

Mary Mary

Jeffrey, Moira; Scotland on Sunday, 27 June 2010

Art preview: Sara Barker: Images | Mark Handforth

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By Moira Jeffrey

IT'S the closing week of June. The exams are over. It's hot. The summer holidays are just beginning. In the garden, the birds are fledging. In university towns all over the country the graduations have begun.

If this all sounds a bit corny, in the vein of John Major's famous speech misquoting George Orwell on English beer and maids cycling to communion, I'll make no apologies for it. I'm a sucker for those times of year when you can just sense the change in the air and it's as well to go with the flow.

In the visual arts, that process of change feels powerful in June, the time of degree shows, the ending of one phase and the beginning of the next. But there's also a constant round of departures, the young artists moving on to the next thing.

That often means a move overseas, a step on to the international merry-go-round of artists' residencies. And that's the case with Sara Barker, whose second solo show at Mary Mary in Glasgow marks both her departure and undoubted arrival.

Barker, who studied in Glasgow, has moved on for the time being. Now she's in Amsterdam where she will shortly begin the prestigious studio programme at de Ateliers, an international set-up for young artists that provides them with a peer group, a context and, most importantly, a studio: that crucial room of their own.

It's perhaps not surprising then that Barker has been thinking hard about what that might mean. For some time now her reedy, frail sculptures, made from scrappy found material, have become increasingly reminiscent of shelters or domestic structures: windows and doors.

Her show, *Images*, explicitly refers to the idea of a room: that space, both literal and metaphoric, that Virginia Woolf insisted every woman must have if she were to pursue a creative life.

Barker's new works are sculpture but barely three-dimensional, lean line drawings or paintings in space made of aluminium frames, which have been coated in paint, scuffed and scumbled with messy resin sand or glue.

A series of freestanding works seems to offer the possibility of shelter, but it soon turns out to be an illusion. Vistas open up and close down, a door appears to open but get close and you will find it never existed at all, it's just a cluster of lines. The eye is drawn not to the sculpture itself but through and beyond it, to the window or the floor. Three works abandon this strategy altogether, sitting on pristine plinths of glass and steel tables, not exits and entrances but simple objects after all.

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Much of this is a sophisticated play on the history of minimalist sculpture, the relationship between the object, the air around it and you the viewer. But still in whimsical mood, you can read it in an emotional way too as a question of inside and out. You may need your own space to make your art but at the same time the only true place needed for making work is in your head. This is a confident, if slightly repetitive sequence of works and Barker confirms her growing reputation as an artist to watch.

Across town at the Modern Institute's handsome new premises, a converted Victorian bath house in the Merchant City, Miami-based artist Mark Handforth is at a very different career stage, an established figure in his early forties, a veteran of the big show and the big gesture.

Handforth's trademarks are skewed familiarity. His early keynote works were strong familiar forms, such as street lights or road signs twisted to the edge of recognition. His neon works took a familiar medium and pushed it from its austere roots to the edge of glamorous decoration.

In his current show, Handforth takes a familiar set of visual images drawn from a set of playing cards and pushes them through the mill of different types of representation: are they ideas or things, signs or sculptures? The heart becomes a graffiti image, a loose sprayed sketch that has been photographed, turned into a screen print then printed directly on to the wall to seem like graffiti again.

The spade is a big wad of felt that is slipping down the wall and on to the floor like a leaf beginning to curl. The club is a deliberately awkward cluster of oxidised steel, like three giant baseballs adrift in the room. The diamonds are outlined in neon, fanned out like a deck of cards, reaching over and beyond the edge of the gallery wall.

It's simple and very effective, a wee bit too empty, but an elegant exposition none the less. If Barker is working away at the thorny question of just what home might mean then Handforth's work is fully fledged and might seem at home anywhere. v

Sara Barker runs until 31 July; Mark Handforth until 24 July www.marymarygallery.co.uk, www.themoderninstitute.com

Sara Barker: Images

Mary Mary, Glasgow

Mark Handforth

Modern Institute, Glasgow

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