

# GRWM —

## Response by Max Fleury

What's in my bag? As I begin writing this essay, I'm on the bus at night, coming back from my unpaid art gallery job after my retail day job. In a couple of weeks, we are exhibiting at the Melbourne Art Fair, and my colleague organised sponsorship from Kowtow, so today my tote bag contains a complimentary new shirt and a fresh pair of jeans, wrapped up in stylish custom printed green tissue paper. This year I'm turning 30, and it seems with age comes an increase in the number of events I need tidy clothing for. Worn-out t-shirts and Levi's won't do. Alongside this, I have Red Seal VitaFizz Performance — aka knockoff Berocca — an Oscar Wylee glasses case (with two afterpay instalments to go), my 2004 Canon DigiCam, and my MP3 player — an accidental *analogue bag*.<sup>1</sup>

The contents of my bag are admittedly not particularly interesting. However, not all bags are created equal. From the early days of YouTube, with Amoeba Music's long-running *What's In My Bag?* (2008–) series, where 'musicians and tastemakers' share their music and movie picks from around the store<sup>2</sup>, to Vogue's chic *In The Bag* series (2016–), our curiosity to see what's in celebrities' bags has been milked by content creators. Similarly concerned with our intrigue into the lives of others, *get ready with me videos* share the morning routines, and fashion wisdom of celebrities and z-list influencers alike — formatted for the current short-form-portrait era of reels and TikTok.

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<sup>1</sup> Analogue bag: A trend where people carry a bag of screen-free activities, such as drawing tools and diaries, often to replace the functions of their smartphone in separate items (much of which is not actually analogue). Also referred to simply as a "bag."

<sup>2</sup> *What's In My Bag?* has been running for 17 years, with the first episode in 2008 featuring NZ musician Liam Finn. Episodes continue to be released weekly, and Amoeba's YouTube channel had over 1,300 videos at the time of writing.

For artists Keani Rewha, Rita Takeuchi, and Aria McInnes, these parasocial relationships mediated by the online sphere are the basis for their line of enquiry in the group exhibition *GRWM*, at RM Gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau. With each artist presenting a project in their respective mediums, Rewha and Takeuchi being painters, and McInnes a sculptor, *GRWM* presents three projects reflecting on style, taste, and self-improvement. The group, all alumni of the AUT master's program, brings their disparate practices and generational perspectives to this project. So, *let's get ready with Keani, Rita and Aria...*

In Rewha's paintings for *GRWM*, the artist presents a series of monochromatic oil paintings depicting logos and text. Rewha, a colourblind painter, has made the choice to use green as the featured colour in this body of work. The colour of most vegetables and matcha, green, is perhaps most associated at *the moment* with Charli XCX's *brat*<sup>3</sup>; a lurid shade of toxic-looking green that has less in common with the natural world than with the sickly faces in a Kirchner painting — things are going viral! This reflects a shift of tone and focus for Rewha, as his previous works have depicted queer experiences in a rural setting, where landscapes and abandoned farmhouses provide cover for a clandestine *rendezvous*; the paintings in *GRWM* shift from that rural context into a more urban gay culture.

In *Totally F\*\*\*ed Up (Diptych)*, two wide-format canvases sit side by side. On one canvas, we see the word *Today* in large print. Running vertically to this, we see an excerpt of smaller text down the side of the canvas, which appears to be a court summons or a parking ticket. On the second canvas in the diptych, there is a painting of a shoe — specifically an Adidas

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<sup>3</sup> I tried to watch *The Moment*, Charli XCX's new mockumentary, as research, but it does not come out in Aotearoa until 5 March. Please enjoy the opening of this exhibition on 4 March.

Taekwondo slip-on. Rendered in a soft, warm green, somewhat muted and teetering on khaki, the diluted oil paint creates a gentle contrast with the background; an even more diluted wash of the same colour. The effect is, on one hand, organic, and on the other, speaks to anxieties of a poisonous kind. The text suggests a chasing anxiety — the paranoia of slow poisoning — where a parking fine becomes an analogy for sickness or bodily degradation.

Many of the other paintings populating Rewha's project are small, with dimensions under 400mm. These paintings show snippets of texts and familiar symbols, the words *will* and *feel*, a blister pack of conspicuously un-edgy Histaclear, and the Betterhelp logo. While this decision to include such ordinary imagery is to provide insight into the artist's everyday, it appears to be searching for something deeper within this. The Betterhelp logo, in particular, suggests something about the psychological flavour of our current moment. Rewha has stripped his painting of illustrative material, leaving the only interpretive cues in the colour and composition. The *help* part of the logo has been cut off, leaving only the word *better* visible on the canvas — suggesting that this isn't always about helping people, but a tool to become 'better'.

For Takeuchi's contribution to *GRWM*, the artist has made two series of paintings, both riffing on the *what's in my bag* format. The first are images of handbags in various candid situations. Here, bags are depicted in Takeuchi's washy brush strokes, sitting on a bed, at the foot of a chair in the airport — idle sacs having a moment's rest. The second shows commonplace images; fish lying on ice at the supermarket, a simple landscape, cocktails on a table, with handbag staples such as keys and wallets moulded onto the canvas support.

