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Fiona Banner: she put a plane in Tate Britain, now she's flying

Article

In pictures



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Fiona Banner at the Frith Street Gallery
Ki Price/The Times

Fiona Banner is trying to get me to sit on a chair with no legs. "It's actually very strong," she says, encouragingly, as I eye a piece of moulded plywood marked with pinstripes leaning, apparently precariously, against a wall. Gingerly, I give it a go. Of course, it's fine. Comfortable even. But my brain still wants me to get up.

IKON

Banner's work — now the subject of a major survey exhibition, *Scroll Down and Keep Scrolling*, at Birmingham's highly respected Ikon gallery — is full of teases like this, that make you aware of the links and gaps in your perception of the world. What she does isn't easy to describe, or to put into a box. She is fascinated by language and the slipperiness of meaning. She makes films, sculptures, photographs, books — she has her own publishing house, the Vanity Press — and things that you might call paintings, though you might also call them text works, most famously her meticulous, frame-for-frame written descriptions, in huge blocks of text, of war films. And of course there's her 2002 Turner Prize nomination piece, *Arsewoman in Wonderland*, a billboard on which she presented a graphic blow-by-blow transcription of the titular porn film.

Now though, you will most likely know her for *Harrier and Jaguar*, an installation she made at Tate Britain in 2010, for which she hung a Harrier jet from the ceiling of the Duveen Galleries and polished up a prone Jaguar fighter plane, which sat on the floor nearby, until you could literally see your face in it. Oh, the planes! I loved that, people always say.

Banner, 49, who lives in Hackney with her ten-year-old daughter, had a more conflicted relationship with them. "I was incredibly uncomfortable about that exhibition, but it was about discomfort," she says now, over coffee and biscuits at Frith Street Gallery in Soho, London, where another, smaller solo show of her work has recently opened. Her intention with *Harrier and Jaguar* was to draw attention to the conflict between our appreciation of the planes as objects of beauty (note how we name them, after predatory wild animals we admire) and their lethal role.

"After the show I reclaimed the planes and carefully took them to pieces and recast them as ingots." She says she will use them eventually in another work — "It was very important to me not to sell those on to what might have been a trophy collection. There was a lot to do with trophyism and trophy art, territory and ownership and desire embedded in that exhibition. All things I feel I'm subject to and also very uncomfortable with."

Conflict is a notion that comes up a lot in Banner's work. She has recently collaborated with the Archive of Modern Conflict, commissioning the war photographer Paolo Pellegrin to shoot images of the City of London as if it were a war zone. The pinstripes on the chairs in her new show echo the uniform of this army of finance.

“Language is all about conflict,” she says. “We are motivated by conflict, whether big or small, whether it’s sexual or global politics, it’s there in every syllable. And you see that s*** on the news, don’t you, as a child, always removed but kind of present. I got interested in how these stories are told and how we get drawn in to them — whether it’s Dad sitting on the edge of the sofa yelling at a football match, cowboy films . . . this is stuff I find interesting.” She indicates the table in front of us, on which sits a copy of her book *The Nam* — 1,000 pages describing in detail six films about Vietnam, including *Full Metal Jacket* and *Platoon*. “So many coffee-table books are about conflict, the big conflict photography book. I mean that’s a very odd thing to want on your coffee table, isn’t it? It’s complex stuff; we are all extremely voyeuristic and this project for me was about my own voyeurism. I’d lived on the edge of the City for years and never been in there and explored it. It was very hard to get access. Part of the soundtrack of this film [at Frith Street] was recorded clandestinely on my iPhone at the London Metal Exchange.”

The idea of this tall, rangy woman, with her effortless grace and presence, roaming the opaque, clubby world of the City with a photographer at her side, is quite wonderful. It’s a subtle aspect to her work that she very often finds herself in very masculine environments. She doesn’t make a big thing of it, but admits that “I make work [there] that a man probably wouldn’t make. I don’t know how or why I’m saying that but I know that.

