving house. Once again, Baker confronts us with the contradictory feelings prompted by the experience of childbirth: the satisfaction and pride of being able to breastfeed her child and donate milk to the hospital contrast with the worry about the baby's diet and managing her time efficiently. The artist illustrates her narrative with an abstract, symbolic artwork that she creates by pouring food onto a white sheet. The actual process of creating this work (an ironic wink to Jackson Pollock's iconic dripping technique) dramatises the impact that the experience of being a mother and running the home has on the individual and her relationship with the world around her.

The title of the show, *Bobby Baker: Jars of Chutney*, echoes one of the anecdotes that serve to dramatisise this peculiar painting process. Baker talks about how, during her first months as a mother in charge of the housework, one of her greatest pleasures was making preserves, especially jars of chutney. As she explains to the audience, this task represented the gratification of being productive, the value of preserving something, the practicality of being beneficial for the household economy—a constant worry—and the aesthetic pleasure of admiring the jars lined up on the shelf. Once again, the anecdote subverts the expectation of what is relevant in the narrative of a life, condensing the pleasure, tensions and multiple layers of meaning hidden in the trifles of everyday life.

This importance of detail, of precision and the trivial action, is not only narrated but dramatised as the performance progresses. The ambiguity between the pleasure and the pressure or demands of daily chores is manifested in the nervous deliberation with which the artist smooths out the plastic and the cloth on which she is working, making sure there are no



creases; in the meticulous task of placing the slices of roast beef on the edges of the cloth, taking the time to press them one by one so that they leave a subtle mark on the cloth; in how she demonstrates the organisation and planning that have gone in to everything she has prepared (the use of plastic so that cleaners won't have to tidy up after the performance and the elements so carefully cut or packed). This dramatisation reminds us that the responsibility for and execution of certain daily tasks do not only determine our experience but also the way we behave.

The nervousness and anxiety reflected in the desire for precision and perfection in carrying out daily activities and actions are accompanied by other signs throughout *Drawing on a (Grand) Mother's Experience*, such as stammering, hesitation and awkwardness. Baker's exclamations, her hastiness in correcting some aspect which she thinks she has failed to do properly, and her constant explanations, modest smiles and apologies remind us that the narration and dramatisation of her experience are being exposed to the gaze of an audience. In this respect, Baker touches on a fundamental aspect of presenting the private in a public arena: embarrassment. As she has indicated, her work often explores "the restriction and cruelty of embarrassment, the damage it does to people's ability to communicate in an honest way" (Barrett and Baker, 2007, p. 91), as well as the sensation of ridicule that governs the boundary between what is perceived as private and public, between the individual and the collective.



Bobby Baker, *Drawing on a Mother's Experience*. Image © Andrew Whittuck, 1988

Bobby Baker, *Drawing on a (Grand) Mother's Experience*. Image © Belinda Lawley, 2015

In both her *Timed Drawings* and *Drawing on a (Grand) Mother's Experience*, Baker also points out the skill, experience and specialist knowledge that are demanded by housework. The recognition and celebration of household chores acquire a central presence in *Epic Domestic*, a work which Baker has produced for La Casa Encendida and intends to continue developing in the coming years. In this piece, the artist proposes the creation of a political party whose mission is to carry out revolutionary actions to shine a spotlight on



the value of housework. The propaganda produced for the party echoes the aesthetics of the dadaist and constructivist posters of the early-twentieth century, presenting a heroic Bobby, goddess of the home, provided with seven arms—she always works with prime numbers—that allow her to carry out multiple tasks at the same time. In this case, as in all of Baker's work, humour and irony are deployed as a key strategy for mitigating the tension of an uncomfortable theme, for attracting and engaging the spectator and demonstrating the paradox and absurdity of many aspects that are accepted unquestioningly as part of everyday life.

As a result, Baker's work does not only expose the limits imposed on the narration of everyday experience, but subverts them through humour. Parody and irony have frequently provided the most practical narrative strategies for presenting critical or subversive discourses that might antagonise the spectator. Deactivating the aggressiveness that is provoked by deliberately highlighting the taboo, as well as a certain anodyne element associated with matters considered to be irrelevant, Baker explores the experience of motherhood, physical and mental illness,

