

Mantle Muscularity

Don't judge a snail by its shell.

One often registers a snail with an accidental crunch. It disrupts our inertia mid-pace, invoking horror and intrigue. We wonder how violence could be so recklessly enacted, fretting over the perceived fragility of a snail's constitution.

This moment of fixation passes, and we demean the shell as weak, unable to withstand the *slightest* force of pressure. Its fracturing is proof of its lack of evolutionary purpose in a snail saturated world. The shell is no longer understood as engineered for retreat, instead an object primed to expose the weak, the raw, the visceral. This is just another passing visual spectacle to behold in the smorgasbord of affective pleasures afforded to us, another disappointing object lacking sufficient conceptual and structural robustness. We continue, moving, without fear of trampling yet another snail.

Traversing through *Beautiful Snail*, one senses a resistance to such brusque encounters and ecstatic revelation. These eight distinct artists appear disinvested in the presumed fixity of art objects, showing little desire to plate their guts to be hawked for consumption. Though blatant in subject matter and sensuous in pathos, their use of found objects, images, materials and memories do not read as preludes to larger, imposed narratives. How can we make sense of art that does not spiral centripetally into an inherent point? What happens when we are not guided to the respite of diving into layers of encoded meaning?

Seen in its flattened state, the snail and its shell are inseparable, one and the same. Yet, the complexity of a snail's anatomical development could perhaps show us how to observe and expect things that grow. A distinct aspect of molluscular evolution is found in its mantle, muscular tissue that resides between the snail's visceral mass and its shell. *It forms its shell through secretions*, composing an ever-enlarging home through proteins and minerals, extracellularly. There is no final state to the shell formed by the mantle, though one could record each stage of its development as discrete. The mantle quite literally holds the snail and its shell together, and its collapse causes another certain death for the snail. Despite its etymology, the mantle allows us to consider objects as oozing out of the surface of a snail, inherently formed and calcified durationally, rather than cloaking or enshrouding an essence. An acculturating muscle that does not flex, nor seek to impress, the mantle simply secretes as life-doing.

Now, when I see a snail, I long to see its mantle. Surely, comparing artistic practice to a mantle is not another capitalist form of biomimicry, in which we learn from the snail by taking its most productive features and purpose it for our own goods. But there is something about the mantle's persistent back-forming labor that resonates with *Beautiful Snail*, an exhibition poised after two years of MFA training, and set to lead to many years of artistic secretion.

I see it in the enmeshment of **Wilson Yerxa's** rigorous posturing, deliberately figuring the body in all ways but one. Yerxa churns through fabric, paper and paint, but never seeks to fully digest the plenitude of reaching and straining, in everyday moments of grocery-unpacking, laundry-doing, pet-feeding, penis-holding—only allowing brief fireworks of a slam dunk every corner and then. Each render contemplates what precedes, yet its cumulative presentation is never merely additive or preparatory; it is bound together in a coherent space-time and continues to exude iteration after iteration. **Abigail Taubman** too sifts through archives of landscape images to produce re-photographed compositions, without arriving at frames of singularity. Taubman activates images previously photographed on her practice of cartographic walking, projecting them onto irregularly hung fabric. Time-space here, as embodied through a photograph, is allowed modulation, siphoned by the fabric that receives projected light. This process of photographic reconstitution is marginally defined by observable

physical lines in the fabric, offering further bisections, dissections, and divulgements from the image. Taubman's images continue to release and generate information, incontrovertible in this casting of time and space.

Sophia Anthony's exacting canvases perform comparable melding, namely of psyches through cinematic compulsions. Each mid-shot portrait approaches without encroaching, each male figure studied with much compassion. Anthony uses every formal tool at her disposal to intuit the texture of her protagonists' personae, discarding a hierarchy of psychological planes in favor of slippages—through the revelry of line drawings, the suffusing of vibrance across definitive clothing fields, the razor sharp precision in facial hair, glints and shadows that contest the notion of an unilateral gaze. Anthony's protagonists are all understood and felt through translucency. This is most exceptionally felt in Anthony's keloid scarring of the canvas surface, banding these male figures in the same fabric of reality. Anthony's indexed touch pervades through the fog of ennui, proving there is more to understand, more to desire. **Elissa Osterland** also dwells in the surface, departing with her images in the swathes of large graphite fields. Transferring images through the rubbing of prints and incidental body contact are considered covalent; not the lifting of impressions but the imbuing of memories. Osterland allows the pressure of imparting to wax and wane, savoring each secretion in its magnitude and concentration. The surfaces takes as much as it gives, the hung image not scored by the tessellation of images but by the rhythm of transmutation.

Yet, straining through borders is not the only evidence of mantle performance. In **Soo Jin Jiang's** *SUPERPOWER Market*, (neo-)Imperialism distributes itself at apparently no cost or variance. Repackaging extant and recanted icons of imperial power through the edible goods of cookies, chocolate bars, and country-flag bread, Soo's continuum of control purports all as equal, at least in this open cycle of consumption. We know what this represents, yet are unable to resist; we succumb, we pass through the system, we form the system. Conversely, **Miles MacClure** enlists seemingly non-synchronous objects and images to incise a rut in what is considered perceptible. (Un)surprisingly, MacClure's physical acts of imposing printed AI-generated baseball player faces on Las Vegas Neo-classical statues effectively fuses real and unreal, both icons now implicated in the other's legitimacy as a form of mimicry. MacClure applies the same conceptual glue to other binaries of "high" and "low" cultural objects, compositing with a brazen belief in the permeability of these images to one another.

Ultimately, the mantle serves to cultivate. **Scott Campbell** is at once a realist and a dreamer, imploring us to consider the relief of escape through possible means. This escape is by no means fantastical, rooted in vestiges of intimacy and the solace of Nature. Campbell requires us to incline our bodies into such visions, implicating us in the new ground we so fear to transgress. While we peer into refashioned moulds just for a brief respite, Campbell continues draw us around these feelings through the consolidation of furtive, grasping light. Similarly, **Caitlyn Au** does not shy away from the difficulty of negotiating difference. Comfortably situated as an oversized box, Au's sculpture proffers many modes of encounter without leading to pure immersion. Its controlled openings and awnings disclose a certain interest in being perceived, perhaps for its assemblage-interiority and transfixed plushie subjects, yet refuses to state a clear interior and exterior. Cultivation here is seen in the box's torsion, seen through the bleeding of paint from surface to surface, in its autonomous calibration and negotiation of its boundaries. Imperceptible yet inevitably felt, just as a snail's organs are continually re-sorted as a shell forms through the mantle.

It continues to be difficult for us to sense the mantle's work, at least for those of us who do not ooze and grow in the same way. We could focus our efforts on studying its sinews, the network of ideas produced in each work, but perhaps a simpler way would be to rid ourselves of diametric oppositions, of hard and soft, shell and snail; to instead seek leakages and calcifications. Maybe then we would be able to sense a snail's trail of slime in advance, to look before we step, to walk alongside a snail on its way to a destination we cannot predetermine.

Toby Wu
2022/6/1-6
Thousand Oaks, California | Singapore, Singapore