Takeuchi's paintings, much like Rewha's, employ diluted glazes of oil paint applied to the canvas in an expressive manner for a painterly effect. Often looking like simple earth-toned underpaintings,

Takeuchi's images are opaque and sparse in detail, with a preliminary quality that requires the viewer to fill in the details. Although they verge on an almost 'stock image' genericism, Takeuchi's warm tones and painterly brushstrokes evoke a sense of warmth. In the painting *one a day*, a handbag sits open on the floor, with an orange poking out the top — a pop of colour against the monochromatic row of airport seats. Presumably propped up by whatever else is concealed inside, the orange is the only revelation Takeuchi offers into its owner's life.

In Agnès Varda's 1988 film 'Jane B. par Agnès V', Varda films Jane Birkin — the famed face of luxury bags — tipping out the contents of a comically overfilled handbag onto the steps of the Eiffel Tower. This setup is humorous and ironic, and there isn't a payoff for the audience looking for an insight into Birkin's life through the content of her bag. Similarly, in Takeuchi's painting, we aren't given the satisfaction of knowing what's in these bags, or who owns them; even if we did, as Birkin states, 'When you show it all, it reveals very little.'<sup>4</sup> While Takeuchi and Rewha express identity through the gestures of the artist's hands, McInnes' project changes tack, using the hands of many, featuring fabricated sculptures of exercise equipment and sexy swimwear.

I first met McInnes ten years ago, while we were both students starting our Bachelor of Fine Arts at Massey University Whiti o Rehua School of Art. In those days, she worked at *Emporium*, a vintage boutique sourcing cowboy boots and denim jackets for the western loving hipsters of the day. One time, McInnes even gifted me my own pair of cowboy boots, delivered by hand in a plastic bag with a rose poking out. Since then, McInnes has hung up her cowboy hat to take a job in high-end retail in Tāmaki Makaurau, abandoning Levi's for Rick Owens. This career path influenced McInnes' recent AUT Master's project,

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<sup>4</sup> Varda, Agnès, director. *Jane B. par Agnès V*. France, 1988, 97 min.

*Imagine Working Here* (2024), where she created a sculptural installation of a shop. McInnes has made a series of imaginative props for *GRWM*. Ostensibly useful to those trying to look hot at the beach in summer, the efficacy of her inventions is questionable. The *Tuxini*, her first creation, is a swimsuit. A portmanteau of tuxedo and bikini, it is inspired by Jennifer Beals' skimpy tux in *Flashdance*. Originally thought up as a legitimate business idea while the artist was trying to get an entrepreneurial visa while living in South Korea, the idea has now been relegated to McInnes' fanciful sculptural world.

To look hot in your Tuxini, McInnes has also designed a home gym to get you into shape. For this, the artist has fabricated her own take on an *Ab Circle Pro*, alongside a barbell rack, of which the discs have been substituted with decorative serving dishes. McInnes' intention was to have these sculptures entirely fabricated; however, cracks in this plan appeared along the way. Having sculptures fabricated is a process relegated to the bankable darlings of the art world, and McInnes' contraptions, not backed by large public grants and money from investors, make some allowances for this. Some aspects toy with the line between 'found' and 'fabricated', such as the knee pads on her ab circle pro being made from readymade chalices. Other elements, such as the recast dinner plates standing in as barbells, are remade and reproduced to the point of simulacra, escaping from the mundane via the route of the absurd. Although aiming to transcend the artist's touch, McInnes proves she's *only human*.

While Takeuchi's paintings are concerned with observation, Rewha and McInnes tackle the project of bettering oneself through self-presentation, psychological help, and exercise. These pursuits, especially clothing and working out, are often dismissed as frivolous or vain, prejudices frequently directed at women and gay men. They are *too* materialistic. *GRWM* offers a gentle push against these accusations.

Sometimes earnest and sometimes satirical, the artists draw from their lives and experiences to consider how to see themselves, and what it means to be seen online. If the promise of the internet is contact, why doesn't it cure loneliness?<sup>5</sup> Through content that offers insight into the lives of others, especially those richer and more famous than ourselves, it is easy to feel powerless on the sidelines.

So, what's in my bag now? I'm unpacking after getting back from the Melbourne Art Fair. My Kowtow-sponsored clothes are dirty, my SD cards are full, and my bank account is empty. On the plane over to Melbourne, I couldn't help but stare at what the lady next to me was doing. I was first drawn in watching her make a PowerPoint presentation using AI-generated pictures of horses jumping through fire. The day was February 16, and was in fact the first day of the year of the Fire Horse. In between writing her fire-horse-themed marketing presentation, she spent two hours editing Instagram reels without headphones, while simultaneously skipping through five movies on the in-flight entertainment (including *The Notebook*, *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, and *Moana*). As soon as the plane touched down, she switched her phone out of flight mode to call her husband, and proceeded to have an argument. It was hectic energy, and I couldn't look away. Unable to connect my dated phone to the in-flight Wi-Fi, this became my IRL version of the Criterion Closet, a day in the life, and a substitute for my favourite soaps. Just because we're not famous doesn't mean we're not interesting. Sorry for being nosy!

—Max Fleury, February 2026

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<sup>5</sup> Laing, Olivia. *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency*. Picador, 2021. I am borrowing from Laing's reflections in her essay *The Future of Loneliness*, 2016. Although a ten year old work, I read it much later, and it feels relevant today.