

Cherished Deviances

Distraction and
other romances

Curated by Izzy Baker and Mia Palmer-Verevis

Artists

Bec Martin

Kurt Medenbach

Ly Nguyen

Beth Sanderson

Jessie Turner

Curators

Izzy Baker

Mia Palmer-Verevis

February 20th – March 3rd 2023

George Paton Gallery

We pay our respects to Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the traditional and ongoing custodians of the land upon which this exhibition was developed and takes place.

Cherished deviances
Distraction and other romances

Izzy Baker and Mia Palmer-Verevis

As Claire Bishop observes in her essay ‘Black Box, White Cube, Grey Zone’ (2018), states synonymous with distraction – “trance, reverie, daydream, hypnosis, meditation, and dissociation” – were once inextricable from creativity.¹ Now however, distraction has been all but completely devalued. It is framed as a threat to success, the consequence of a virulent attention economy, a problem to be solved.

In *How to Do Nothing* (2019), Jenny Odell warns of these perils, casting distraction as the enemy.² She highlights the dangers of allowing distraction to occupy one’s mind, with the potential for it to obstruct our true desires in life. Perhaps however, distraction and attention are not so polarised – they are, after all, both states of response to external stimuli. One has been denigrated as a failing, the other an optimised state; distraction is to attention to what noise is to sound – its undesirable other.

But what if distraction was retrieved from the pejorative and reattached to creativity? To consider distraction as blissful, productive, subversive and mesmerising promises possibility – it draws us towards sights, thoughts and cognizance otherwise inaccessible from within the confines of attention. As Jack Halberstam writes in relation to failure, embracing subversive modes of consciousness can “in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being with the world.”³

In *Cherished deviances: Distraction and other romances*, five artists embrace distraction through four themes: distraction as bliss; productivity; resistance; and as an aesthetic. Jessie Turner’s photographs of glistening stimuli recall the bliss of submitting to distraction. Beth Sanderson’s

Grating series reimagines the household object of the cheese grater as a decorative object, reflecting the potential for monotonous domestic tasks to enable digressive, creative thought. Kurt Medenbach ties distraction to chaos, presenting both as subversive forces in resisting technocapitalism. Ly Nguyen and Bec Martin translate distractions into meditative visual language – a contemplative inner world expressed through textural mixed-media and dizzying external stimuli captured by abstract photographic compositions, respectively.

The works in *Cherished deviances* – some meditative, some declarative – traverse a myriad of mediums, coming together in a chorus of distraction. Turner, Sanderson, Medenbach, Nguyen and Martin reunite distraction with creativity, and in doing so draw us towards liberation from the regime of attention.

¹ Claire Bishop, 'Black Box, White Cube, Grey Zone,' *The Drama Review* 62, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 38.

² Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing* (Melbourne: Black Inc. Books, 2019).

³ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

Jessie Turner
Distraction as Bliss

Izzy Baker

Louis Aragon's 1926 novel, *Paris Peasant*, follows a man through Paris's Passage de l'Opera in its last breaths before demolition.¹ It is a surrealist travel guide, an inventory of a Parisian arcade that is exalted, mythic, phantasmagoric. When Walter Benjamin read it, he exclaimed "I could never read more than two to three pages... because my heart started to pound so hard I had to put the book down. What a warning!"² In the dense sprawl of the arcade, Aragon and Benjamin located the "lustre of distraction" – its dual threats of oblivion and intoxication.³

Multiples of sponges, mounds of clementines, vats of hairpins – the arcade was a site of consumption and mass spectacle, populated by ordinary objects in hysteric quantities. This state, somewhere between desire and familiarity, lingers too in Jessie Turner's photographs. Her works – *End of Days* (2020), *Radioactive Graveyard Flowers* (2020), *Dinosaur in the Scrovegni Chapel* (2020) and *Halo of Headspins* (2020) – are sumptuous, glossy abstractions of pearls, plants and sparkling matter. They are magical portraits of earthly objects, visions of distracted bliss.

