

**Josephine Baker**  
**Prime Movers**

**15 November 2024 -  
 25 January 2025**

*Love,*

*They were incapable  
 The Pelton wheel  
 The Frances turbine  
 The Deriaz turbine  
 The Keplen and the propellor turbine  
 They were incapable  
 of taking us.*

*Our waters flow over them today,  
 They are engulfed.  
 The engineers have long given up and departed  
 With their cheques and degrees and their religions  
 Leaving a hiss of kilowatts in their wake.*

*The control circuits could not cope.  
 (There was no one to regulate the gate-opening  
 malfunction.)*

*They've so long been into overload,  
 The waterwheel without governance,*

*Who now will determine the system characteristics,  
 Who will determine the voltage,  
 The frequencies of hertz that never were  
 In the rushlit houses, in the boom towns  
 Of mushrooms, crafts and candle production?*

*They cannot provide the light we need,  
 They can't cope with the waters in us,  
 All the time these falling, flowing waters;  
 These waters a natural source of energy,  
 These waters to be used for power and light  
 For you. To light up your own mortal hours.<sup>1</sup>*

Two aluminium sculptures, cloud-like in form, protrude out from the walls. A series of curved aluminium sheets jut out from their metallic contours. Like the blades of a water wheel, they have been riveted at perpendicular angles, poised to capture water in motion. Yet the rudder-like blades hinged at the base appear sedimentary – concretised into place. No longer possessing the capacity to churn, or generate energy, they stand stagnant – time has passed. Thin blue cables run along the gallery, their slackness pinned at points to create loose wave-like forms that ebb and flow across the walls. A series of bulkhead lights – fixtures commonly found in industrial environments or aboard ships – have been installed throughout the space. Soft illuminations from under their part-textured, part-translucent lids, cast in glass, light up aerial views of bodies of water within mountainscapes. Their surfaces, stained with blue and brown pigments, echo the colours of the neutral and live wires encased within. The blue neutral wire transfers electricity away from the light, while the brown live wire transfers electricity into it. As these colour codes and materials repeat across the room, we're reminded that it's a space alive with transference and charge.

For some years now, Josephine Baker has worked with the material languages, processes, and compositions that make up human and natural phenomena, and the wider logistical infrastructures in which materials mutate, vibrate. For her latest body of work, Baker turns to the production of energy through hydropower, with a focus on the history of the water wheel as it stood at the inception of steam power in Britain. The turn of the 18th century gave way to notable material shifts; the use of wood in industry and construction was replaced by more resilient metals such as iron and steel, cast iron and precision manufacturing advanced a range of engineering processes, an increased demand for coal as fuel resulted in the extensive extraction of natural resources, and

the advancement of infrastructures - such as canals and man-made waterways - propelled industrial growth.

Prime movers are machines that transform energy from thermal, electrical, or pressure forms into mechanical forms. These transformations can be mapped across reservoirs, dams, on/off flows through turbines, mechanical energy, generators, electrical energy, and power lines. *Prime Movers* is also the title of Baker's latest exhibition in which a series of new works trace these metamorphoses, and the material and socio-political dynamics that flow and overflow throughout.

Traversing scales that span the mineral and microscopic to the industrial and global, Baker's sculptures seamlessly oscillate between the macro and micro. In *Searchlights, 2024*, we encounter a blurry aerial view of water currents washing into beacons of light. Zoomed so far out, we're able to map flows and tides across space. Baker annotates the scene, like a scientific diagram, which pulls us even further out of a specific geographic context and into a global, universal scale. Yet within the work also lies a more localised and attentive understanding of the material dynamics at play. Leftover building materials - roofing felt, grit, shingle slate, and bitumen paint - are layered on top of one another and intermingle with raw materials and organic matter - charcoal, chalk (Dover cliffs), and red sand (Jurassic coast) - to create a dense and textured canvas. Baker does not understand these materials as surfaces only, but as containing their own microcosms of material relations and tensions. Waste products like high-density polyethylene, marble quarry waste, building demolition waste, ground tire rubber, cooking oil, palm oil fuel ash, coconut, sisal, cellulose and polyester fibre, starch, plastic bottles, waste glass, waste brick, waste ceramic, waste fly ash, and cigarette butts, can all be found in asphalt concrete and bitumen. And while effectively recycling swathes of

waste across the planet - roof by roof, road by road - these are highly toxic substances. Baker's work traces a genealogy of materials through their chains of production and mutating uses. While turning to materials that contain worlds within worlds, she reminds us of their archival potential and draws our attention to their capacity to carry histories, memories, and stories in their make-up.

