

The Hardest Geometry Problem in the World

Samantha Cheng & Hugo Primbs' *Surface Level*

My girlfriend and I live with a stern-faced, barrel-chested little mutt named Jerry. He contains multitudes, by which I mean he is an assortment of dog parts akin to a turkey twizzler. Jerry is a neurotic animal. Perhaps it is the Chihuahua. Dogs need their nails clipped regularly, but Jerry won't let me near his paws. I take him to the pet store groomer once a month to get them cut. I don't drive, and Auckland Transport does not allow dogs on the bus, so I walk him forty-five minutes to the Animates opposite the Countdown on Richmond Road. They have a Rube Goldberg contraption of ropes and pulleys that fasten him in place like James Bond in Goldfinger's lair.

There are ten minutes between me handing the dog to the groomer and him desperately hauling his entire body weight toward the car park. I skulk the aisles looking for something to hold my interest. I am not interested in dog toys, so I end up by the aquariums. You can buy ceramic castles and treasure chests, strands of kelp and strings of pearls, coloured gravel in hot pink, cold teal, and a shade of purple that looks edible. I am sure the 3D printing revolution extends to aquarium décor. Who needs these toys? Put a castle in the tank and let us pretend Sergio the Angelfish is a barren and heirless despot. Maybe some buyers believe their fish need stimulation like tigers at the zoo.

In *Surface Level*, a collaborative exhibition at RM Gallery by Samantha Cheng & Hugo Primbs, everyday objects and simple gestures are bundled together as the products of a fertile flowchart. A Staedtler Mars Lumograph pencil is tucked into the ridge of a ceiling beam. A large yellow mop bucket is mounted on the wall. There are two 1:1 scale paintings of sponges in the bathroom, titled *Scouring* and *Non-scouring*. These items are details, the movements in one of those multi-part Green Day songs from *American Idiot*, like "Jesus of Suburbia" with its five roman-numeral-designated sub-tracks. There are twenty-nine movements, and *Surface Level* is the song.

Cheng and Primbs tell me they spent seven days installing the show. They implanted themselves in the gallery, exemplifying RM's promise to experimental practice methods. In their own words, "As the things in the space were rearranged, cast aside, erased and brought back we basked between familiarity and unfamiliarity." This discrete unit of private space is their fish tank, measurable on the X, the Y, and the Z. The paintings are drippy. So is the bucket on the wall. It has a speaker inside that goes drip, drip, drip. The fish tank is leaking.

An incomplete list of objects to delight the fish: a toothbrush with blown-out bristles, power cords layered and traced, gentle scrapings of charcoal stick, buckets and mops, and a bike lock. Scattered on the walls and floor are many paintings, including those of a sparrow, a surgical mask, an EFTPOS terminal, a wooden palette (canvas stretched over an actual palette), and an A-frame warning sign reading "Caution. Wet Floor." Abundance carries particular humour. Something is endearing in gregariously jamming all these objects together. That they are mostly cheap vernacular objects or painted representations of such things compounds the absurdity.

Every object in *Surface Level* is listed on the room sheet and notated on an accompanying map. The contrapositive is that anything unlisted is not part of *Surface Level*. The map mixes voyeurism with completionist thrill, like browsing a stranger's bookshelf. I always look at bookshelves at house parties. It is like bird watching. If *Scar Tissue* is a seagull, *Acid for the Children* is a dotterel. If *Just Kids* is a sparrow, *M Train* is a pīwakawaka.

At the opening, the map quickly became a game. We stormed around the gallery, puzzling out every detail. Neither Cheng nor Primbs could make it, so the RM gallerists helped, drawing our attention to every squirrely particular. It is playful, not in the heavy terms of tertiary education, but like the teacher at school camp who cuts loose during a game of flashlight. The names of the works are often jokes, malleably phrased to be either in-jokes or, preferably, non-sequiturs. I laughed at the sponges (2 and 3 on the room sheet), at a sparrow called "*peanut*" (1), and at *Samantha's old iPhone* (15), an iPhone on the table in the RM Archive Room that is broadcasting drip.mp3 to *bucket from Hugo's studio* (17).

My friend recently moved into her boyfriend's flat and tacked the map to his bedroom wall. Marking the space with something from her context, an art context, helped her feel like she had the right to be there. In *Capital is Dead*, Media theorist McKenzie Wark remarks, "I always thought of privacy as a bourgeois concept." It is a throwaway comment, contextualising the pearl-clutching anguish around Cambridge Analytica within a broader history of Capitalist exploitation. *Surface Level* is expanding, and the fish tank is leaking.

Despite the breezy tone, there is forcefulness in how *Surface Level* cements its boundaries. In RM's current configuration, they always run two shows concurrently. *Surface Level* cohabitates with Alan Thomas' sculptural series *A set of impositions*. On Cheng and Primb's map, these sculptures are absent. Thomas' objects are not part of *Surface Level*, so *Surface Level* has erased them. This erasure makes me wonder when this sort of whimsical world-building becomes aggressive. The exhibition is playful, but play necessitates everyone agreeing to participate. Play exaggerates insider/outsider dynamics. Those who don't play along are not invited to the next party.

I woke my girlfriend up at three AM to share an epiphany. Jerry nestles between us. He refuses to sleep in his crate.

"Spiders are like fish."

"What?" She is a deep sleeper.

"Because they're hairy, we treat spiders like mammals, especially big spiders, but they're actually like fish. Land fish. They patrol their territory like fish circling an aquarium."

"Go to sleep, baby."

"Spiders are like fish."

For the Wes Anderson comedy *Rushmore* (1998), aquariums are a meeting place. The mingling of fish, real or fantasised, analogises the relationships between students and staff at a prestigious Houston private school. One scale grander, and the aquarium is a metaphor for the film's production, *Rushmore*'s integration of amateur actors with established stars.

In one memorable scene, Bill Murray's defeated tycoon Herman Blume observes an art class run by Rosemary Cross (Olivia Williams). He is standing by a little boy working at an easel. Anderson frames the shot behind the easel, hiding its surface. Blume points at the picture and asks, "What's that you're painting?"

The boy replies, "That's, uh, a jellyfish."

During the film's audio commentary, Anderson reveals that the boy was actually painting his picture of an aquarium. For each take, Murray would point at a different section of the painting, and the boy would describe his subject. "That's a shark." "That's a crayfish." "That's, uh, a jellyfish."

Surface Level reminds me of that moment in *Rushmore*. It lives in the same gap, between the written and the improvisatory. It shares the unruliness of this little kid explaining his process.

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