Aragon's *Paris Peasant* inspired Benjamin's Arcade project, an expansion of his theory of "reception through distraction", first stated near the close of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936). Benjamin believed that some aesthetic forms, such as architecture or film, are primarily experienced in a distracted state; the arcade is perceived not at distance but in movement, lost in thought.⁴ In her work, Turner also seems lost in thought – distracted by the glint of a pearl, a splash of sun on water, pigment flicked onto a

mirror. These peripheral glances are given pause, distilled with almost ecclesiastical reverence.

The kind of distraction expressed by Aragon and theorised by Benjamin diverges from how distraction is now discussed – a symptom of a crisis, slack-jawed scrolling leading to flailing productivity.⁵ As Aragon and Benjamin suggest, however, distraction and attention are not necessarily antithetical but points on the same continuum of reception. Attention is deliberate, while distraction unconscious. In a culture that doggedly demands we listen up, perception without effort can feel remedial; as sociologist Simon Stewart observes, it is the grace “of being carried away.”⁶

Aragon and Turner both submit to distraction. Aragon’s protagonist walks through the “strange zone” of the arcade feeling ordinary objects turn mysterious and Turner walks through life, turning debris into sumptuous visions.⁷ Arcades as they existed for Aragon are now largely extinct, replaced by the mall (also an endangered species) and social media. Critiques of the mall and social media denigrate them as sites of consumerism – and while they are, this can miss the perverse pleasure of succumbing to spectacle. Walking through Sephora is an out of body experience, the pressure to be productive vanquished by gleaming stuff – you are one with the lip kits, perfumes, sunscreens, pop hits. In this state of abstracted bliss, as Aragon muses, “Everything distracts indefinably, except from distraction itself... My ears are closed to the reproaches you make me.”⁸

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- ¹ Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1980).
- ² Vaclav Paris, "Uncreative Influence: Louis Aragon's *Paysan de Paris* and Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 37, no. 1 (October 2013): 21, doi: 10.2979/jomodelite.37.1.21.
- ³ Simon Stewart, "Aesthetics and Time: Sustained and Distracted Modes of Engagement," *British Sociological Association* 9, no. 2 (November 2014), doi: 10.1177/1749975514557549.
- ⁴ Howard Eiland, "Reception in Distraction," *boundary 2* 30, no. 1: 51–66, doi: 10.1215/01903659-30-1-51.
- ⁵ Carolin Duttlinger, "Between Contemplation and Distraction: Configurations of Attention in Walter Benjamin," *German Studies Review* 30, no. 1 (February 2007): 33.
- ⁶ Stewart, "Aesthetics and Time."
- ⁷ Duttlinger, "Between Contemplation and Distraction," 37.
- ⁸ Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 12.









Jessie Turner, *End of Days*, 2020
Metallic inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Jessie Turner, *Radioactive Graveyard Flowers*, 2020
Metallic inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Jessie Turner, *Dinosaur in the Scrovegni chapel*, 2020
Metallic inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Jessie Turner, *Halo of Headspins*, 2020
Metallic inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

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Bec Martin & Ly Nguyen
Distraction as an Aesthetic

Mia Palmer-Verevis

Abstraction is a key visual language for liberated thought that can transcend conventional modes of perception and relativity. The sensory overload symptomatic of the onset of modernity, and therefore altered states of cognition, resulted in the artistic perception of objects and figures becoming blurred and oversaturated – ‘distracted’ in nature.¹ For artists, this distracted perspective of the world found a formal translation in abstraction that prioritised sensation and gesture.

Theorist Ernst van Alphen argues that this form of perception, shaded by distraction, formed an extension of figuration, in which the depiction of distraction was “given form by means of abstraction.”² Therefore, in such work, visions of distraction become both the “figure” and influence the form. This approach is central to the work of Ly Nguyen and Bec Martin, which is united by a distracted sensibility. Each artist, with divergent stylistic approaches, translates digression and fluidity into visual abstraction, fragmentation, and imprecision.