Where connections can be made through material associations and circulatory formations, at other times Baker's forms hang loose, disconnect, or interrupt flows, '...edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans, but also to act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.'<sup>2</sup> So, what happens when the wheels decide to stop turning? When currents short circuit and copper wires fray disobediently? What happens when energy surges or wanes of its own accord? Does water continue to flow? Do lights turn to darkness? Baker's works open up spaces where materials are active, they intervene. Below the surface of *Prime Movers* are the many contradictions of renewable energy infrastructure: how it destroys habitats, ecosystems and indigenous lands while promising salvation and green revolution. Across Baker's new works, materials misbehave, and at times turn processes into redundancies. What we're left with isn't a romanticised idyll, where nature and machines work in harmony, but an ambiguous present. Two giant cloud-like forms made from aluminium stand in the gallery: Are they silver linings, or is there a storm brewing?

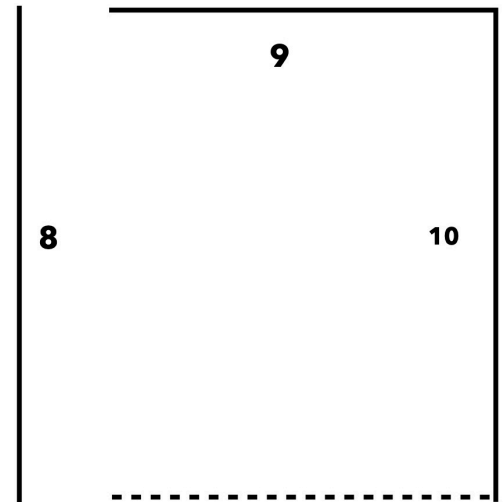
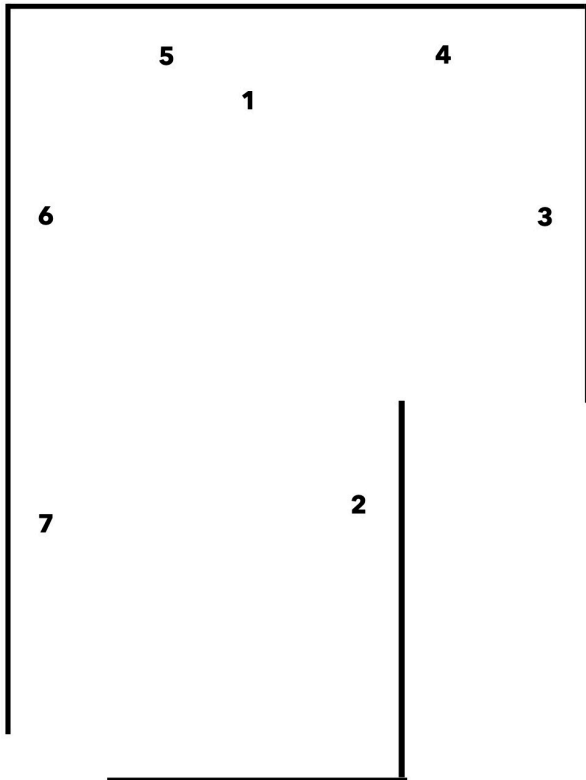
*Olivia Aherne*

1 John Ennis, "HYDROTURBINES" *Poetry: Contemporary Irish Poetry* (October/November 1995).

2 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 9.

