

Soft Façade

Gerald Moore Gallery

10th November – 17th December 2022

A façade is a front presented to the world. A mix of form and formalities, that is a mix of looks and matter, a façade is an appearance, a performance, an arrival, a becoming visible. One can read these appearances as one can read a book, hard and fast or, perhaps if one is in a meditative mood softly with a slowness that abounds the initial impression given in and by some decorative frontage. The title of this group exhibition, *Soft Façade*, makes clear the mode of reading favoured by the artists assembled. Here, beyond the hard surface of ‘the principal front,’ that ‘deceptive outward appearance,’ form and formalities blur with soft edges, they fold and fold and fold, and fizzle, creating multi-faceted associations that trace bodies in a world - historic, contemporary, otherwise.

Isabel Castro Jung’s work *Ancestors. Spirits and Ghosts*, formally troubles any notion of a fixed front, indeed any notion of a hard façade. Composed of a long white cloak hanging from the ceiling of the gallery, with a train formed from writhing silhouetted figures, pebble-like ceramics, and a digital projection, Castro Jung’s layering of media not only complicates ideas of the ‘correct’ viewpoint but acts as a poignant metaphor for the battles individuals go through to appear correct in a social climate that privileges ultra-normativity. The digital projection that enlivens *Ancestors. Spirits and Ghosts*, makes this battle to don the right social face evocatively visible. As it loops, we see the bare top half of a figure's back and their subsequent struggle to pull a tight white tube of cloth down over their head, shoulders, body. As the garment erratically bunches, stretching before wrinkling back upon itself, we see the figure squirm, they wriggle and writhe, their back muscles becoming tense under the strain of the stifling tube. The formal parallels between the folding fabric and the body that is bending through this binding process is wholly uncanny. Further, projected above and onto a ceramic form, that echoes the shape of a smooth back, the work pointedly references the overwhelming weight that contorts our social lives and indeed our identities.

Haffendi Anuar's sculptural construction *Unit*, 2021, draws upon the artist's current research into the colonial relations between Southeast Asia and the UK; explored here by poetically unpacking the social and emotional connotations of 'kain pelikat' - a type of male sarong that is an omnipresent item of clothing for men across Southeast Asia. Working from his own childhood memories of being enveloped by these garments, *Unit* gives a bodily form to these moments of encounter, and in turn, co-opts the formalities of this garment to convey something of the relationship between coloniality and the social lives it fundamentally suppresses. Grouped as if posing for a family portrait, three differently coloured check kain pelikat are draped over three minimal wood frames that function as each body's skeleton. Modified and moulded by Anuar, the formal introduction of long swathes of felt and hemming tape running vertically down each cotton body endows father, father, and child, as the sculptures are respectively titled, with an individual character and presence. Further, Anuar gives each of these fabric forms a twisted sense of corporeality by asymmetrically hooking each swathe of cloth to its wooden frame, creating uneven plumes and recesses in each form, endowing them with a fleshiness in turn. Animated by Anuar, these undulating bodies defy crisp cylindricity, and in this way, they allude to the ways in which differing social and emotional value systems become flattened by the cold logic of colonialisms.

Hugo Brazão's also uses fabric appliqué to raise questions about the sociocultural circumstances we find ourselves within. Formed from two long panels of cotton and wool, with acrylic paint used as a patina, his work *Elephant in the Room* uses humour to question our contemporary tendency to avoid crises by 'sticking one's head in the sand.' The two-sided panels hung from the ceiling of the gallery here come from a wider textile piece composed of five 240 by 90-centimetre panels. As a group, the set depicts, on the one side, a life-size motif of an Asian Elephant - its body divided into colourful block print silhouettes that run across the five panels - and on the second side, a colourful abstract pattern. Devoid of an imaged body, the two panels presented in this exhibition feature the head and rear of this shadowed Elephant. Rather than following a harmonious appliqué technique, with each part of the Elephant's body being cut from the same cloth, Brazão's uses differing coloured and textured fabrics to patch together his Elephant over the panels. This approach almost transforms the silhouetted animal into an abstract pattern. That being said, the Elephant form is still overtly discernible and in this way *Elephant in the Room*, makes tangible that old English phrase 'the elephant in the room,' here used as a pointed punch line referencing the plight of the highly endangered Asian Elephant as well as the ways we avoid addressing our complicity with the eradication of other animal species who share our planet.