Nguyen’s work materialises the traces of an internal state of distraction – recording and preserving intimate thoughts through organic gesture and pattern. A translation of concealed thoughts, originally recorded in the artist’s mobile phone notes, the work employs simple, textural materials, such as clay, paper, foil, and tape in an imprecise manner to express fleeting thoughts in an impenetrable, private visual language. The delicate quality of *This is Where it Ends (Silver)* (2021), *A Brief Feeling I Had* (2021), and *Marking of Thoughts (Five Times)* (2021) reveals Nguyen’s inner world with a sense of vulnerability, operating as a form of visual poetry. These subtle, monochromatic compositions suggest a state of quietened, inward-looking distraction that provides solace from an over-

stimulating external world, and therefore subvert the conventional notions of distraction as a competing force.

In contrast, Martin pays mind to the traditions of photography and film, to which spectacle, and therefore distraction, are integral. Martin's *Chandelier shop* (2021) and *Mirabella light store* (2020) both capture the luminous, glimmering bulbs of the Mirabella lighting shop on Lygon St, Brunswick. With heightened exposure and a grainy, unfocused quality, the detail of the chandelier's dangling crystals form a dizzying composition that reflects sensory immersion in a visual spectacle. For the artist, these moments of distraction are lucid – a reflection of a heightened state of observation that is enchanted by the visual periphery. Martin's process of capturing transitory moments indulges in curiosity and distraction, celebrating a ceaseless gaze and relishing in the experience of being seduced by sight.

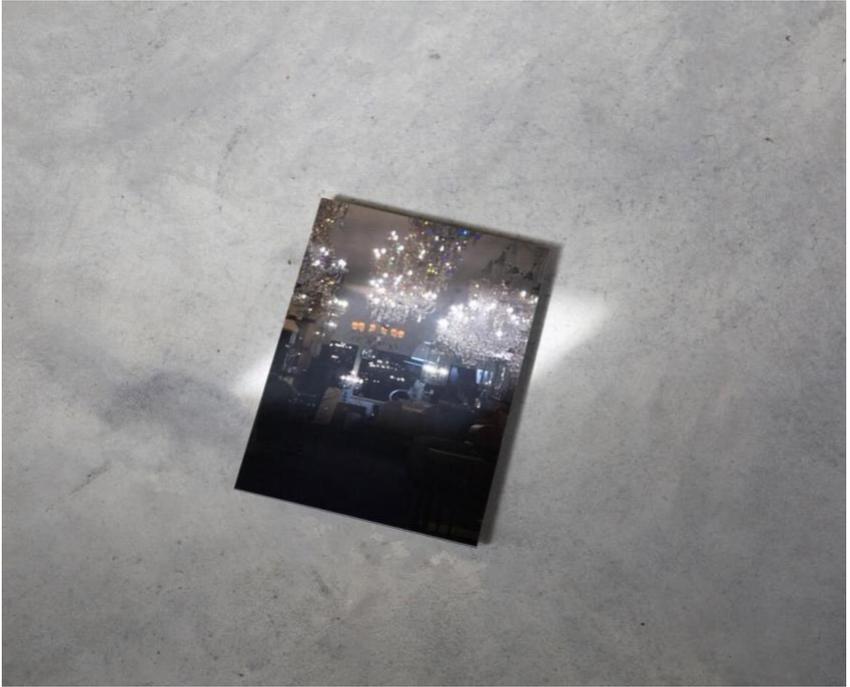
Nguyen and Martin embrace fleeting, intimate moments of observation and contemplation, prioritising poetics and ambiguities. With distraction as both their subject and their aesthetic framework, these two artists present contrasting spheres of peripheral stimuli – where Nguyen is preoccupied with internal contemplations, Martin is seduced by the fleeting spectacles of the world around her. As Alphen said of the modernist painters' departure from traditional figuration: "one does not paint the object world, but the way one sees the object world – distractedly."³