I’m quite often in environments where there is a mistrust,” she continues, saying that she was recently reminded of a bizarre encounter with the printers (overwhelmingly male) who produced *Arsewoman in Wonderland*. “These blokes suddenly got really weird about it. They told me that I literally had to go in and print it overnight, and pick it up in the morning ‘before the ladies turned up’. It was really stressful. They were worried about the ladies, that it was offensive, but they had a tit calendar in the office.”

Arsewoman, which was made in 2001, will be on display in the Ikon show. She is currently grappling, she says, with how to display a work that “is now actually very different, contextually, to when it was made,” she says. “It was made at a time when pornography was something different to what it is now. Porn as we all know, with the internet, has become this really insidious thing. Not that the context was simple before, it by no means was, but I’m working on showing [the piece] in a different way, that somehow addresses this.”

She’s done a bit of tinkering elsewhere in the show as well. Instead of the full-stop sculptures that she produced in 2005 — bronze sculptures of full stops in various different fonts — she will be displaying full-stop bean bags; a practical intervention, because there are a number of films to watch, such as the transfixing *Chinook*, of two Chinook military helicopters performing an aerial ballet, and “everybody knows you can actually sit on a bean bag”. The full stops provide a literal pause.

Banner finds the idea of a survey show quite “weird. How can you survey your own work? It’s a psychoanalytic contradiction.” Typically, as well as the adaptations of old work, several new works have come out of it — one, *Phantom*, in the Frith Street exhibition and made with a drone camera, is about the idea of being surveyed. Another, *FONT*, a newly created typeface, “came from that as well, this idea of, how do you overview your practice, how do you look at the elements that have made up your work?”

By breeding all the fonts she has used previously (apparently that’s how you do it, by mixing two typefaces and then combining their offspring with another and so on), she has created something that looks as if it might have been carved into stone about 500 years ago. “For me it was quite an amusing way to proceed, to amalgamate the visual, formal dimension of all those bits of writing into this one rather daft-looking but perfectly functional font.” With typical humour, she has displayed it in the Frith Street show by having the word “font” carved, in the font, on to a 19th-century limestone baptismal . . . font.

All of this makes it surprising to find that Banner started out as a painter. She grew up in the Wirral (though her accent is a sort of standard estuary, with a faint drawl, almost like a drag in the undercurrent), then studied at Kingston Polytechnic, where she made paintings of fighter planes and of scenes from films such as *Lawrence of Arabia*. She went to Goldsmiths to do an MA in 1992 (she’s sometimes lumped in with the YBAs, but in fact came to the college a couple of years after them), but struggled. “There was so much verbalisation around art, that it seemed absurd to me. It wasn’t a course that was really about practice so much as about talking. I found it quite hard to be part of the discussion at that time, so I felt like a fish out of water,” she says.

She says she barely made any work. “I was dealing with the mucky stuff of paint, how do you define this as an image, what makes this the image that you want and it ended up being really circular. And then one day I just wrote a picture, I wrote out *Top Gun*.” It was a revelation. “I thought, I can do this without being confounded by these images. I can write this whole picture, not just all of these little parts of it, and that thing that I had enjoyed personally, which was writing, came into my work. I had never thought that you could do that.”

It’s this unpretentious openness that makes Banner’s work so engaging and unpredictable. Though she’s been crisscrossing the same subject terrain for years now, it’s impossible to know what she’s going to come up with next. Which is how she likes it, but also brings us back to those planes. How, I wonder, does she feel being associated with what is now, for better or worse, an iconic work?

“Well, before it was the planes it was *Arsewoman in Wonderland*, so it can only be an improvement,” she says, wryly. Good point.

Fiona Banner *Scroll Down and Keep Scrolling* is at Ikon, Birmingham (0121 248 0708), until Jan 17. *FONT* is at Frith Street Gallery, W1 (020 7494 1550), until Oct 31