

DOMESTIC SCIENTIST & ARTIST: BOBBY BAKER'S PORTRAYALS OF FEMINIST SELFHOOD

by: [Elizabeth Orcutt](#), November 10, 2025

CONVERSATION

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Could Bobby Baker have been a household name if she had lived in 1970s Fresno? It might have been different had her radical visual arts performance practice encountered Judy Chicago, Miriam Shapiro, and their CalArts Feminist Art Programme and received its due attention 50 years ago. Catherine Wood highlights this time as one of the foundational periods (2018) of performance art, noting that Baker worked similarly to those radical feminist artists. However, the visual arts scene in the UK was less receptive to this kind of work, leading her to carve out a place within the radical drama and dance world instead. But via this deviation, her practice offers an intriguing intersection and a lens through which to consider the portrayal of self as autobiographical within performance and as self-portraiture in the visual arts.



Fig. 1. Glendinning 2023. Artist Bobby Baker and the interior of An Edible Family in a Mobile Home.



Deirdre Heddon (2002 & 2007) considers autobiography in performance as a form that 'foregrounds some aspect of a life-story, a bio' where the 'auto' signals the sameness of subject and object of that story; that is 'author' and 'performer' collapse into each other as the performing 'I' is also the represented 'I' (2007: 8). But she also says the autobiographical performance is more complex as 'the 'I' that performs is often strategically complex and layered' (2007: 8). Both these ideas are present in Baker's pieces; she often performs an aspect of herself like mother, housewife, or grandmother. Furthermore, all performances transcend the singular 'I' and are by necessity plural, involving numerous people in the work/encounter, including—but not limited to—co-directors, designers, producers, and production managers. In this guided reflection on practice, Baker speaks of the infection and assumption gleaned from her art school education that her work should, by imperative, be a lone production. However, over



time, and through a detour into commercial advertising, she has come to relish the close collaboration her work entails.

Can we also think of Baker's work as self-portraits in the visual arts tradition? She admits here, with glee, that in her eighth decade, that world, which she feels is her natural home, is finally embracing her. James Hall defines contemporary self-portraits as 'confessional' (2014: 7), and this too encompasses Baker's pieces. Her work does depict her person, albeit with some characteristics, such as self-effacement, exaggerated. Frances Borzello argues for a discrete genre of self-portraiture made by women (2016). Borzello says that women's works depicting the self are less concerned with likeness and that the autobiographical is the defining characteristic of these. This implies that the 'I' in the work does not need to be accurate but can describe some aspect of experience. It is here that the static image and the active performance overlap and embrace each other, much like Heddon's performer and author. I found this too in my visual arts practice, but I define my works as self-portrayals (Orcutt 2022) as this word is more active and less fixed than self-portrait. Under Borzello's definition, Baker's work can be defined as a visual arts woman's self-portrait, as the autobiographical element is implicit in the performance.



Fig 2. Whittuck 1976. An Edible Family in a Mobile Home with artist Bobby Baker.

Baker's practice is finally receiving attention from the visual arts, particularly in the UK. *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home* (1976, 2023) was on display as *Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-1990* toured to the Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, from 7 March 2025 until the end of May. In *Performance in Contemporary Art* (2018), curator Catherine Wood says the artist presents an authentic self over time through their body, emphasising ritual via the physical and emotional. What the audience sees and experiences is a constructed image of themselves. This too could be a definition of a woman's self-portrait, and it is a pity that such a boundary-breaking, open-minded approach to art practice was absent within the UK art establishment in the 1970s.

Baker has long been established in the experimental performance world. But I only encountered her relatively recently in an excerpt of her *Drawing on a (Grand) Mother's Experience* (2015). The piece was commissioned by WOW festival founder Jude Kelly in 2015. It is no coincidence that this commission to celebrate global achievement around International Women's Day was made by a world-renowned theatre director.

On the main stage of the Royal Festival Hall in London, Baker bumbles her way through a complex message, dealing diffidently and wittily with the experience of parenting. She shows us the abject nature of a woman's role and the ridiculousness of an enduring, frustrating inequality that spotlights the messiness of mothering a mother. Although I have no grandchildren, her message chimed with my experiences: her ever-so-slightly crazy, maternal, white-coated, domestic professor is all of us. And I wondered why I had not heard of her before.