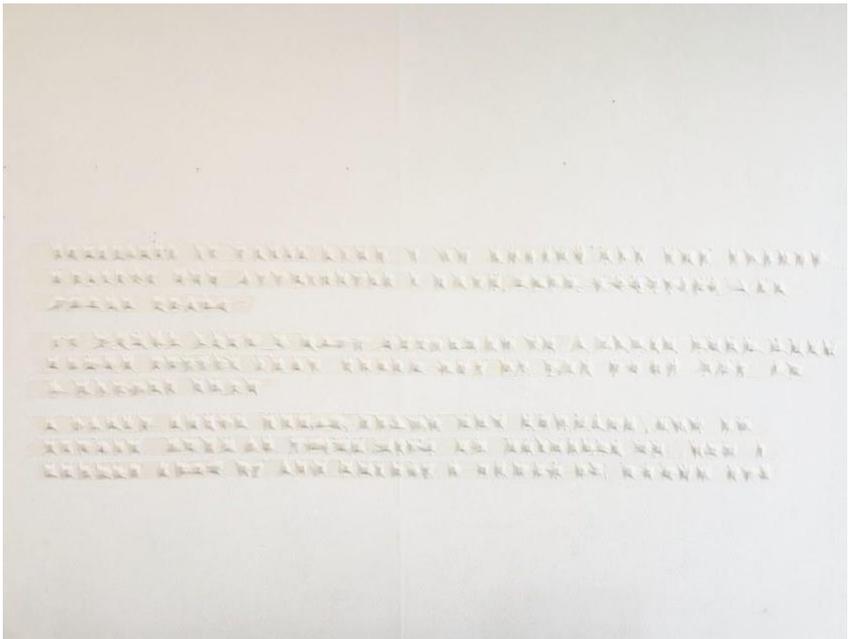
¹ Jonathan Crary, "Unbinding Vision," *October* 68 (Spring 1994): 22.

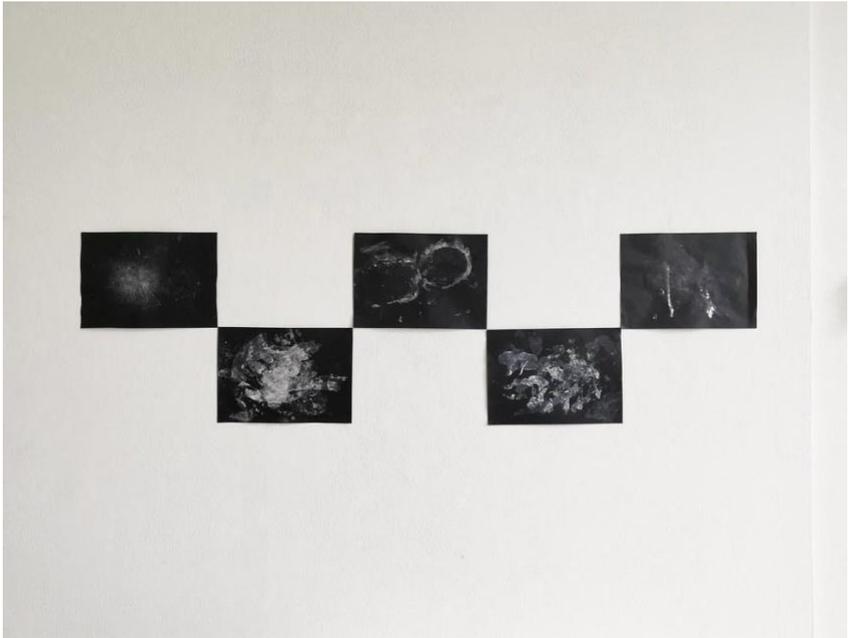
² Ernst van Alphen, "Attention for Distraction: Modernism and Perception," *Text Matters* 7, no. 7 (2017): 96.

