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Monday – Friday 11am – 5pm. By appt on Saturdays

By The Way **An Exhibition by George Barber**

Exhibition Dates: Sept 17th – November 1st, 2015

By the Way is the first solo show by **George Barber** in the United States. With a wide range of work, deploying both humour and lyricism, the London-based Barber has been long recognized as one of the more influential video artists in the UK. His practice straddles many forms but has always combined a strong writerly aspect, humour and a devout iconoclasm. “Nodding equally to Jack Goldstein and Afrika Bambaataa,” writes critic Martin Herbert, “[Barber’s work] is smartest in its accessibility: it’s textbook Postmodernism, but with a groove.”

Barber gained considerable attention for his "scratch videos" of the 1980s, many of which were later copied by advertisers and promo makers (and used by bands such as U2). He has been celebrated by a younger generation of British contemporary artists including Hannah Perry and James Richards. Over his career Barber has produced an impressive range of work and does not sit easily in one box. He includes elements in his work as disparate as performance, improvisers, computer graphics, music, image manipulation, appropriation, professional actors and written narratives. He moves between the registers of conceptual art and political observation, especially in some of his most recent film work such as *Akula Dream* and *The Freestone Drone*.

For his wide-ranging exhibition at Young Projects, Barber will present a cross-section of works including the aforementioned *Akula Dream* and *The Freestone Drone*, as well as *Upside Down Minutiae*, *River Sky*, *Garden Centre*, *Automotive Action Painting*. The show will also include his well-known *Shouting Match Series* and many of his 'scratch videos'.

George Barber’s numerous solo screenings have included the Tate, the ICA, The Victoria & Albert Museum, The Royal Academy, New York Film & Video Festival, Art Belgium, Miami Basel, South London Gallery, and at La Rochelle Festival, France. Many of his works reside in key collections around the world including Paris’s Marc Fassiati collection. Barber has also been the subject of many articles by such authors as Sukdev Sandhu, Sam Thorne, Christy Lange, Omar Kholief, Sean Cubitt, Mike O’Pray, Paul Morley and Gareth Evans, Ed Halter, Martin Herbert, Victor Lewis Smith & Maria Walsh.

Barber’s first collection of short fiction, *Reality Check*, is also being released to coincide with the exhibition.

Entryway works:

The lobby area contains a handful of works that explore some of Barber's psychedelic experiments with video synthesizers in the 1990s (works such as "Arizona" and "2001 Colours Andy Never thought of". As Garth Evans has noted, these works "provide the clearest examples of Barber's desire to be immersed in the abstracting potential of technology, a dream of the shifting surface that suggests the ephemerality of both subject and signal."

This section of the exhibition also features two performance-based works, "Upside Down Minutiae" and "River Sky." Each presents a scenario from daily life where the participants are asked to hang upside-down on the back of a moving vehicle as it travels around London or a speedboat on the River Thames. As they hang upside down, Barber asks them questions about their lives, feelings and childhoods. The result is a kind of public confessional that trades on the topsy-turvy ethos of contemporary art practices.

***Upside Down Minutiae* 2001**

Reference BAR059/1

Edition 1/3+1ap

Length 4'00"

***Video High Two* 1994**

Reference BAR0381/2

Edition 2/3+1ap

Length 46'03"

***Arizona* 1994**

Reference BAR034/2

Edition 2/3+1ap

Length 6'23"

2001 Colours Andy Never

***Thought Of* 1995**

Reference BAR064/2

Edition 2/3+1ap

Length 5'00"

***River Sky* 2002**

Reference BAR039/2

Edition 2/3+1ap

Length 02'01"

First Gallery

The first gallery contains Barber's 'Shouting Match' series, which were created over the course of seven years on four different continents. Inspired by 'Reality TV' programming, each "match" was conducted at a public location and always with local volunteers. Each pair of contestants were asked to sit in chairs that were nailed to dollies running on DiY-style rails (each propelled by volunteers). Over the course of one to two minutes, the contestants would see if they could "out shout" the other—always at the risk of losing their voice. The result is both comical and disturbing—an absurdist take on daytime tv that also somehow hints at Bruce Nauman and Chris Burden. As Evans writes in "The Boy From Georgetown": "As the clock ticks from day to dusk and beyond, in a low-rent nod to the durational aspect of 'reality' machinations, the scenario becomes both a perfect metaphor for the underlying nature of much archetypal human behavior and a deceptively simple incarnation of the forward impulse of contemporary cultural, social and political exchange."

