

VAULT™

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HELEN JOHNSON MICHAEL PAREKOWHAI GRAYSON PERRY MARIAN TUBBS TOME LOUISE ZHANG



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FORECAST LOUISE ZHANG

Louise Zhang's technicolor paintings and neon-flecked sculptures are a front for something far more sinister than their sugary sheen may suggest.

By Chloé Wolfson

Like lollies in a supermarket aisle, the acid-bright colours of Louise Zhang's paintings and sculptures appeal to the eye. However, closer examination reveals a grotesque amorphousness camouflaged by this candied surface. Zhang experiments with paint and unconventional materials to create blobs that meld the monstrous with the cute.

In 2016, the busy young artist holds her second solo exhibition at Sydney's Arterreal Gallery. This follows a jam-packed 2015 that included group exhibitions at Casula Powerhouse, Penrith Regional Gallery and Bathurst Regional Gallery. Zhang, who's an MFA candidate at the University of New South Wales, also recently took out the Sculpture category of the Fisher's Ghost Art Prize as well as the Yen STAEDTLER Female Artist Award.

VAULT spoke with Zhang to find out what's behind the slime.

WHAT DO YOU GET UP TO IN YOUR STUDIO?
I play around with materials that are usually found in special effects. That stuff is really rich in possibilities. It's just me playing around and seeing what I can make, and how slimy it can get.

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT OUTSIDE THE STUDIO?
I watch a lot of horror films. I really like [the] fantastical, like *Pan's Labyrinth*, and anything by [David] Cronenberg. I find body horror really inspiring. I like it when I see the character transforming into something unimaginable.

I'm a big fan of *SpongeBob*. Who knew *SpongeBob* could be such a big influence in my life? It's seriously one of the most grotesque cartoons out there [but] probably not as grotesque as *Ren and Stimpy*, one of the first true gross-out cartoons.

WERE YOU KEEN ON CARTOONS DURING CHILDHOOD?
When I was a kid, my parents, being immigrants, worked 24/7, so I stayed home and watched a lot of TV. Those shows influenced me and I find comfort in watching cartoons, which is weird being a 24-year-old.

WHAT INTRIGUES YOU ABOUT THESE IDEAS OF ATTRACTION AND REPULSION?
We live in a society where almost every category intersects with another category, and things separated as purely attractive or purely disgusting [are] non-existent. I'm interested in that combination because I feel like they're representative of today. There's something intriguing and slightly disturbing about this masking or cosmetic covering of something darker.

Cuteness to us is generally seen as something positive but if we really dissect it it's like saying, "I'm superior to you therefore I think you're cute." If we look at babies, for example, we find them cute because we think they're helpless. We dominate them because we think they're cute. It's quite dark.

YOU'VE BEEN WORKING WITH A DISTINCT PALETTE FOR QUITE A WHILE.

I think I choose these colours because they're artificial. It's slightly irrational, but I need almost everything to be artificial because it emphasises fakeness and [its] potential. I use quite a bit of fluoro as well as pastel colours [which] recur in things marketed to children.

WHEN YOU MOVED INTO SCULPTURE WAS THAT A CONSCIOUS DECISION, OR WAS IT MORE OF A LOGICAL PROGRESSION FROM PAINTING?

I think it was the logical progression of using paint. I was applying paint, but [asking] "What else can I do with it?" I remember one of the first times I used expanding foam and I was like, "Whoa, this shit is amazing." I started looking at paint as sculptural. There are sculptures and then there are paintings, but they're connected through the painterly.

NOW, YOU'RE EXPLORING THE DIGITAL REALM AS WELL, THROUGH AN IPAD APP AND THE POWERPOINT WORK *FLAILING FORMS* - HOW DID THOSE COME ABOUT, AND IS THAT SOMETHING YOU'RE INTERESTED IN CONTINUING?

The iPad app was a collaboration with [new media artist] Josh Harle. We were thinking about how we can go beyond a picture [and] reach interactivity with a blob sculpture [for] a wider audience. So we decided to create an interactive blob. It was interesting to translate the physical into a digital realm and see whether it would retain the same fluidity - if we could mimic that in an animated sense. That project's really interesting, I'm looking forward to it expanding. I'm thinking about what progressions we can make.

Flailing Forms is just me being restless. I was always into low-fi programs that aren't in Adobe Suite, which I feel requires particular skills. So I thought, "What can you make in PowerPoint?" and it expanded from there. Who knew there were so many options in PowerPoint alone? I'm going to say it's better than Photoshop.

I now make a digital rendering to give me a sense of a palette because that can really affect the way we see a work. I'll use PowerPoint to create a composition or tweak the colours. After I started making work with PowerPoint, I discovered its use as a tool. It's easy to manipulate, and visualises everything better.

Right
LOUISE ZHANG
...it came from Goo Lagoon, 2015
acrylic, oil and plastics
on plywood
125 x 126 cm

Opposite
LOUISE ZHANG
stickypop, 2015
acrylic, oil and plastics
on plywood
62 x 62 cm

Photo: Brett East
Courtesy the artist and Arterreal Gallery, Sydney





Top to bottom
Installation view
PAINT15, Arterreal
Gallery, 2015

LOUISE ZHANG
*I went to mars and the isolation and
red speckled solar winds eroded my
sanity and it was beautiful*, 2015
foam, clay, acrylic, polyurethane, glass
stamens, foam stamens, plastics
45 x 55 x 45 cm

Photo: Brett East

Courtesy the artist and
Arterreal Gallery, Sydney

**DO YOU FIND YOU GET PIGEONHOLED AS AN
ASIAN-AUSTRALIAN ARTIST AND DO YOU THINK
ABOUT THAT MUCH?**

I do think about it a lot. My current research doesn't address my culture - I'm looking into Western art history and theory. I grew up in Australia, so it makes sense to go down that route. I can't help but accept that there are influences in the way I make work. I grew up with Chinese paintings around the house, Mum and Dad were always watching those weird Chinese fantasy dramas where they fly around wearing pretty costumes, so I think there's an influence there, but it's not direct.

I think because I look Asian and my surname's Zhang, some people make connections which I wouldn't say were true. I have been curated into certain shows where I've been to the opening and [thought] "They just chose me because I'm Asian." It's a personal road of discovery [and] definitely an interest of mine. Many of us who were born in Australia and have immigrant parents [are asking], "Where do we fit?"

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON AT THE MOMENT?

I'm working on a four-panel painting. My current research is about horror films and aestheticising slime so I'm trying to create an installation that conjures those feelings. Hopefully it works. I'm still in the initial stages so if it dies let's pretend that we never spoke about this.

**Louise Zhang will show at Arterreal Gallery
from May 4 to 28, 2016.**

arterreal.com.au

louisezhang.com