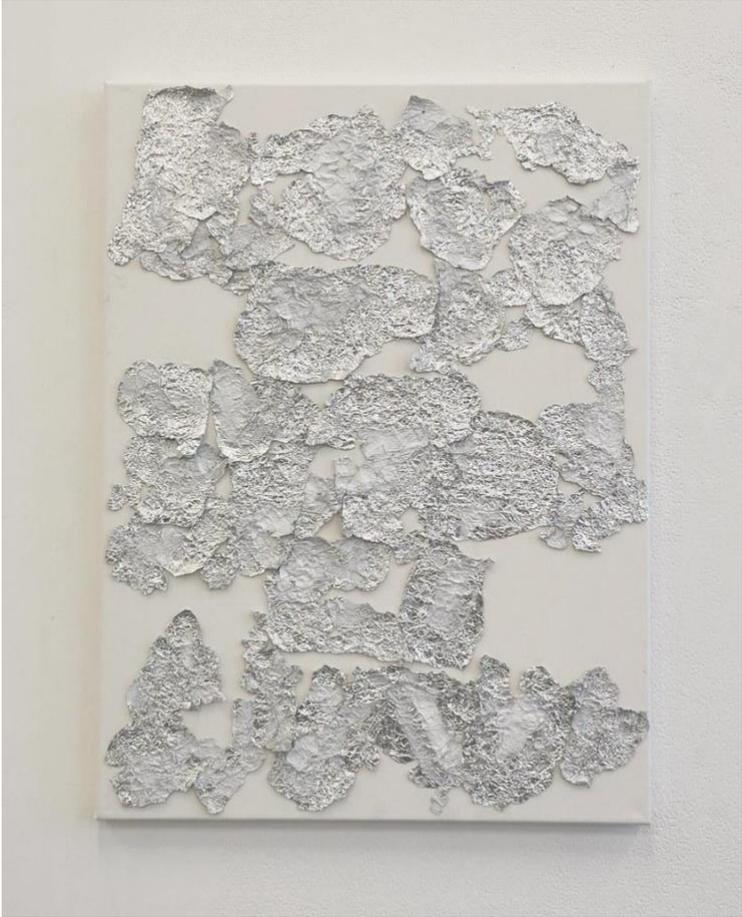
³ Alphen, "Attention for Distraction," 96.











Bec Martin, *Mirabella light store*, 2020
Chromogenic print mounted to aluminium
Documentation by Lucy Foster

Bec Martin, *Chandelier shop*, 2021
Chromogenic print on aluminium dibond
Documentation by ALEC

Ly Nguyen, *A Brief Feeling I Had*, 2021
Masking tape and air-dry clay on wall
Courtesy of the artist

Ly Nguyen, *Marking of Thoughts (Five Times)*, 2021
Air-dry clay on black-coloured paper
Courtesy of the artist

Ly Nguyen, *This Is Where It Ends (Silver)*, 2021
Spray paint and aluminium foil on canvas
Courtesy of the artist

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Kurt Medenbach
Distraction as Resistance

Izzy Baker

According to Ancient Greek myth, the start of civilisation lies with a trickster. Prometheus, the Titan God of Fire, stole fire from Zeus and gave it to the people – a crime for which he was condemned to eternal torment, bound to a rock, an eagle feasting upon his liver.¹ Prometheus’s transgression gave life and chaos to civilisation; it was a tragic and vitalising act of mischief.

In Kurt Medenbach’s work, genesis and destruction spin around the same axis. They draw upon a lattice of references – mythology, memes, popular culture and the concept of Muddy Thinking – building a world that evokes the beginning and end of time, our digital id and distraction itself. The results are Frankensteinien. In *Promethea* (2020), a digital type-c print, two computer-generated figures entwine, circled by a striped snake, a rudimentary smiley face superimposed over their fused heads. Puffy stickers sit top left and bottom right. Despite their distinctly digital aesthetic, Medenbach evokes myths of genesis, namely Prometheus and the Garden of Eden.

If *Promethea* is a vision of the beginning, the video-work *PROMEPHEA revisited* (2021) is its eschatological counterpart. Across three minutes, Medenbach cuts between shots of a dancing blue creature and two purple puffs spitting sparks, a darkened subterrane, more purple creatures, flashes of lightning, ruins, a decaying carcass and Playschool, playing on an old TV. The video is captioned by fragments of text and emojis, veering between aphorisms and gobbledygook, soundtracked by pitched up pop. The effect is disorientating – Hades for memes.

To understand the world Medenbach has created, Donna Haraway's Chthulucene proves useful. An alternative to the Anthropocene and Capitalocene, the Chthulucene is a conception of our current epoch that encompasses the time before and after humans, as well as non-human entities: "chthonic ones – ancient entities, elements, critters, forces of the deep, of the earth; diverse beings, living, dead and otherwise."² Where the Anthropocene and Capitalocene can be fatalistic, Haraway's concept resists overarching narratives of environmental destruction, urging us towards a conception of life that is entangled, rich and chaotic. In embracing this chaos, she locates a form of resistance.