***1) Shouting Match India* '10**

Reference BAR033/2

Edition 2/3+1ap

Length 6'14"

2) Shouting Match Tel Aviv

'04

Reference BAR032/3

Edition 3/5+1ap

3) Shouting Match New Orleans

Reference BAR058/1

Edition 1/3 +1ap

Length 9'

***4) Shouting Match (UK)* '04**

Reference BAR032/3

Edition 3/5+1ap | Length 11'

Main room (16:9 screen to the right)

Garden Centre 2015
Reference BAR060/1
Edition 1/3+1ap
Length 2'05"

Rear screen projection (4:3 screen in the middle)

Automotive Action Painting 2007
Reference BAR001/2
Edition 2/3+1ap
full HD video
Length 6'03"

Small Flatscreen on far wall

'Following Your Heart', 'Welcome', 'Losing Faith', 'Reality Check' and 'Autumn' all use off-air adverts and minor films. The central conceit is to take found footage and manipulate it into a new artistic experience. The adverts all play with the capitalistic theme of constantly asking people to consume by appealing to their emotions. A variety of adverts are used, ranging from the mobile campaigns, credit cards, bread, new DVDs, to 'Fantastic Voyage', the classic film about a miniature craft inserted into a man's blood stream. The messages start to collide and contradict and many of the adverts have been re-mixed to fit together perfectly, to be in tune and maintain the same timing. Some become sad, depressing or troubling, and often reveal something quite opposite of the advert itself, such as a desire for death or the absolute insignificance of each one of us.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1) Autumn 2008
 <i>Reference BAR0131/2</i>
 <i>Edition 2/3+1ap</i>
 <i>Length 5'03"</i></p> | <p><i>Reference BAR044/2</i>
 <i>Edition 2/3+1ap</i>
 <i>Length 17'06"</i></p> |
| <p>2) Following Your Heart Can Lead to Wonderful Things 2008
 <i>Reference BAR031/2</i>
 <i>Edition 2/3+1ap</i>
 <i>Length 6'03"</i></p> | <p>4) Welcome 2001
 <i>Reference BAR037/2</i>
 <i>Edition 2/3+1ap</i>
 <i>Length 4'03"</i></p> |
| <p>3) Reality Check 2003</p> | <p>5) Losing Faith 2008
 <i>Reference BAR0661/2</i>
 <i>Edition 2/3+1ap</i>
 <i>Length 5'06"</i></p> |

Large LCD flatscreens to the far right

The two screens in this section offer another selection of works that suggest a second, parallel strand that can be found in Barber's work. As Evans points out, Barber moved away from the heavy-editing of his scratch videos of the past and began moving toward micro-dramas and/or monologues in

the 2000s, which often focused on word-play and scripted scenarios. Many are based on Barber's daily life, where he goes to great lengths to describe what can only be described as mundane or trivial. Yet each tends to reveal something about "larger" writes Evans, "about the nature and challenge of being human." Much of that has to do with the subtle detail and intimacy that Barber brings to these works. (The human "voice" is crucial to many of these works). At the same time, they're also distinguished by an almost tangible tension between Barber's construction of the event and the "reality" of that scenario itself and thus they achieve their own formal investigation as well.

Left screen

1) I Was Once In A Shit

Show_1994

Reference BAR056/1

Edition 1/3+1ap

Length 1'45"

2) Basement Pool_2015

Reference BAR056/1

Edition 1/3+1ap

Length 1'55

Right screen

1) Discrepancy 1999

Reference BAR0564/1

Edition 1/3+1ap

Length 15'45"

2) Withdrawal 1997

Reference BAR05364/1

Edition 1/3+1ap

Length 4'57

Mid area 1 (Large 4:3 screen)

Program of classic Barber 1980 works:

This screen contains a number of Barber's extremely influential 'scratch videos' from the 1980s and 90s (such as *Absence of Satan*, *Tilt* and *Yes Frank, No Smoke*) for which he received considerable attention (The pop video and advertising industry rapidly adopted some of Barber's "visual tricks" as he says.) These works exhibit a bravura montage style that uses appropriated found-footage (mostly from VHS tapes of television shows and movies) to not only create vivid, often humorous short films, but also highly musical compositions that play with structuralist ideas of repetition and verse. As Garth Evans writes in 'The Boy from Georgetown,' "Scratch, this re-ordering of popular artefacts, of *thin* images, into something stranger and more ambiguous, was, and in many ways still *is*, the perfect tool for the times. It both satirizes and salvages, pleases and provokes. It offers a carnival parade of icons and images, where the holding of power briefly changes, becomes democratised and diverse. Rhythmic, electric-hued, passing from the street to onward gaze, the carnival becomes resistance, first by simply being, and only then, once it has been experienced, by how it can be read."

