

Art History, the way I studied it, loves series. The foundation of my academic background was based on a chronological approach, with artists grouped together in artistic movements, and their careers broken down into categories like “training and early years”, “mature style”, “final years”. Engaging with contemporary art is a very different process, but I must admit that the curation of Jane Fairhurst’s solo exhibition as a series of series immediately feels familiar. Unlike the chapters in the Art History books I studied, Fairhurst’s series are still in progress, they are dynamic and subject to change, as the artist keeps producing art and new connections surface across the body of her work. And in fact, almost reflecting the fluidity of the development of her career so far, the space of the World of Glass, where the exhibition is held, feels more like an open space than a pre-constructed route. Viewers are welcome to follow the thematic order of the display, but they can also navigate the various sections by finding their own connections. Some connections might be more obvious, while others are more subtle.

Each artwork in the exhibition is self-sufficient and fully expressive on its own; when a few pieces are grouped in a series, they dialogue among each other, they enrich each other, and come to form very coherent unities. As a whole, the body of work presented in In Series appears wonderfully diverse and varied, as well as beautifully unified by overarching topics, concepts, themes of interest. It seems to me that the balance between unity and variety in Fairhurst’s work is achieved through some sort of alchemical process.

The artist’s production is so varied that, wandering around the space of the exhibition, one can encounter an installation made of three bigger-than-life mice plush toys as well as incredibly skilled and refined drawings of ancient female deities. But then, these two pieces can in fact be linked by one of the artist’s key concerns: the role of women in histories and societies, and how systems of powers have systematically limited women’s power. The story behind *Soft Sculptures*, the mice installation, connects to the artist’s research on how cheap, small plush toys, of the kind you find in fast food chains meals, are actually produced. As she tried to reproduce some of those objects herself, she realised she could not do it, and discovered the dark side of the “happy meals” gifts: they are mainly made by young women, whose hands allow movements and details adult hands can’t achieve. These women, living and working in extremely harsh conditions, are deprived of any power of choice or indeed possibility of owning their own life, in order to serve the capitalistic chain. In an era millennia before contemporary capitalism, instead, prehistoric systems of belief celebrated and venerated the Goddess Mother, represented in the drawings. The stark and exciting contrast in visual expression and media, then, is combined in an intense conceptual and thematic link.

A distinctive feature of Fairhurst’s art is her ability to express herself in a multitude of materials. She knows her craft (or rather crafts) and she understands the technical aspects of different media, but she also possesses a distinctive sensibility for understanding connotations of materials.

On the other hand, from a more intellectual and theoretical point of view, the artist encapsulates in her pieces multiple layers of concepts, ideas, research on

philosophy, history, anthropology, and more, even in the apparently simplest ones.

The combination of these two sides - a deep understanding of media and the conscious complexity of underpinning ideas - results in artworks that communicate through materials, as communication is a key part of Fairhurst's work.

For most of her career so far, the starting point for a piece has been a conceptual or emotional one, where media somehow followed accordingly. In some cases, the final artworks are the result of a series of steps in the choice of materials. One example, in my opinion one of the most compelling pieces in the show, is one of the paintings in the *Red Tape* series. Two toy-like characters, dominated by yellow and red tones, are propped on light green grass in a simple landscape, with a large cartoon-like tree in the background. A few white clouds run in the violet sky, casting no shadow on the grass. In this bright scene, which could almost belong to a children's book, one of the two characters is disturbingly deformed by what seems to be elastic bands. The bands wrap the character up, while it lies crouched on the ground. Like in the case of the giant mice, the artist went through a specific experience, which got translated into art in this piece. This time, the prompt was the frustration and rage at the state of the world, in particular at war and its consequences on human beings and the environment – the resulting act of wrapping some toys in elastic bands acted as a very instinctive, maybe even relatable, form of stress release. But then, the artist decided to paint the deformed object; as she was turning the physical toy her hands had manipulated into a character in the painting, her personal frustration was transcended, and the figure has now become a much broader symbol, that viewers can interpret and respond to in different ways. I feel that the choice of using paint, in this case, contributes to the translation from the specificity of the episode to the more general, symbolic power of the final artwork.

Fairhurst's relationship to paint has been an interesting one: from an early love of botanical drawing and painting, to discovering the possibilities of experimenting with different media and the additional meanings they could bring. During one of my first conversations with the artist, she shared with me how some male painters would take her seriously only when she was painting, dismissing all the rest of her installation, mixed media, found objects, textile, embroidery work. Perhaps, the choice of keeping on working in those art forms has been partly motivated by a desire of wanting to keep proving those men wrong, by producing meaningful and inspired art with other materials that are *not* paint.

Fairhurst's less conventional pieces, which at first might look playful, ironic, a bit absurd sometimes, are always deeply meaningful. And, once more, part of the meaning is actually carried across by the materials. One very poignant example is that of the glass domes series. They reference in different ways environmental issues, and our relation with the planet we inhabit. As a scuba diver plunges himself deep down in one of the domes, golden plastic fish comically pop out from the top of it: humans have been conquering natural environments in sometimes amazing ways, but our presence is increasingly pushing other species away. Not only does the *TITLE* piece portray the actual human-in-fish-out

movement, but in using a glass dome it adds an historical layer to the issue it addresses: in Victorian times, those glass domes would be used to showcase taxonomy – stuffed animals. Through the passion for preserving, cataloguing and displaying ideally any specimen of the natural world – arguably to indirectly affirm their power over it all – human beings from a couple of centuries ago actually caused the extinction of numerous species.

I can't imagine a more effective, poignant and engaging way to address those points, while creating an artwork of fascinating visual impact. Would it have been as effective in paint? I personally doubt it.

Two dolls, that reference sacred ancient Egyptian dancers, feature real locs – a gift to the artist from one of her son's ex-girlfriend, who apparently knew it would be appreciated; a series of boxes contains small toys, arranged by colour, like an artist's palette; a cascade of knitted figures, based on the form of prehistorical goddesses, quite literally represents how *Women's Work is Never Done* – Fairhurst is still making them, and does not plan to stop. Every artwork in the exhibition contains pieces of the artist's biography, connections to other people, references to different times and places. In some of the latest paintings, she is exploring a more formalist approach to painting, without a concept as starting point, but rather an exploration of shapes, colours, compositions. Yet, those pieces link to her art-historical interests (Dutch still life, in this case), and plastic waste.

Fairhurst's final ironic and surprising move in this exhibition is to reveal her artistic production to date as such a multifaceted whole: it is a kaleidoscope of colours, materials, irony, and a witty and deep gaze on our place in the world.

May 2021

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