

## art plus thought

### Sara Barker's 'Change - the - setting'

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by Megan Wallace



Sara Barker, 'CHANGE-THE-SETTING', installation view, The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 2016; photograph: Ruth Clark

'CHANGE-THE-SETTING' is a solo exhibition of eighteen of Sara Barker's works, combining pre-existing pieces with ones commissioned specifically for the Fruitmarket gallery space. With the featured artwork being created over the space of ten years, we can see how the artist's thinking and methods have changed and developed over the space of her career. The displayed work is undeniably ambiguous and abstract, yet titles such as *Woman at the Window* hint at hidden figurative qualities, and ask the viewer to look anew at the piece before them and attempt to reinterpret its visual qualities. The relationship which is thus fostered between the work and the onlooker, as well as the insight which the exhibition gives into the artist's progression, gives the exhibition a particularly intimate feel.

The exhibition title, 'CHANGE-THE-SETTING' has the guttural bark of one of Beckett's stage directions, and evokes a situation in which one element can be changed in order to permit other aspects to interact in a new way. Fittingly, Sara Barker's work breaks down the divisions between painting and sculpture in order to invigorate her practice and play with the associations of these media. Hence, we see a series of sculpture-like structures which consist of strips of paintings done by Barker teased into ever-more precarious shapes.

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Elsewhere, there are large works embedded into the gallery wall wherein the traditional painting surface of canvas has been replaced with metal and mirror. Thus, the spontaneity we often associate with paint effuses her delicate structures and the overt materiality evoked by sculpture, is present in her paintings.

This melding of media is what Barker has made her name for, but her disregard of boundaries can be seen elsewhere, in the inspiration she draws from literature and dance. Rather than see the visual arts as completely separate from other creative fields, she allows her art to be enriched by the concepts and qualities of other creative media and we can see this primarily through her use of shape and space. The fragile sculptural forms evoke a certain balletic grace and the way that pieces change as the viewer's perspective alters as they move around the work mimics the movement of dance, making her sculptures animate rather than static forms.

Such innovative use of space is one of the most distinctive aspects of Barker's artistic practice and Barker makes the upper floor of the Fruitmarket her own: making robust works for the space itself, one even being made within it. These works have been designed so that they dialogue and interact and this, combined with the fact that some are embedded into the wall, gives a sense of these pieces being intrinsically tied to the space. In this way, Barker is inspired by female modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf, who mediated upon the importance of personal space, both literally and symbolically, to the artistic process. In making her newer work so dependent on the gallery space she has been provided, the artist suggests that having a 'Room of One's Own' in which to be creative allows the artist to move away from the mundane of the every day in order to develop artistically.

Barker's work ridicules our predisposition to categorise, to reduce other people and things to overly restrictive categories. Making use of steel and aluminium, it is clear that her pieces are very labour-intensive which may lead some of us to assume that they have been crafted by a man. However, this traditionally 'masculine' aspect is combined with 'feminine elements' — like the use of soft paint colours and delicate forms. Therefore, not only does she resist the boundaries between paint and sculpture but she frustrates the viewer's assumptions in a range of other ways, making them alive to new modes of perception.

**Sara Barker** CHANGE-THE-SETTING

**Exhibition** 12 March – 5 June 2016

The Fruitmarket Gallery

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