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Oscar Perry
The Michelin Star

Elli Walsh

Melbourne artist Oscar Perry creates thematic installations fusing painting, sculpture, video and performance. Excavating the sociocultural strata of recent milieu – from popular culture and cinema to conspiracy theories and capitalist propaganda – Perry’s works are like symbolic dioramas welding together the crossroads of fragmented histories and fraught contemporaneity.

What’s the inspiration behind your latest body of work?

The show’s called ‘The Michelin Star’. It’s a show that examines the Michelin tyre company and its complicated legacy.

I was thinking about Manuel from *Faulty Towers*. The confused waiter became a sort of physical guide to making work. In an episode called ‘Communication Problems’, Manuel delivers his famous line ‘I know nothing’. An apt mantra for the studio. There’s something unusual about the sets in sitcoms. They stand still in time. Minor variations on established gags snowball into huge comedic moments. I think the work comes out of a similar idea. The techniques and material shift around. Basically, I’m just trying capture an atmosphere. Painting and objects need to feel right – it’s a continuity that only I can locate.

In this exhibition I used Manuel’s runaway kitchen as a studio template. Burnt toast, spilt wine, stacked up dirty dishes, greasy oven doors, dishevelled table cloths and dissatisfied patrons all became the source material. I’ve been writing a lot of poetry and many of the themes in the exhibition seem to come from my writing. This poem is called *HMS Gratuity*:

I imagined an island inhabited
by only the very worst waiters

Surrounded by a sea of soup
huge flies like buoys bobbing
with condescension

A dirty untucked shirt flaps in the wind
not quite a flag not quite a sail

There’s no message in the bottle
just a disintegrated cork and
mouldy divorce papers

The campfire smells like cheap
Perfume and the cockroaches
are wearing Hairnets

HMS Gratuity is sinking and

Garcon has just spilt the
last of the summer wine

What kinds of research informed this show?

I was thinking about the Michelin Man, or 'Bibendum' in French. I imagined this iconic mascot as a drugged-up celebrity chef turned dictator. Bibendum always felt to me like a soft totalitarian monument. There's something disruptive about softness. It was an object I wanted to bootleg as a way of toppling it. I made these plaster men that ended up looking like bizarre lawn ornaments.

The Michelin Star becomes like a sheriff badge. I thought about Gary Cooper in *High Noon* when he waits anxiously for bandits to arrive. Perhaps those bandits are now Restaurant Inspectors or suburban Yelpers. I read about French chef Bernard Loiseau who shot himself following speculation that he could lose his restaurant's three-star Michelin rating. Michelin is interesting because it intersects so many important moments in history. From 1930s Union strikes in Vietnamese rubber plantations to WW2 roadmaps used to invade almost every corner of Europe. The Michelin restaurant guides and the removable pneumatic tyre are still as influential as ever. In a strange way they did reinvent the wheel.

I approach a lot of exhibitions like road movies. George Sluizer's film *The Vanishing* had a big impact on me. You set off and discover all this stuff, obsessively searching, but in the end you never make sense of it. As Manuel would say, 'I know nothing'.

You've referred to the contemporary artist as a 'Manchurian candidate', driven by her cultural programming rather than any intrinsic impulse in an era where information-saturation is hijacking the space between art, propaganda and marketing. What 'cultural programming' do you grapple with?

It's hard to get clear sight on cultural programming. We're living in a time where companies and algorithms dictate what we see and what gets ahead. All this energy for positive change and serious discussion is flattened out and co-opted; side tracked and turned into branding.

I think the idea of professionalism in art is something I'm always rubbing up against. It's a system of controlling people. I hate computers and technology, it's all a waste of time. I want physical experiences. Maybe I'll quit art and breed falcons or become a Ferryman. But Ferryman don't get paid. Maybe I could be a professional tyre kicker. If you're about to buy a car you hire me and I kick the tyre and nod approvingly.

What do you want viewers to take from 'The Michelin Star'?

I remember hearing a story about my Grandad doing the famous tablecloth trick at a packed restaurant. He failed, dragging the huge banquet onto the floor. People looked on with horror. He laughed and payed the cheque. 'This isn't the only restaurant in London'.

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