

Audrey Tan: salt water buffet

28 August – 22 September, 2024

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As a child, while other kids were playing kiss chasey, Audrey would wash a collection of treasured objects under a broken sprinkler. Small precious things: a Paua shell Koala pendant, a tumbled quartz crystal, a purple octopus.

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‘salt water buffet’. In a literal sense it’s a buffet. A combination of things: including but not limited to plastic, metal, stone and pigment. A combination of elements: including but not limited to jewellery, sculpture, ornament. There’s a petrified mandarin, a kernel of corn, an almond, tiny metal sculptures, and a series of finely wrought vegetable sticker pins.

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We talk about what it’s like to learn metal and jewellery techniques but practice and apply them in a haphazard way. Applying these techniques within a general approach to sculpture making.

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It’s a praxis that collects, sets aside and incorporates materials and found things. Sometimes its rummaging through the scrap bin. And then thinking, when you no longer have access to that, how can you generate your own scrap bin. To make one thing to then make scrap for another. Copper off cuts and the accumulation of shapes.

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There are small things as tiny as a pin, a dried flower, a single petal. Then larger things, shallow relief sculptures that jut out braced together as shelves on the wall and lying flat as decorative motifs. Sculptures with ribbons of sparkly plastic or scooby thread. An intricate curling brass mobile, with twisting clear sections of gelatine looking like miniature patterned glass. There are DIY methodologies set within and against traditional techniques, enamelling and cloisonné, recycling and assemblage. All friezes and frescoes, mosaic and stained glass, stucco and sponge painting.

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Some of it looks chewed. Tactile Styrofoam sheet, wavy and corrugated. Cut up with a Stanley knife, arranged in various formations, and stuck together with masking tape. These are covered in layers of coloured beeswax, filler and pigment. They are textural and decorative. With an essential ornamentality: a curly, flippy, wispy whimsy. It’s off kilter like a Mr Burn’s celebration cake. Cakes with soft frosting, creamy butter icing.

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When we look at the array of Styrofoam relief sculpture laid out in front of the big window it glows uranium green and yellow in the light. It seems much brighter than in Audrey’s home studio. The colours push against each other in a harmonious jangle. Soft greens, brown, purple, orange, blue, pink and white. An off-pastel palette.

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Some cut up foam that looks like a tiny surfboard or a big leaf, temporarily holds a series of decorative pins. A small blobbing caterpillar morphing into a butterfly with a flower butt; a tiny flat cloud shape in pink, blue and green, winks at me and quirks its eyebrows; a silver and blue cloud looks like chewed gum. Squiggly lines, flowers, dots and tendrils, some with a scrape-y and flecked fake stone finish. The pins are carefully selected, plucked off their provisional home and dotted through and into the sculptures. They secure them to the wall, prop them up all the while animating and decorating with spots of silver, copper, brass or stone on each rippled surface. Stabbing with a satisfying poke through the foam.

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The practice is abundance versus scarcity. It’s nose to tail, root to leaf, flower to seed. It’s all in and it’s also carefully selected. It’s as haphazard and slapdash as it is finely constructed. Look closely at a series of miniature delicacies or stand back to take in the exploded world view.