

Nadine Treister,  
*Ornamental Alchemy:*  
*Accessorising the Decorative* (2024),  
Radiant Pavilion [12–22 September].

... Imagine appearing in front of Nadine's exuberant *Ornamental Alchemy*. Now imagine burrowing under its baroque-like, wobbly surfaces and unexpected combination of parts to search for the work's animating source...

I met Nadine in her studio, which is also her home. Her welcome—a freshly made cake, calm, lightness—was matched by the elevating mood of her objects. We spoke about her hope to infuse monotony with joyfulness, her training in fields other than art, her design work... and the significance of humour that informs her life and making.

A funny idea is thrown into a shared space, momentarily suspended. Will it yield laughter or silence? Humour is uncompromising, vulnerable to mis-stepping and poor timing. Thus, to better understand the way Nadine's objects have twists of humour, the way they present as one thing, only to be undercut by another, I begin obliquely, from an inverse perspective. The twentieth century artist, Philip Guston noted: "if someone bursts out laughing in front of my painting, that is exactly what I want and expect."<sup>1</sup> Guston's late paintings [1967–1980] featured smoking, cartoony figures with familiar white hoods. His humour was pictorial, centred on the absurd narratives of his cruising subjects.

Nadine's humour offers a very different kind of absurdity—more furtive. I propose that it is a laugh for a different century. (Would it be too presumptuous to suggest that it is humour in search of gentler resolutions?) If Guston's work is a comedic slap in the face, with its didactically led-narrative and comic absurdity, Nadine's is much quieter, less obviously political. And yet, there is a politics stored in the work, beginning with her choice of materials and their misalignments. In a relentless upturning of expectations, Nadine's reckoning with material conformity contains a politics of difference, a non-judgemental love for variance and heterogeneity.<sup>2</sup>

The objects are constructed from bits and pieces rescued from second-hand shops. Offering more than an experience of individual works curated for a gallery space, the exhibition cheekily hints at designed domesticity—a decorative flourish here, a fireplace over there, a carved wooden lamp adorned by brass decorations and sprouting pearly beads stands proudly... The domestic allusions of *Ornamental Alchemy* challenge the tawdry (unloved) living rooms that we might remember from our childhoods, the ones that sucked energies and left us a little sad. The visitor moves from a 'foyer-like' entry into a spectral living-room. The debris from a broken marble hearth is reformed into a companion wall plaque. A carpet is laid on the floor, a corner removed, the missing scrap repurposed as a framed, wall hanging, bejewelled with glass, 'gem' stones, tongues of silver-foil and feathers. A second, seemingly its twin, is found to have slight differences (the loose tongues of the first are neatly tucked into a pocket-like strip of carpet in the second). Surprising details have been weaved through the work. The décor is fanciful and surprising. Fun.

The refashioning and repetition of reclaimed materials are not jokey jokes, in the manner of the standup comedian, or the narrative painter. They operate more like gesture. For Giorgio Agamben, gesture "is always the gesture of being at a loss in language; it is always a 'gag' in the literal sense of the word, which indicates first of all something put in someone's mouth to keep him [sic] from speaking, and then, the actor's improvisation to make up for an impossibility of speaking."<sup>3</sup> The joke, the abyss, trauma, coming face-to-face with reality (Jacques Lacan), are experiences that induce non-verbal responses, as Pasi Väliäho surmises, gesture "expresses the bare, material life which language presupposes."<sup>4</sup>

The architectural term, 'baroque' (lower case) opened this piece to describe the iteration of forms found in *Ornamental Alchemy*. But I confess, the term was used loosely and with cavalier imprecision. As a style of exaggerated gesture, the seventeenth century Baroque came after the harmonious ideals of an earlier generation of High Renaissance painters, sculptors and architects. Baroque has its own nemesis, early twentieth century modernism, an earnest, proselytising design movement that proposed a clean and minimalist future, reordered under anti-decorative proclamations. I see a little modern design anarchy in Nadine's *Ornamental Alchemy*. The works' animating source is the gag transmitted from object to viewer through sensate vibrations and non-verbal affects.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Guston, "Studio Notes: 1970–1978]" (*Collected writings, talks, etc.* p.309)

<sup>2</sup> In line with Gilles Deleuze, difference is used here as a metaphor for an ethical respect for autonomy of all living entities.

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "Kommerell, or on Gesture", in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (California: Stanford University Press, 1999) 78.

<sup>4</sup> Pasi Väliäho, "Simulation, Automata, Cinema: A Critique of Gestures", (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press) 2005.