

Emelia French

**Sun Room**

27 January to 13 February 2021

RM Gallery and Project space



*I sit on the floor. The cool concrete is a relief in the hot gallery. Emelia floats through the space, propelled by her train of thought and the next thing that catches her eye. As she talks me through her exhibition, she laughs and apologises for dumping the contents of her brain on me. Pausing at one grouping and moving to the next, she rests in front of her clay rings. Arranged on fabric that Emelia dyed with sunflowers. She tells me how she formed the rings. Clay coiled around her finger. Squeezed by her other hand. Reaching for one of the rings as she talks, Emelia stops mid sentence. She has discovered that the fabric is being bleached by the sunlight as it lies in the gallery. I cross the room to kneel beside the rings. I ask Emelia if I can hold one.*

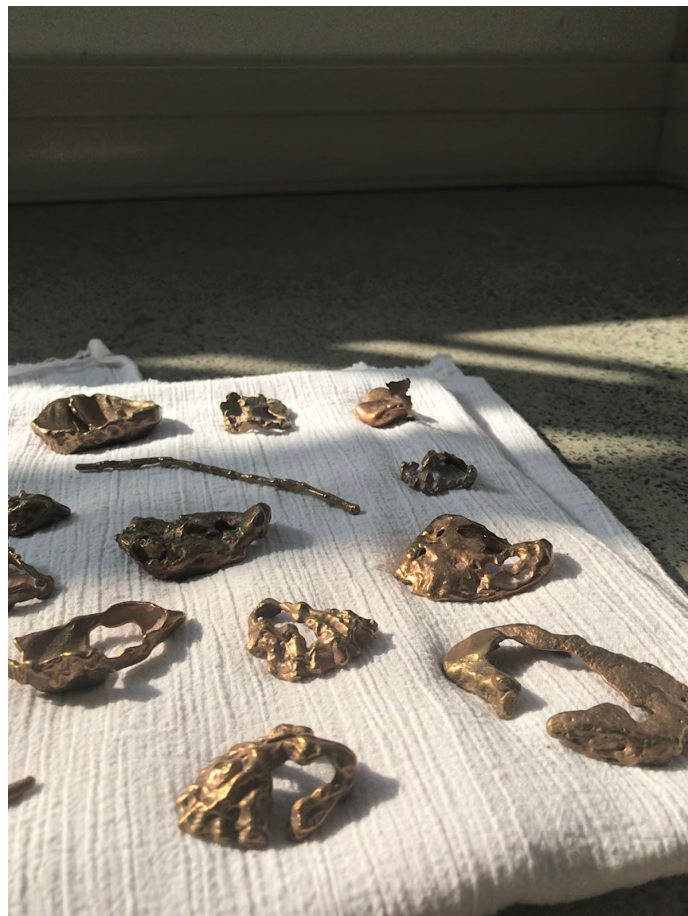
*Gently, tenderly, slowly, I pick up the coil closest to me. I see a faint trace, a darker dye. A shadow of the rough ring now in my hand. I try to put it back in the same place, but it's slightly askew. I wonder if my intervention will make its shadow mark look different to its neighbours.*

*Emelia turns to me, excited; 'I didn't expect that'.*

*Elsewhere, oyster casts sit nuzzled in a piece of muslin which has been folded in and on top of itself. Its springy weave is a pillowy plinth, providing a sympathetic platform for the casts.*

*Each oyster form presses down on the fabric according to their distribution of weight and surface area. Digging in here and skimming across there. The resulting contours are caught in raking sunlight. The sun has crawled through the space during the two hours we've been here.*

*It rests on the casts and throws their indentations into shadow.*



Emelia French describes her foray into sculpture and craft as 'enthusiastic novice investigations'. *Sun Room* sees an expansion of her practice to include sculpture alongside her paintings. Continuing her interrogation and undoing of conventional pedagogies and their expectations, French's experimentation with new techniques offers an alternative model of learning.

Denying a traditional prescription of learning oriented around a final outcome and predetermined standards, French lingers in the process of discovery, and revels in the serendipity of trying something new. She talks about using a light touch when making, a metaphoric loose grip that her plans and intentions often and happily slip out of. Rather than leading them with a forceful hand, French gently and generously encourages the materials she works with to dictate her processes and outcomes. This approach is incubated in an empathetic environment where mistakes are serendipitous points of interest and curiosity, not something to be avoided and eventually eliminated with diligent practice.

It is with this light touch in mind that French gravitates towards new techniques and materials. Unfamiliar and untrained, French places herself in a position where her lack of knowledge and physical skills limit her ability to control the outcome of her making. Her unpracticed-ness necessitates making which spontaneously responds to the characteristics of materials as they are revealed to her. French explains, 'when I can control the outcome, I make things I already know. When I can't control the outcome that's when new and interesting things happen.'

The herd of animal forms, critters or creatures, as French calls them, are the happy accidents of her first time working with clay and using experimental firing techniques. French shaped the clay in a set series of repeated actions, a squeeze, tug and a pinch. Despite this, in her neophyte hands, every accidental pull and push, every movement of clay, results in a creature that is different to the one that came before it. She laughs, clearly enjoying the mistakes that surprise her, 'I wouldn't have thought to make a leg look like that.'

Text and images by Erin Lee