Rather than working with fabric, in its material form, the paintings by **Rutie Borthwick** that feature in *Soft Façade* each depict lush folds of puffed-up pillows and crinkled bedsheets. These are not quaint images of one's unmade bed, however. With their sparing use of colour, high contrast and compositional closeness these works recall, in my mind, the unnerving bedroom nudes painted by French masters such as Édouard Manet (1832 - 1883). Despite its lullful title, Borthwick's painting *Lying in the Bluebells*, 2022, has a particularly unsettling and melancholic quality. Painted on a padded canvas, Borthwick's close crop of a bed before a flock wallpaper literally rolls out from the bottom of her scene. Sitting before the work, it is not like we are sharing the same space as Borthwick's bed, rather it feels as if we are glimpsing the bedroom scene through a bevelled-edge mirror. This compositional framing creates both a proximity and a distance between us and the bed subject. Paired with the drooping bluebell pattern painted as wallpaper, this is a haunting image, strangely dreamlike, one that beckons us to think and perhaps place ourselves within the soft embrace of the folded cloth. Indeed, with pillows and sheets arranged in a manner that recalls the shape of a dozing body, Borthwick's painting invites us to project ourselves into the safety zone of this image; to find solace, curled beneath chiming bluebells.

Jennifer Caroline Campbell blurs the formal lines between painting and sculpture, in turn, abounding the sensorial possibilities found in differing materials; glitter becomes a visual means to convey a sense of smell for example. In this exhibition, Caroline Campbell presents a number of succulent objects and wall-based works, remnants of the 'Azurian society' - a matriarchal civilisation active between c.2500 and c.2822 CE. (It is of note that the works included in this exhibition all come from Caroline Campbell's speculative transformation of the Gerald Moore Gallery into the Jerald Moor Museum; an institution that holds the cultural remnants of the 'Azurian World.')

With their textual surfaces and inviting pastel tones, each of Caroline Campbell's pieces has a strangely everyday feel. Indeed, presented without the objectified reverence given by anthropological frames the objects appear more like quotidian remnants of Azurian life, as opposed to fetishised plunder. In this way, they act as a gateway, telling us something about this cultural group and their 'unique power structure.' Perhaps one of the objects that conveys this projection the most for me is *Triangular Offering Bowl. Azure Vally, Temple of Circeay. 2625 - 2722 CE.*, 2021, a small object presented in an open-top vitrine. Triangular in form, the object looks like a Tom Dixon-esque reed diffuser. Jettisoning this clerical modern aesthetic, the surface of *Triangular Offering Bowl* [...] bubbles two-toned blue. Out from the lips of this vessel, twisting stems glisten. Coloured putrid-yellow through mint-green, they seem to suggest something of the object's 'original' function: a tool for olfactory offerings.

The sensorial possibilities afforded through differing materials, and using materials differently, is a feature of **Sophie Goodchild's** practice. Two works by the artist are included in *Soft Façade*, each, a hand-felted merino wall-hanging abounding with hedgerow colours. Goodchild often draws upon craft histories, re-working and re-connecting these practices in order to conjure a sense of the curious. Through material estrangement, here the dishevelled merino knits, Goodchild aims to spark a desire within a viewer; one where the glimmer of the known leads one down a multi-layered path where sensorial resemblances are not only heightened but allude to our humanly connection with the world that surrounds us. The work *We Both Begin to Writhe*, 2022, is a prime example of this process of sensorial translation. A long, horizontal, almost cell-like form, the hanging recalls the pulping leaves that mature on autumn pavements. This image contains numerous and contradictory sensorial connotations: one day fragile, crunching underfoot, the next day these fallen leaves become damp, slippery, mud-like. Goodchild's wall hanging evokes neither of these haptic body memories, favouring instead the qualities of a warming storm. By weaving together so many richly associative images and memories of touch, *We Both Begin to Writhe* translates a simple look into a felt sensation, one that nurtures new realms of thinking.

Little Green, 2022, is one of **Hannah Knox's** carefully crafted painted garments that dot the walls of Gerald Moore Gallery's exhibition space. Aligning with Knox's practice of mimesis, this painting is a detailed depiction of a lush green cable knit jumper, neatly folded into the confines of a 90 by 75 centimetre canvas. On the face of things, this is a straightforward image, wool rendered on linen, sitting with the painting however, getting wrapped up in its surface I find myself teasing corporeal associations from its gem-toned surface. As a ubiquitous object, probably found in most wardrobes, Knox's jumper fluctuates between a still-life and a stand-in for the bodies who know the warming embrace of similar woollen wear. In this way, *Little Green*, provides a space for personal projection; one is perhaps reminded of scratchy childhood woollens. Getting lost in the dabbled marks of oil that layer to conjure this associative stitching, I am also pushed to think about the very nature of copies, reproductions, and even ideas around what individuality can be. Thinking back to the etymological senses of façade, the 'deceptive outward appearance' of *Little Green* provides a case in point example of the ways in which a soft and slow reading of form and formalities can allow the front of things to fizz, to become performative, and in turn, allowing more than visible humanly traces to appear.