SOFT TOUCH

Caboolture Regional Art Gallery
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Rest is Radical, Michelle Vine's *Soft Touch*

Text by Louise Mayhew

Dearest reader,

Hello! It's a special pleasure to have you here: reading, thinking, experiencing and imagining *Soft Touch*. I'm writing to tease out some of the themes in the exhibition. I want to do this in a way that supports the luxury, generosity and personal narratives of Michelle's work, making this a languorous read for you and for me.

I'm sitting in my backyard, surrounded by the greenery of too many pot plants and a scattering of fallen jacaranda flowers. Overhead I can hear the squarks and chirrups of magpies and miner birds. If I'm lucky, two local kookaburras will reward my listening with a cacophonous duet of laughter. It's muggy. My neighbour's overgrown jasmine scents the air with a heavy sweetness and reminds me of walks home from school. A wolfhound is barking his loud, gravelly, bark. And at my feet, my lithe rescue cat, is stretched out and resting. Her twitching ears tell me she is listening too.

I'm picturing you in the gallery. Maybe you're at home, curled into an armchair. Or maybe someone else is reading my letter to you. I hope you'll take a moment to settle into this text. Acknowledge the sturdy ground beneath your body. Notice the colours, scents and textures of your surrounds.

Take your time.
Relax your shoulders.
Close your eyes.
Breathe in.
Breath out.

Rest is Radical

Michelle's *Soft Touch* is a restful wonderland. Her work beckons us to linger and unwind in the reassuring textures of her *Comfort Objects* and *Affirmation Tubs*. Even her artwork titles conjure the gentle *Sway*ing of flora and the slowed *Snail's pace* of shelled gastropods. In turn, her art is an antidote to the increasing pace and interconnectedness of late capitalism, the insidious mantras of neoliberal feminism, and the toxic productivity of social media, which value our labour and our leisure through salaries and likes. By prioritising rest, *Soft Touch* sits alongside artists and art movements such as Lee Lozano, Hannah Bronte and the Slow Art Movement, which seek alternative temporalities. Like them, *Soft Touch* provides an escape from contemporary pressures and champions rest as radical.

Close your eyes.
Breathe in.
Breath out

Touch is Revolutionary

As COVID swept around the globe, the rules and emotions of touch changed. Handshakes and hugs were replaced with awkward elbow taps and unsure nods. In this era of touch aversion, many of us became aware of touch deprivation or skin hunger: the unrequited desire to be affectionately touched by others. Michelle's work engages with this deficit. Her *Surrogates for social* touch recreate the pleasure, reassurance and comfort of social touch. By this I mean the caring touch of having your hair brushed, your forehead kissed, your hand held or your shoulder squeezed. By shifting her attention to touch, Michelle also counters the vision of the gallery as a pristine white cube where only select audiences - those with certain bodies and particular levels of confidence, privilege, maturity and social class - view art from a respectful distance. In the footsteps of Brazilian participatory artists, Michelle welcomes children's curious, rapacious and frenetic bodies into the gallery. In this context, touch leads a revolutionary reconceptualisation of who art is for and how it is consumed.

Close your eyes.
Breathe in.
Breath out.

Play is Universal

Children are beautifully alert to life's pleasures: their laughter intermingles with unrestrained squeals, their bodies dance without shame and their minds see opportunities for games in the everyday activities of car trips, family meals and household chores. As I write this, I'm thinking of my little niece and nephew who recently (re)discovered the delight of wearing undies on their heads, echoing my brother doing the same thing a lifetime ago. The artist's childhood memories also infuse the exhibition. *The Search* is reminiscent of running through linen as it dries on the washing line. The cotton sheets of our youth are reimagined in candied and ice-cream coloured netting. Similarly, *The Tender Wild* proposes a magical landscape of yesteryear, conjuring the latchkey generation's rambles to local creeks and the enticing lands of children's fantasy books. By recreating childhood colours, sensations and memories in the gallery, Michelle grants us permission to play and reminds us that play is for everyone.

Soft Touch is a salve, an antidote, a hug, a caress, a song and a playground for our minds and our bodies. The exhibition is also an appeal to live more expansively, joyously and tenderly beyond the gallery's walls, through rest and through play. I'm excited by Michelle's vision of a world that more carefully caters for all of us. And I hope to see you nurtured, and nourished, in the future we make together.

Close your eyes.
Breathe in.
Breath out.

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Image credits:

Front cover: Michelle Vine, *Comfort Object* (prototype), 2020. Image by Seth Ellis
Centre left: Michelle Vine, *Affirmation Tub,* 2018. Image by Michelle Vine.
Centre right: Michelle Vine, *Surrogates For Social Touch (Love Me Tender)*, 2018. Image by Luke Janniste.

Moreton Bay Regional Council