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All works 2024

1 *Prime Mover (01)*

Aluminium foil, aluminium sheet, aluminium tube, crocodile clips, electrical cabling, glass, grit, paints, pigments, plaster, plaster fragments, rivets, resin, sand, silicone, steel drillbits  
 149 x 318 x 158 cm

2 *Prime Mover (02)*

Aluminium foil, aluminium sheet, aluminium tube, crocodile clips, electrical cabling, glass, grit, paints, pigments, plaster, plaster fragments, rivets, resin, sand, silicone, steel drillbits  
 108 x 397 x 151 cm

Cable installation: Aluminium silver-plated hooks, cabling (copper + PVC), cardboard spools (altered). Dimensions variable.

**Light sculptures (Gallery)**

3 *Hydro Electricity: bulkhead (06)*

Cabling, cast glass, copper powder, dowelling, electrical fittings, lightbulb, paints, pigments, plaster, plywood, silver-plated aluminium clips  
 16 x 26 x 12 cm

- 4 *Hydro Electricity: bulkhead (05)*  
Cabling, cast glass, dowelling, electrical fittings, lightbulb, paints, pencil, pigments, plaster, plywood, silver-plated aluminium clips  
25 x 40 x 14 cm
- 5 *Hydro Electricity: bulkhead (04)*  
Cabling, cast glass, copper powder, copper wire, dowelling, electrical fittings, lightbulb, paints, pencil, pigments, plaster, plywood, silver-plated aluminium clips, steel drillbit  
32 x 37 x 13.5 cm
- 6 *Hydro Electricity: bulkhead (03)*  
Cabling, cast glass, copper powder, copper wire, dowelling, electrical fittings, lightbulb, paints, pencil, pigments, plaster, plywood, silver-plated aluminium clips, steel drillbit  
24 x 39.5 x 14 cm
- 7 *Hydro Electricity: bulkhead (02)*  
Cabling, cast glass, copper wire, dowelling, electrical fittings, lightbulb, paints, pigments, plaster, plywood, silver-plated aluminium clips  
24 x 38.5 x 13.5 cm

**Josephine Baker** (b. London, 1990) completed her BA at Central Saint Martins in 2012, and her postgraduate in 2017 from the Royal Academy Schools, London. Her recent solo exhibitions include: *water-resistance*, St. Chads (London, 2023); Frieze London Focus Section solo presentation (2022); *Outfallers*, Nir Altman (Munich, 2022); *Clear out the wounds closest to the sun*, V.O. Curations (London, 2021); *The Land Lies*, ChertLüdde (Berlin, 2020). Her work has been included in exhibitions at the British Museum, MACA Beijing, Gustav Lübcke Museum (Hamm), the Drawing Room (London), Pippy Houldsworth (London), among others. Her book of drawings, *Submarines*, produced in collaboration with writer M. Ty, was published in 2022. She is an Associate Lecturer at Chelsea College of Art, London.

## Office

- 8 *Hydro Electricity: bulkhead (01)*  
Cabling, cast glass, copper wire, dowelling, electrical fittings, lightbulb, paints, pigments, plaster, plywood, silver-plated aluminium clips  
23 x 36 x 14 cm
- 9 *Storm Circuit 03*  
Cabling (copper + PVC), chalk, charcoal, MDF, paints, pigments, plaster, plywood, resin  
71.5 x 77.5 x 10 cm
- 10 *Searchlights*  
Bitumen paint, chalk (Dover cliffs), charcoal, dowelling, glass, grit, magnets, paints, pigments, plaster, plywood, red sand (Jurassic coast), resin, roofing felt, shingle slate, silicone, studio waste  
90 x 250 x 6 cm

**Olivia Aherne** is a curator based in the UK. As the Curator at Chisenhale Gallery, London, she's developed commissions by Rory Pilgrim, Joshua Leon, and Alia Farid, amongst others. In her previous role as the Curator at Nottingham Contemporary, she curated exhibitions by Carolyn Lazard, Meriem Bennani and Mélanie Matranga. In 2018, she was awarded the NEON Curatorial Award in partnership with the Whitechapel Gallery, London and participated in the inaugural Shanghai Biennial Curator's Lab. She regularly writes for publications including *Art Monthly* and *Mousse*, and is a visiting tutor on the MFA Fine Art at Goldsmiths, University of London.