In part, it is our historic arts culture that has taken an age to recognise historic home-grown performance in art gallery settings. This shift has been glacial and has likely been hampered by closed-mindedness and maybe even snobbery in its numerous forms: gendered, social and intellectual. Much of Baker's work ceases to exist, be it a performance or perishable baked goods, and it could be that its impermanent and domestic nature meant that it was easy to discount. But her energy and creativity have endured over decades and are now reaching an audience in the broader arts arena.

Elizabeth Orcutt: To what extent are you, in theatre scholar Geraldine Harris's phrase, 'playing' yourself (in Barrett 2007: 110)?

Bobby Baker: That's an interesting term, *playing myself*. I come from a visual arts background, which has become more tangible to me since the *Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-1990* at Tate Britain (2023-24). I straddle performance and visual arts, but I left the visual arts world as a young woman because of its elitist, status-based nature. Performance felt more inclusive, and the drama world embraced my work generously, particularly Roland Miller (Obit Ainley 2022), who taught sculpture at Leeds School of Art and his partner Shirley Cameron, with whom I collaborated in the 1970s. And also, Jeff Nuttall (Obit Horovitz 2004), who understood performance from a fine art perspective.

In terms of playing myself, I wouldn't use that theatrical language. I would intentionally use my persona to communicate. When I tentatively started in my twenties, I wanted to create intellectual, world-changing work. But people laughed—something I initially found mortifying. Over time, I embraced humour, realising it's better to engage an audience than to have them sit silent and confused.

Much of my work is autobiographical, but not in a narcissistic way. My middle-class, suburban, British upbringing shapes how I communicate ideas, even though I want the work to resonate universally. For example, when performing mundane aspects of life, people connect those moments to their own experiences. The goal is for audiences to reflect on themselves rather than me. In that sense, it's deliberate and often quite cunning; it works universally, and I've seen audiences connect with it in diverse cultural contexts, including China. It's all about communicating in whatever space, a theatre, a gallery or whatever.

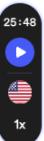
EO: So, would you identify more with the performance term 'autobiography' or the visual arts tradition of 'self-portraiture'?

BB: I haven't consciously identified with either; I'm just making work to communicate. I've been frustrated by being overlooked in the visual arts world for years, but I'm also grateful for how the drama world has embraced me. The recent Tate Britain show has been a pivotal moment—it affirmed my place in the visual arts conversation.

Self-portraiture has a long, extraordinary tradition in painting and photography. Women using themselves in their work, especially in photography, is a fascinating area. Artists like Cindy Sherman and Jo Spence come to mind. Jo Spence, whom I met two years before she died, was a huge influence on me. She came to see *Kitchen Show* (1991) and was incredibly generous. She burst into my laundry room, as the show was performed in my house, and said, 'That's fantastic.' At the time, accessing work like hers wasn't easy, as there were no accessible archives or digital platforms.



Fig. 3. Whittuck 1991. Bobby Baker's Kitchen Show.



the case?

BB: Not at first. Early in my career, I felt I had to do everything myself for the work to have integrity. But working as a stylist in commercial photography during the 1980s changed that. I loved dashing around London, renting and buying things. I adored the collaborative nature of it—art directors, set designers, actors and everyone working together. I felt utterly at home and wanted to be all of them. It made me realise I could bring that ethos into my practice.

For example, with *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988), I worked closely with Polona Baloh-Brown (who lectured in performance at the University of Essex), adapting the show to fit different contexts without compromising its essence. Collaboration allowed me to focus on the creative aspects while relying on others for technical and administrative support. It was liberating. Also, there is Steve Wald, Technical Director, with whom I've been working for decades since *How To Live* (1992) and whose mantra is 'no ego issues.' It becomes a way of working that is very generous.

EO: You mentioned feeling excluded from the visual arts world. Can you account for that?

BB: The art world traditionally excluded women. Early in my career, I struggled with how male-dominated it was. There was an unspoken assumption that male artists were superior. When I applied to the Royal College of Art, they didn't know what to make of me and my unconventional work, artworks made of cake like *Baseball Boot Cake* (1972). I was turned down endlessly. It was deeply disillusioning. I connected with artists like Miller and Cameron, who came from sculpture and drama backgrounds. Their generosity and openness were refreshing compared to the traditional visual arts.