1) Absence of Satan 1985

Reference BAR012/2

Edition 2/3+1ap

Length 4'46

2) Scratch Free State 1983

Reference BAR0173.2

Edition 2/3+1AP

Length 4'32

3) Television as Rock 1992

Reference BAR092/2

Edition 2/3+1ap

Length 2'46

4) What's that Sound? 1992

Reference BAR092/2

Edition 2/3+1ap

Length 4'56

5) Yes Frank No Smoke 1985

Reference BAR013.2

Edition 2/3+1AP

6) Tilt 1983

Reference BAR011/2

Edition 2/3+1ap

Length 5'37

Mid Area 2 (after partition with washing lines)

The last two areas of the gallery present two of the artist's most recent works, both of which are based on original scenarios by the artist. Here the cinematic becomes central to each work's meaning. Regarding **The Freestone Drone**, Sight & Sound remarked that, "like such early works of Barber's as **Yes Frank No Smoke**, this film ransacks the datastream for images - in this case footage of Al-Qaeda suspects, a missile tumbling, and so much more. The drone itself symbolizes US power but here it takes on a querulous and meditative personality to create an eerie collage of the visual cultures of militarized modernity. This is supplemented by the director's trademark wit: "I'm a bit like Thomas the Tank Engine," claims the drone, "he was a machine that could talk and he was small and hard-working."

The Freestone Drone 2013

Reference BAR044/2

Edition 2/3+ap

Media HD video

Large Back Cinema

Akula Dream is Barber's latest and most ambitious work to date. The scenario involves an old Russian Akula submarine which is armed with ballistic nuclear missiles. It spends months at a time in the mid-Atlantic remaining motionless and often resting on the bottom of the sea to avoid detection. The ship's Captain Pavel seems to care very little for practical matters or protocol. According to him his concerns are much larger than that, preferring instead to lead discussions about spiritual matters and the power of good. At night he sends out messages of peace and love to the universe at night and insists to everyone on board that a sailor's job is to promote 'world harmony and love.' Not surprisingly many of the sailors feel otherwise and question his devotion to Russia and a 'true sailor's duty.'

Like many of Barber's works Akula Dream questions the idea of surface both literally and figuratively, while creating a narrative that features two opposing systems butting into one another. At the same time, it also uses the notion of the "submerged" to let Barber do what he often does so well: indulge in extraordinary moments of sheer, luscious psychedelia.

Akula Dream 2015

Reference BAR055/2

Edition 2/3+ap

Media HD video

2015 ESSAY by Frieze and Editor of Art Review
MARTIN HERBERT:

Dream Myself Outside: On George Barber

One could be forgiven for thinking that there are, in fact, several video artists named George Barber. Is the maker of *Absence of Satan* (1985), which arranges sampled fragments of trashy American TV and cinema into an illogical but ominous montage underpinned by guitar-heavy electro, really the same G. Barber who filmed *I Was Once Involved in a Shit Show* (2003), a comically lachrymose, very English, first-person

account of a dismal exhibition experience sponsored by a cement-works owner? Can the Barber who made the wordless *Automotive Action Painting* (2007), a single-take aerial view of cars slaloming creatively through bucketfuls of coloured paint poured on an airstrip, also be the creator of the intricately edited, CGI-laden, fully scripted *Akula Dream* (2015)? Well, yes, and the heterodox attitude is surely no accident, given that Barber's art itself has, underneath the variation, regularly taken aim at deleterious orthodoxies. Those exist in the ostensible freedom of the artworld too, determining that artists play to comprehensible type. Barber is a moving target firing at targets of his own; and yet his art won't even be compassed by the notion of critique.

Akula Dream, for example, feels formally as distant from the Scratch Video approach that Barber pioneered in the 1980s – if no less leavened by wit – as its characters are from dry land or a happy ending. At the bottom of the ocean, in 1988, in a Soviet nuclear submarine, in an unlikely mix of *Heart of Darkness* and *Yellow Submarine*, one Captain Pavel has gone rogue, preoccupied with shamanic drumming and astral travels in which he proceeds to 'dream myself outside the hull'. The crew are mostly mutinous, and unwilling to join him in thinking outside their metal box. There are clear suggestions meanwhile that this story has dark metaphorical contours: the crew, '300 metres under the sea in a tube of hate', are informed by their commander that 'humankind is the real nuclear weapon', and that 'the world is calling us. Like a child, it is crying'. One might not subsequently expect a vintage garage number to erupt amid strafing lights, the first of several miniature pop videos within the film, signalling a crewmember's burgeoning ecological awareness. But that's what happens.

