



SHELBY A. BARON'S BIG FAT BABY • January 14 to March 4, 2011

Shelby A. Baron was born in '76 and named after a popular American car. She attended the University of South Florida for her B.A. and earned her M.F.A. at The State University of New York at Buffalo. Baron's drawings are based on observations and lustful daydreams, a practice that began as doodles on any surface available to her growing up in both Buffalo, N.Y. and San Antonio, T.X. Exposure to two remarkably different cities in two households resulted in Shelby's dependence upon 'hyper-observation' and obsessive drawing to catalog inconstant circumstances, odd characters and uncanny contraptions.

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BIG FAT BABY

Shelby Baron's work is a curious aggregate of formal and conceptual notions, ideally exemplified by the current exhibition. There is, for example, the notion that an exhibition is an artist's baby, with the hopeful and fulsome qualifiers of "big" and "fat" to allude to the potential density of meaning in the work. Not to mention that there's actually a big fat baby depicted in the exhibition.

There are no simple or obvious meanings here, so it's perhaps appropriate that the lines that comprise Baron's drawings are disconnected or obliquely connected. Baron has an almost modular style to her drawing, with lean and bold lines curving and bouncing around each other in a fashion both calculated and seemingly intuitive. This spontaneous-seeming contrivance is an effective method, as it creates a persistent vibration in the imagery, which could read as nervous energy, riotous anxiety, or unrestrained enthusiasm. It's not always clear whether the image before us is attempting to elicit humor or dread.

In previous work, Baron has usually depicted either characters or apparatuses and rendered in her modular style, the drawings often alternately evoke imaginative Rube Goldberg machines or Chuck Jones animations. There are even occasional hints of Dr. Seussian styling, but all of these playful allusions belie the darker edge that pervades the work. Yes, there is a baby, a rattle, a crib mobile, and even a stuffed teddy bear, but the ultimate effect is far from coy or even cute.

Central to the darker edge residing amid the drawings is, not surprisingly, the big fat baby. Or is it even a baby? Why does it look like a drunken Buddha? Or iconic movie villain Sidney Greenstreet? And why does it have a gnarled right hand with claw-like fingernails? In fact, the more we consider Baron's big fat baby, the harder it becomes to be polite about its abject lack of cuteness. Rather than coo with delight, it appears contrived specifically to make us shudder in revulsion.

Baron's visual style accentuates this queasy uncertainty, but the image is also drawn as the imagined antagonist from *The Shutter of Snow*, a novel by Emily Holmes Coleman about a woman suffering from post-partum psychosis. As the avatar of a new mother's deepest anxieties, its jittery, almost violent-looking aspect is appropriately depicted. Baron's style emphasizes the baby not as an adorable, newborn person but as a grotesque thing and this objectification is also true to another of the artists' background sources.

Making the infant an object relates to Baron's curious interest in Erika Eiffel, a woman who, for reasons of objectophilia, chose to marry the Eiffel Tower in a commitment ceremony in 2007. An objectophile is someone who loves an inanimate object and it's interesting that the actual objects that Baron sketches—the rattle, the mobile, the teddybear—arguably appear as organic and lifelike (or more so) than the baby itself.

So, it would appear that there are complex and contradictory notions of desire throughout the work. What does it mean to love someone or something? And if Baron's visual cues are considered, why is that desire so messy? And what desire are we talking about anyway—our desire toward the baby or the baby's desire toward its environment? In the case of the latter, it's interesting that Baron's teddy bear is the least complex drawing, suggesting that it's perhaps the purest, most honest form of love. The baby's rattle, by contrast, seems to contain every multifarious sensation a baby might have, a bauble of form and sound and movement so suggestively complex it reads like a mutated brain with a handle. Even the oversized hand that points our way into the exhibition is a fearful entity, the alien intruder plunging in to poke mercilessly or perhaps to steal a nose.

Baron's drawings appear less like specifically-represented things (though they are) than quivering icons of sensation. They are, on the one hand, beautifully rendered but they are also calculated to be gently off-putting, with distorted details that make it seem as though a drawing might be turning itself inside out, revealing its engorged and troublesome interior.

There is lightness, humor and frivolity. There is also desire, anxiety, and fear.

John Massier  
Visual Arts Curator