Fig. 4. Baker 1973. Baseball Boot Cake.

EO: Does your work's sense of play connect to Winnicott's ideas in *Playing and Reality* (2005, 1971) about creativity and how our childhood passions or little madnesses (Kuhn 2013) lead us to later cultural life?

BB: That's an interesting connection. I haven't read Winnicott's *Playing and Reality*, but I'm lucky to have children and grandchildren, which makes it fascinating. Absolutely, my work taps into that childish, playful, exploratory energy.

EO: Your piece *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home* (1976 and 2023) seems sad to me, and possibly touched on personal history. It appears somewhat tragic that an apparently happy nuclear family should be consumed by the audience over the course of its display. Was that intentional?

BB: When I made that piece, I was unsure why I made it. At the end of the week-long process in the mid-seventies, I realised I'd recreated my family in this surreal, edible form. It was both shocking and cathartic. Revisiting the work for the Tate Britain show in 2023 was even more revealing—it unearthed grief and trauma I hadn't fully processed, particularly around the loss of my dad when I was a teenager. That personal connection gives the work its profoundness. That is the magic of it, as Grayson Perry says, you pinch ideas and put them together and then 'yes': the magpie effect that becomes your own.

EO: Has ageism also affected your career?

BB: I worried about being even more sidelined as I aged, especially as male peers continued to be more visible. I remember clearly, when I was 60, seeing the stark lack of parity of esteem within the art world. Conversely, there's been a resurgence of interest in my work, as well as in other women artists of my generation. The *Women in Revolt!* (2023-24) show and The Arts Council's acquisition of my film *Kitchen Show* (1991)—my first work in a national collection—were huge moments. It's validating, though

EO: Your work often critiques societal institutions. Does that include psychiatry?

BB: Psychiatry is patriarchy ramped up a million times—one of the most misogynistic structures I've encountered, not necessarily the people, but the framework. My experiences when I cracked up within that were deeply damaging, and it fuels my critique. Art and performance allow me to challenge these structures creatively and politically, offering alternative narratives that empower rather than oppress. I try not to be too angry. I processed these experiences in the *Diary Drawings* (1997-2008).

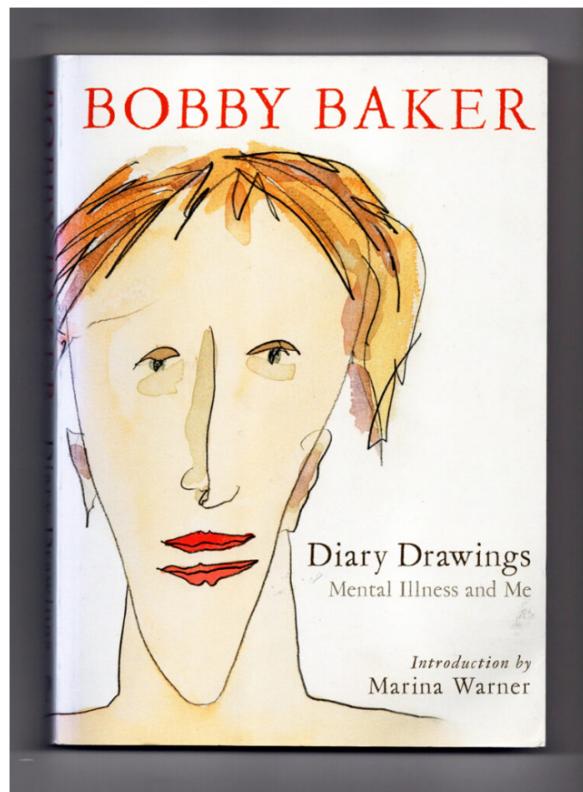


Fig. 5. Orcutt 2025. Cover of Bobby Baker's *Diary Drawings* (1997-2008), 'The idea of giving myself two mouths suddenly popped into my head. This is one of my all-time favourites and the first of many self-portraits'.