Yet if you're expecting this to end well rather than with the likely destruction – following several further glisteningly digitised psychedelic episodes sound-tracked by rapturous music – of this submarine by the Soviets themselves, then you don't know Barber. The countercultural mind-expanding elements here, playing against the reference point of the 1980s (which saw the conservative rollback of 60s ideals, including burgeoning ecological consciousness, and capitalism's effective defeat of Communism) serve as part of a what-if scenario, one that still accepts a likely disastrous outcome. Within the comedic carapace of the story – 'A mad captain in a crap boat; just our luck' is a not-atypical line from a lugubrious crewmember – is a molten melancholy core. The submarine, surely, denotes the false consciousness in which most of humanity, being so easily distracted and turned inward, is trapped while the planet heads to hell. Barber, meanwhile, in making video art that embraces pop aesthetics, proper acting, a mix of reality and computer graphics, humour and sadness, has symbolically escaped one box already.

Most of us, though, can't seem to get out of our own. In *The Very Very End* (2013), Barber again points to his medium's plastic possibility by somehow travelling into the future *and* the past, nodding to Neville Shute's apocalyptic 1957 novel *On the Beach* (and, again, historical paranoia about nuclear war) while setting an end-of-days story in a 21st-century holiday resort. At least thirty-seven nuclear strikes have gone off and it's the end of the world, but glassy club music is playing and everyone is still watching TV – watching images, we're told, of the beginning of the universe – while they wait for 'the radiation' to make them 'vomit and grow weak'. Barber's voiceover has him sounding calm, accepting. This is perhaps – intentionally, obviously – part of the problem. 'People keep believing that it's going to be OK,' Barber says, 'but it's not.' Stirring classical music intercedes, tugging the emotions, and, as in the artist's Scratch videos, science-programme and blockbuster-style imagery intended for very different purposes is upended, recontextualised. You recognise that, in an ideal world, such moves might snap a populace out of torpor. This isn't an ideal world, though.

Still, nuclear war is not the most likely threat to our future. It serves here, as with *Akula Dream*, as an analogue for a realer menace: probably environmental collapse, although there *is* always the possibility of a madman with nuclear weapons. The aim, apparently, is not to send audiences rushing to the nearest barricade. Barber's way around art's potential political inefficacy, always a speculative possibility, is to redefine the terms: art is a response to and reflection of the world as it is – seeing it *as it is*, without veils, might be achievement enough – and it leaves open the possibility of altering consciousness at another time through being talked about, through focusing concerns, suggesting alternative neural pathways. Still, Barber is far from naïve or Pollyanna-ish. The end is, almost certainly, coming somehow, whatever artists might want. And it may even be surprisingly continuous with the present: accompanied by passivity, stunned inertia, careless leisure, plenty of television, not too much thinking.

The Freestone Drone (2013), the companion piece to *The Very Very End* (and using the same sweeping classical music), substitutes a historical anxiety for a contemporary one concerning remote warfare. Here, again, Barber aims to think past a reflex response while analysing a problematic, not entirely rational hive-mind reaction: drones engender fear today because they represent a mindless, futuristic mode of warfare. Barber, emphasising this, reverses the terms and humanises the drone. He compares it to Thomas the Tank Engine (complete with burst of theme tune), gives it a personality, a silly sped-up voice, some mordantly humorous lines about how the drone 'just happened to blow you up'. Drones, Barber suggests, may not constitute worse weaponry than older examples but they somehow frighten us more, which deserves thinking about. Here, as in *Akula Dream*, there's a model of awakening into independent thought that points to a widespread stupor. And yet, once again, Barber won't aim straight for a target. *The Freestone Drone* flies along several courses, including an unofficial homage to Chris Marker's 1962 film *La Jetée* – a reminder that images don't have fixed meaning and are ripe for hijacking; snippets of nature documentaries serving as summaries of the contemporary mood ('the climate at the time was freakishly cold'); a narrative in which, playing on deep fears, the drone causes havoc in New York; and – strangest of all – the gestation of feelings of tenderness towards the faceless animist drone, who is something of a poet and seemingly saddened by the unease he produces in others.