In their work, Medenbach embraces this chaos, moving beyond the material world to ask "Where do memes go when they die?"³ They express how it feels to exist online – the internet's tendency to obliterate context, swerving between offensive, serious and saccharine aesthetics. "This is an aesthetics of validity // anti-validity," writes Medenbach.⁴ Online, we click between YouTube videos of natural disasters and 1990s nostalgia, scrolling past political extremism and memes, sponcon and confessions of profound anguish. The pressing economic, environmental and political threats that characterise our time are, Medenbach suggests, tentacles of the same beast that spurs trivial, delightful and inane digression. To denigrate one as valid and the other as distracting is to deny the muddiness, or in Haraway's parlance, trouble of existence.⁵

There is not a single meaning to be gleaned from *Promethea* or *PROMETHEA revisited*, nor the myth of Prometheus. Like Pandora's Box, Prometheus's act was simultaneously generative and destructive, a tragedy that sounded birth and condemnation. In their work, Medenbach revels in the same muddiness, placing chaos – and thus distraction – at the nucleus of their world. For them, digression is creative – "the artist tends to digress // understand –

stubborn art is beautiful in its willingness to fail.”⁶ Distraction is often decried as a consequence of technocapitalism – yet, thinking beyond the oppressive structures we leave beneath might entail accepting confusion, chaos and fragmented meaning. Perhaps in this pursuit, distraction becomes an act of resistance.

¹ “Fire Myths: Prometheus,” ELDVARM, published August 2021, <https://eldvarm.com/stories-by-the-fire/fire-myths-prometheus/>.

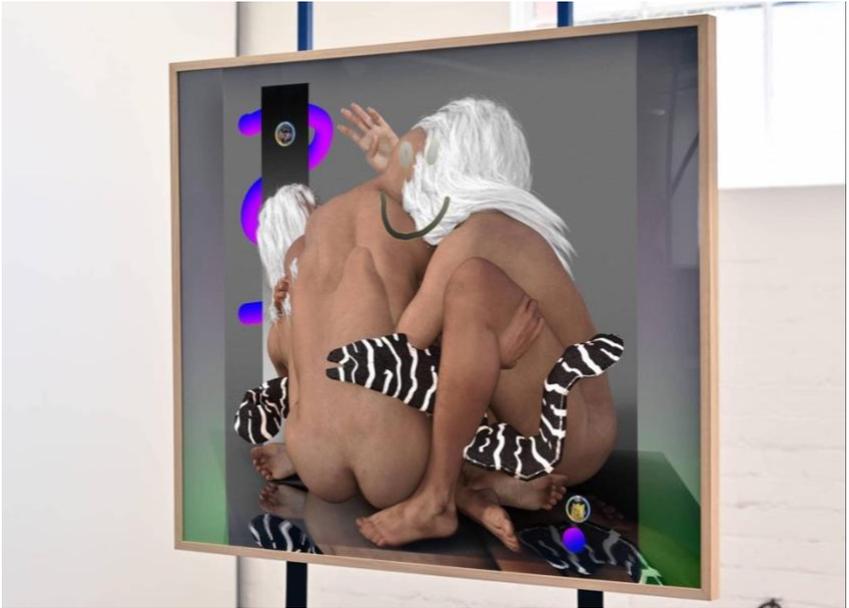
² Thom Van Dooren, “Temporal promiscuities in the Chthulucene: A reflection on Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble*,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* 8, no. 1: 93, doi: 10.1177/2043820617739210.

³ Kurt Medenbach, “Kurt Medenbach,” VCA Honours 2020, accessed January 27, 2023, <https://art2020.finearts-music.unimelb.edu.au/programs/honours/kurt-medenbach>.

⁴ Medenbach, “Kurt Medenbach.”

⁵ Donna Haraway, “Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene,” *e-flux* 75: URL: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-chthulucene/>.

⁶ Medenbach, “Kurt Medenbach.”