I wonder if it's also feeling insecure. I remember at school, this private school I went to, we all apologised all the time to each other. Women are brought up to do this ... I was watching *Kitchen Show* (1991) with independent curator Gemma Lloyd, and I commented, 'Oh, it's torture watching, I'm just so self-deprecating.' And she went, 'Yeah, but that's why it works.' I was performing myself at that time, you know, a young mother. The self-deprecation is how I was brought up: not to put myself first, but always to be there looking after people. And by nature, I'm very much a helper; I want everybody to be happy; I want to cook for people. I've realised that's fundamental to how I am. So, in the work I'm using that part of myself in an honest way. Because it's painful to perform that part of yourself so knowingly, but it's also cunning and powerful.

EO: When did you become more consciously feminist in your work?

BB: I've always been naturally feminist—I was indignant at what a better deal that boys had—but I became more conscious in my late twenties, I knew about *Spare Rib* (1972-1993). Although I wasn't using the f-word in my twenties and thirties. Contextualisation and feminism were not really taught at art school, no, no, no, and few of the girls I knew went to university. I did love the critical studies on my painting course at St Martins when I was there (from 1968-72). A pivotal moment later on was attending Janet Radcliffe Richards' *Philosophy and Feminism* class when I was 27 in the late 1970s at City University, an experience that inspired her book *The Sceptical Feminist* (1980). It was rigorous and transformative, exploring language and power. Each week, we discussed the chapter themes. Topics like sexual justice, the feminine, women's work, the fertile woman, society, and the mother. That intellectual grounding shaped much of my later work, for example, *Packed Lunch* at the Hayward Gallery (1979) and *My Cooking Competes* at the ICA in 1980. But then I lost my confidence for eight years and made no work.

EO: Do you think women and men experience your work differently?

BB: Women often see themselves in my work, which can be empowering. Men, however, sometimes struggle to relate, especially if they are viewing it through a masculine lens. But I aim to make my work universal—about the person doing the labour, not their gender. It's gratifying when men engage and reflect on their own lives through my pieces.

EO: Your *EPIC DOMESTIC* (2016-current) project seems to address domestic labour's undervaluation. Can you tell me more?

BB: It's about the revolutionary potential of domestic labour. Inspired by Soviet propaganda, I'm creating a satirical 'Revolutionary Party' to elevate and celebrate unpaid domestic work. The project critiques how society devalues this essential labour, perpetuating economic inequality.

EO: What role does collaboration play in this project?

BB: Collaboration is crucial. I work with incredible people who bring their expertise and ideas to the process. For example, we've run immersive sandwich workshops as part of the project, using humour and conversation to challenge perceptions about domestic work. It's ambitious, but the team makes it possible. Humour disarms people—it allows them to engage with difficult subjects without feeling attacked. Marina Warner once said humour is deeply subversive (2011), which resonates with me. It's not just about making people laugh; it's about shifting their perspectives and challenging norms.

EO: Could you expand on humour in your work? It seems like a vital component.

BB: Humour is integral to my practice—it's subversive and persuasive. Growing up, humour was part of my family culture. My mother and her sister had a sharp wit, using humour to cope with life's difficulties. It's a powerful tool for addressing serious issues without alienating people.

For example, in *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988), I used humour to explore motherhood's complexities. Some viewers find it unsettling or abject, but that's the point. Humour helps people confront uncomfortable truths in a way that's accessible.

EO: So, just talking about *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988), when I watch recordings of the work, I am drawn to and repelled by it, not only attraction and kind of revulsion at the same time, with you lying in pools of food and whatnot. And that very much reminds me of Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject.

BB: That's what I encountered at Queen Mary University of London, with Michelle Barret. I'd won a Wellcome Trust fellowship to develop *How to Live* (2004). There were great people in English and drama at Queen Mary, for example, Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw of Split Britches, as well as Lisa Jardine. I'd go to these seminars thinking, 'I've really got to learn words and find out about these theories.' It was so exciting, and Michelle talked a lot about the abject, but also Judith Butler. Some of those people came to *Take a Peek!* (1991-2001) and were very shocked by my abject behaviour, but I said, 'that's the point.' I'm breaking that taboo. It's abject because you've absorbed the patriarchal view of what you can and can't do. But I really was stimulated, you know, I loved finding out about the world at Queen Mary.





Fig 6. Whittuck 1991. Still from Bobby Baker's Take a Peek.

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