

The Aftermath of an Idea Jimmy Baker's Challenges capsizes the concept of disaster

Interview by Laura Leffler James
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Jimmy Baker is as much a thinker as a painter. He rattles off critical cultural theories in a far different way than most of us would dissect popular culture.

Baker walks me through his solo exhibition at the Phyllis J. Weston-Annie Bolling Gallery in Oakley, taking ad infinitum. His words stick to me, perhaps because of their urgency. They're the same words you (could) hear (if you're paying attention) about almost everything these days: isolation, brutality, disaster, disconnection, fragmentation, aftermath, media, spectacle, the antithesis of spectacle.

Baker is only 25, a vastly intelligent guy with an M.F.A. in painting from DAAP, curator and dealer buddies in Los Angeles and New York, sell-out shows, media kicking at his door and an apartment in -- of all places -- Cincinnati.

I had to ask him, with so much success already, why stay in Cincinnati? His answer? "Because I can."

It makes sense, too. Baker is happy here, flourishing, teaching at the Art Academy and paying far, far less for studio space than the up-and-comers in New York and Los Angeles.

And the thing is, he really doesn't care. He's doing well. He's making art and showing art and making people think twice about some "pretty painting hanging on a wall."

Baker's paintings are immaculate: meticulous, detailed even when hazily ambered in epoxy resin or stuck to MDF board -- "shitty IKEA furniture material," as he calls it. The work is beautiful. But beauty doesn't distract from its *raison d'être*. Baker does not just paint for collectors who love talent but rather for thinkers, cultural critics, news watchers, readers and listeners.

What you'll hear Baker saying most about his work is that he loves appropriating images and that he loves using those images to paste together a kind of autobiography. The first work he points me to is a direct appropriation -- a cloudburst, it seems at first glance.

No. Nothing so gentle, nothing so natural. Here is the image, the exact image, of the Challenger explosion in 1986, which Baker has renamed “Genesis.” It was his first disaster experience. “I watched it on TV, and I had no idea how to relate,” he says. “How does a 6-year-old relate to an image? There was intense disconnect.”

In other words, the image of the explosion was not the explosion. We, no matter our age, remember the image of the explosion, not the actual explosion. Precisely therein lies the disconnect.

Genesis: This first experience becomes the liturgy of Baker’s work, doesn’t it? Though he did not admit as much to me, it’s quite clear that this work morphs into the title of the exhibition, Challenges. It set off a 6-year-old mind to question the authority of the image, the document of the reality. It remains unsolved. Which is it? To seek an answer to that looming question is a task, a challenge. And let’s face it; everything that Baker shows us has to do with disasters, wars and the aftermath of each – the challenges that face us as people. It all comes together as one big confrontation with cultural perceptions.

Baker’s other works are less obvious in their appropriation. Perhaps the best use of media is the television on the upper corner of the gallery, beeping like some institutional machine, constantly looping images of a stealth bomber firing at Iraq below in the first Gulf War.

Baker remembers “the TV image wheeled into the sixth-grade classroom.” The way it’s set up, it absolutely feels like that “something’s happened!” break in an otherwise ordinary school day. He adds to that feeling with the use of passé computer programs like Mario Paint and otherwise “crude animation.”

The conglomeration is especially meaningful to Baker.

“I wanted to mix this grave event with a video game,” he says. “I know it’s offensive, or potentially offensive, my relationship to the thing, the event.”

It might be offensive, but the truth often is.

Baker pilfered images of the most recent stumble into Iraq from Yahoo! News – the pictures that throw themselves at the American public. Baker used those photojournalistic pictures of the first nine days of the war as the subject of nine small paintings, blurred and loosely rendered, smothered in resin, finished with blinding gloss. Essentially, he takes those automatic images and turns them into questions. Television stills? Cartoons? Or, how Baker sees them, like images of another world. He’s just as at ease melding fragments of utopia (think Hudson River School painters) with science fiction and/or real natural disasters.

“It might seem like a weird moment to be quoting so clearly,” he says about the Hudson River School, “pitting drastic optimism against absolute horror. But that’s it: shards and fragments of both. Analyzing the scrapheap of pre-existing cultural events and bringing them together to talk about how we see.”

In essence, Baker looks at culture, especially news-byte culture, as a stone that should be turned over. Underneath the recognizable, pale gray world of disaster and misfortune, there is a little bit everything: refuse, life, abandonment, debris, death, pleasure, growth, ridiculousness, poverty, excess. The reality of occurrences is the side we rarely see, the terrifying rubble. The wrong side of the news.