

Obadiah Russon in conversation with Artspace Aotearoa.

The following text is part of *Cruel Optimism's* interview series. Artspace Aotearoa speaks with Obadiah Russon to gain more insight into her artistic practice.

Obadiah Russon is an artist based in Tāmaki Makaurau. Her work centres around the spiritual and existential impact of technology and the internet. Ranging from video, imaging making and sculpture, her work uncovers the emotions and subjectivities of these influences on the body and intentions of performance.

AA: What are some of the themes underpinning your practice?

OR: Life, death, dreams, the underworld, the above world, me... But also you....

AA: How does technology inform your work?

OR: It's hard to know where its influence begins and ends. My work reflects a lived experience with technology, both inside and out, through culture and my body. I'm not interested in making a distinction between what is or isn't technology, and in turn what is or isn't artificial. If anything, I question the idea itself; clarifying the distinction of technology might be missing the point.

AA: How has performance or performativity come into your practice?

OR: There are the traditional forms of performance; an audience, performer(s), a location and a time frame. But similar to my sense and view on technology, performance is hard to distinguish, and I hope it's hard to distinguish in my work. This is why I use ideas of trace and direct performance to a camera, then combine these with P.O.V. shots (iPhone photos). Rather than being critical of performativity in everyday life, I'm interested in indulging the delusion that life is a series of scenes, that sense of living in a movie. Delusion and ignorance about the world around you are typically viewed as negative states. I'm interested in these, in dissociation - as methods for finding the driving forces behind our performative acts.

AA: How do your three artworks connect to each other?

OR Because I made them. It's all from my silly little brain and eyes and hands... and heart!

AA: What were you hoping to communicate in your work that has 'she's a darling, she's a demon she's a lamb' inscribed onto it?

OR: It comes from The Sound of Music's "How do you solve a problem like Maria". The church bell has rung when, the elder sisters notice Maria is not there, breaking into the song "how do you solve a problem like Maria"...They each, in turn, describe Maria (what I have quoted), each description contradicting the other. Maria is all

these things at once; she has joie de vivre, a virtue, yet rebellious and frowned upon. She has a devotion for life and love through faith, yet at the same time disregards the expected behaviours and practices of following a faith. It's subjective even in the house of god!

In placing these song lines on top of images of a clinician's office; an environment specific to the technology of medicine, I'm questioning the Christian values that operate coercively in contemporary life. Instead of a bible passage, I choose this film as an example of someone grappling with these ideas. Even though a modern fiction, "the problem of Maria" is, well, a narrative as old as Christianity.

AA: Why do you use silicone sealant in your work?

OR: Silicone is a material I use to alter my images, giving them body, quite literally, and figuratively. I like that it's a nod to bodily fluid, whether that be the water in our blood, the filler in lips and cheeks, or fluid from an IV drip. It's my attempt to give a flat image life and substance. In an abstract way, I've distorted the image by giving it a body, as if to say it has a memory or a view of its own.

AA: Why do you gravitate towards the frosted glass motif?

OR: I'm interested in frosted glass for what it is. It's solid, sharp and fragile, transparent yet opaque. It turns an image or view into a flat blur of colour. In my work, a motif of sorts is the clear nail polish additive I use to create the effect of condensation. Condensation alludes to private, contained, and reflective moments, like being in the shower, or washing your face and brushing your teeth. In these moments we communicate so honestly with ourselves, yet they are still somewhat performative moments. Like writing a message to yourself in the mirror, these are the moments in which life feels like a movie... I could give so many examples of scenes in films where someone wipes the condensation off a mirror to reveal the main character staring at themselves.