If one target here is oversimplification, another is generational amnesia. We live in fear now in egocentric fashion, as if previous generations had never lived in fear. (Those previous generations, of course, may have felt the same way; this may merely be human nature, endless exceptionalism.) 'We already have the footage of our future. It's the footage of our past,' the Freestone Drone quavers. Perhaps only the details will change; certainly not the trajectory. The current refugee crisis is comparable to that at the end of the Second World War (Barber makes the comparison himself), a narrative that history has simplified too. In *Fences Make Senses* (2014), the artist invites empathy with refugees in an astringent way, at once diagnosing and analysing what art might achieve. Here he lays out the blunt realities of migration – being held up lengthily in camps, 'swimming to a place where you're not wanted', buying a vehicle to escape in sight unseen and discovering that it has no wheels – while doubling down on the meaning of images. Clear aquamarine water, the sensuous stuff of holiday ads, is reframed in voiceover as what the refugee must swim through. There's an ironical, blokeish sales pitch for a dinghy, the parlance of consumerism again redeployed to create empathy, in which Barber's intent once more bifurcates. This, the work suggests, is what passes for common speech, the most democratic voice one might use in order to convey the urgency of the point. Later, a century-hence futuristic scenario taps into mainstream audiences'

desire to project themselves around in time, while also serving as a way to compress time so that patterns can be seen. ‘Human time,’ as Captain Pavel says, ‘is tiny.’

Understanding, even using blunt tools, is a goal of *Fences Make Senses*, even as it flaunts its own mechanisms for reaching the viewer. Pointed comparisons are made between beans in a lorry (well cared for, because consumer products) and people in a lorry (not well cared for at all), and the fact that biscuits are packed so as not to be smashed whereas emigrants, as we know, often die in transit. The reality principle that divides affluent citizens in the West from their sense of responsibility to the poor – on which their affluence rests – is exposed, as are the easy get-out clauses, voiced by Barber’s actors: ‘Nobody can solve a fifty-million people problem.’ ‘Are we meant to stop for every boat we see? We’d be stopping all day.’ ‘It’s not our problem, this is the problem of *countries*.’ The film becomes a complex amalgam of exposed problems, arguments for their insolubility, and then renewed efforts, the tide coming in and going out again, perpetually. ‘To imagine is at least a beginning,’ Barber says, registering the point at which art must locate itself to be realistic, to neither disregard responsibility or hide its head in idealist clouds.

And once again Barber is resistant to stylistic demarcation, appositely so in a film that concerns itself with borders. Here are reused advertisements, documentary images, bits of *verité* camcorder footage, acted sequences. The sum, though, might be characterised as a complex medley of filmic forms, bubbling with speech. It’s a renegade form, a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* approach to video art in which one sees the early influence on Barber of Jean-Luc Godard – who similarly stretched definitions of what one might include in cinema. Barber, though, reserves the right even to be oppositional to his own aesthetics. In the four *Shouting Match* films shot in London, Bangalore, Tel Aviv and New Orleans, he sets up a situation whose simplicity recalls the pure products of early video art.

Two people sit on chairs, on tracks, and yell at each other: assistants assess which one is shouting loudest, and accordingly push them forward or pull them back, in or out of the camera frame. Each locale produces a different kind of preverbal joust (witness the theatricality of the Indian segment), implicitly suggesting that not only are human beings in perpetual conflict that looks ridiculous from a distance; but also, scaling up, nations produce their own kind of aggression. People have been disagreeing since time immemorial, of course. But Barber seems, here, particularly interested in how this might function as allegorical for a consumerist era, a marketplace of attention. Nobody, here, is listening to each other: what’s important is that you shout the loudest, lest you be pushed out of frame. Communication is reduced to its simplest form, just as Barber here compresses video art to the question of who is in frame. Of course, we’re aware that he is also offering alternatives to this model in the form of his other, richly tessellated films, with their fluent and inclusive conflation of registers. He’s also offering alternatives to a po-faced reading of this work as lamenting human conflict, since *Shouting Match* is, inescapably, blackly comic. The shouting will go on, as Barber’s extending of this project over several years and milieus already suggests. We’ll shout until we have no voices left, until the end of the world, when we’ll settle in to watch television. Or maybe art will redeem us along the way. Barber, you suspect, doesn’t bank on that. But to imagine so is, at least, a beginning.

Martin Herbert