Kurt Medenbach, *Promethea*, 2020
C-type digital print, puffy stickers, leather, steel
Courtesy of the artist

Kurt Medenbach, *PROMETHEA revisited*, 2021
Video, 3 minutes
Courtesy of the artist

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Beth Sanderson
Distraction as Productivity

Mia Palmer-Verevis

The mechanical monotony of domestic chores – vacuuming carpets, washing plates, folding shirts, or grating cheese – can be a powerful enabler for a state of heightened imagination. The search for a reprieve from repetition and tedium may offer an opportunity for contemplations to be fluid and transcendent, allowing one to enter a state of uninterrupted complex and creative thought.

Surrealism actively embraced non-linear thought and alternative states of consciousness in a response to the restraints of the industrial workforce and wartime conscription. In reaction to the cataclysm of World War One, there was a “thirst to forget [one’s] own condition, to be entertained” through the inversion and destruction of discipline and rigidity.¹ The ideology of Surrealism is inextricable from the phenomenon of distraction, as reflected in Robert B. Ray’s description of avant-garde tendencies: “the desire for a transformed everyday life... the belief in procedures rooted in the arbitrary and accomplished in distraction.”²

This is evident in the work of Beth Sanderson, where the metallic teeth of a grater recur as a motif, imagining the domestic landscape as a conservative site to be inverted and transformed. In the *Grating* series (2022) monotony meets play, where the artist has crafted small, ornamental steel graters, embellished with vibrant enamels and luminous freshwater pearls. Sculptural in form, Sanderson’s objects are in fact brooches, further reconceptualising the familiar domestic object as a point of expansive imagination. Adopting a Surrealist disposition, Sanderson’s creative impulses appear to be born from a desire to escape moments of tedium and reinvent the traditional culinary object into a work of art.

Each of the six works has been attributed an endearing name, for instance: *Grating II (Leopold)* and *Grating V (Doris)*. Here, Sanderson sparks the imagination of the viewer, perhaps triggering a distracting line of thought about the personalities that could be associated with each name. Reminiscent of French avant-garde artist Frances Picabia's "mechanomorphic" machinery portraits, Sanderson's personalised graters can too be read as a critique of an alienated society consumed by efficiency.³ With kitchens as a historical site of domestic confinement for women, Sanderson's beautification of a household object further implies a reclamation of restrictive objects.

Sanderson's presentation of a familiar symbol of domesticity that evades its usual function is an example of the potential for "art to re-enchant the prosaic."⁴ Accomplished in distraction, the artist plots the mind-numbing absorption of tedious labour against the potential for expansive, creative thought. Perhaps, only when stagnant in the confines of tedium can one be inspired to find beauty in a cheese grater.

¹ Quentin Bajac, "The Age of Distraction: Photography and Film," in *Object: Photo. Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909–1949. An Online Project of The Museum of Modern Art*, eds. Mitra Abbaspour, Lee Ann Daffner, and Maria Morris Hambourg (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014), <http://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/assets/essays/Bajac.pdf>.1.

² Robert B. Ray, *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 44.

³ Hannah H Wong, "Powering Portraiture: Frances Picabia's 291 Mechanomorphs Revivied," *American Art* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 118.

⁴ Scott Freer, "Magritte: The Uncanny Sublime," *Literature and Theology* 27, no. 3, (September 2013): 33.



Clockwise from top left:

Beth Sanderson, *Grating III (Constance)*, 2022

Mild steel, vitreous enamel, freshwater pearls, stainless steel, cubic zirconia.

Courtesy of the artist

Beth Sanderson, *Grating I (Ethel)*, 2022

Mild steel, vitreous enamel, stainless steel, cubic zirconia

Courtesy of the artist

Beth Sanderson, *Grating V (Doris)*, 2022

Mild steel, vitreous enamel, stainless steel, cubic zirconia.

Courtesy of the artist

Beth Sanderson, *Grating VII (Edison)*, 2022

Mild steel, vitreous enamel, stainless steel, cubic zirconia

Courtesy of the artist

Beth Sanderson, *Grating IV (Wilbert)*, 2022

Mild steel, vitreous enamel, stainless steel, cubic zirconia.

Courtesy of the artist

Beth Sanderson, *Grating II (Leopold)*, 2022

Mild steel, vitreous enamel, stainless steel, cubic zirconia.

Courtesy of the artist

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Izzy and Mia

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