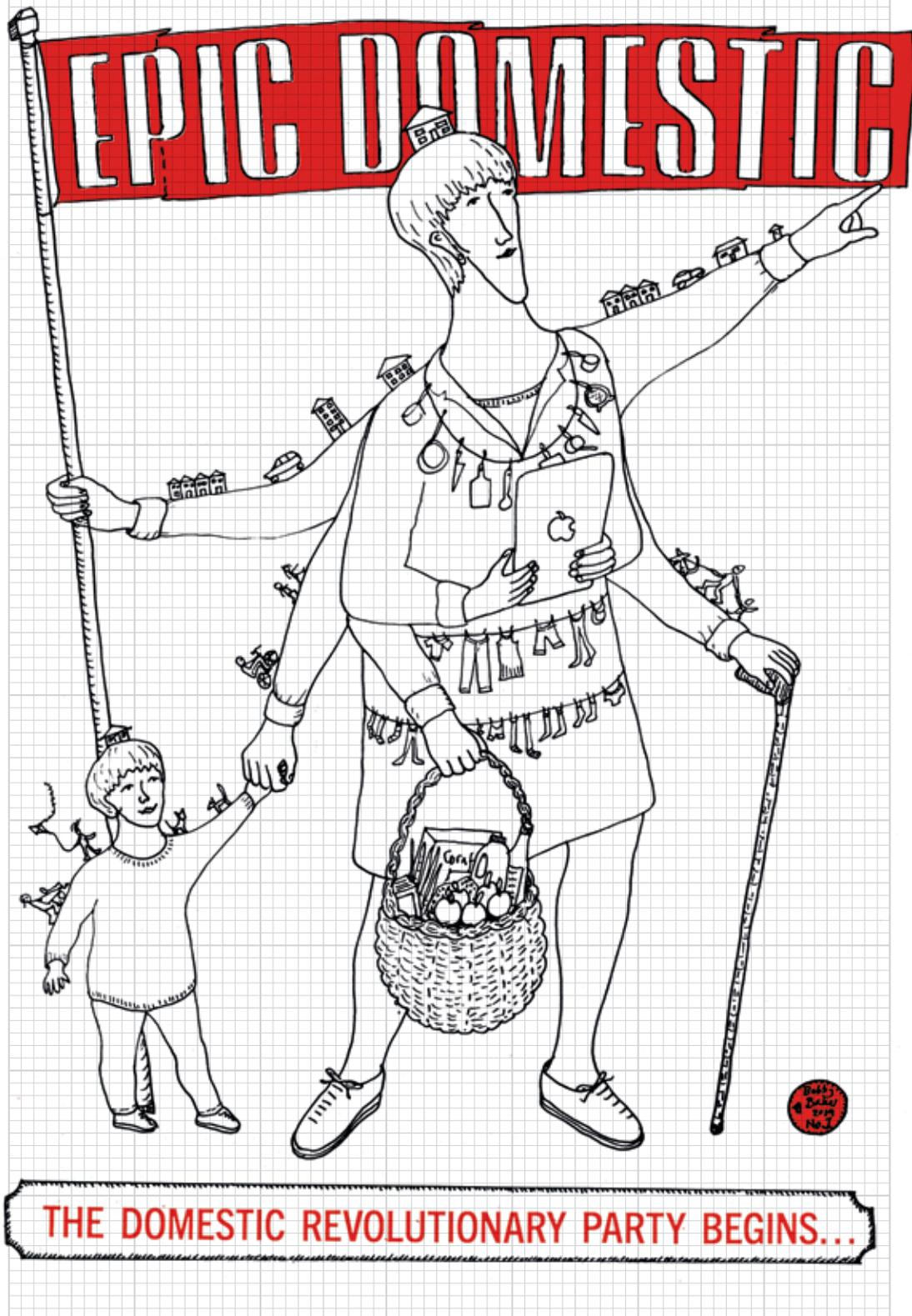


Bobby Baker, *Drawing on a Mother's Experience*. Image © Andrew Whittuck, 1988  
Bobby Baker, *Drawing on a (Grand) Mother's Experience*. Image © Belinda Lawley, 2015

family relationships, the politics of caregiving and the tensions between domestic and professional work. But far from *presenting* a personal narrative with autobiographical undertones, or allowing us to peek into her private world for the mere pleasure of gazing at someone else's life, Baker's work offers us a material and framework in which to engage in a broader and more fundamental reflection about power and the importance contained in the trifles of everyday life, *transforming* our perception of ourselves and our relationship with the world around us.

References:

Michèle Barrett and Bobby Baker, *Bobby Baker: Redeeming Features of Daily Life* (London: Routledge, 2007).



## LA CASA ENCENDIDA

Director  
LUCÍA CASANI

Head of the Cultural Department  
MÓNICA CARROQUINO

Exhibitions Department

Coordination  
TANIA PARDO  
Management and Production  
MARÍA NIETO GARCÍA  
VANESSA CASAS CALVO

## EXHIBITION

Curator  
CLARA ZARZA

Assembly  
INICIATIVAS Y  
EXPOSICIONES, S.A.

Design  
JOSÉ DUARTE

Video Editing  
GUZMÁN INFANZÓN

Transport  
CRISÓSTOMO

Insurance  
HISCOX

## PUBLICATION

Design  
JOSÉ DUARTE

Copy-editing  
EXILIO GRÁFICO

Translations  
POLISEMIA, S.L.

Prepress and Printing  
BRIZZOLIS

DL  
M-6277-2019

© texts:  
their authors  
© photographs:  
their authors

---

Exhibition

**Bobby Baker:**  
**Jars of Chutney**  
**22.02 — 21.04.2019**

Curated by

**Clara Zarza**

Room

**A**

**#TarrosDeChutney**

---

Performance

**Drawing on a (Grand)**  
**Mother's Experience,**  
**by Bobby Baker**  
**22.02.2019 22.00 h**

*Drawing on a (Grand) Mother's Experience* is an autobiographical performance in which the artist talks about her experience as a mother.

---

**La Casa Encendida**

Ronda de Valencia, 2  
28012 Madrid  
T 91 506 21 80

[lacasaencendida.es](http://lacasaencendida.es)

**Opening hours**

Tuesday to Sunday,  
10 am to 10 pm  
Exhibition spaces are  
cleared at 9:45 pm

**lacasaencendida.es**

[facebook.com/lacasaencendida](https://facebook.com/lacasaencendida)  
[twitter.com/lacasaencendida](https://twitter.com/lacasaencendida)  
[instagram.com/lacasaencendida](https://instagram.com/lacasaencendida)  
[youtube.com/lacasaencendida](https://youtube.com/lacasaencendida)  
[vimeo.com/lacasaencendida](https://vimeo.com/lacasaencendida)  
[blog.lacasaencendida.es](https://blog.lacasaencendida.es)

**LA CASA ENCENDIDA**

de fundación **montemadrid**