

Praxis

This eclectic and disquisitive group exhibition, conceived by Arusha Gallery's Creative Director Agnieszka Prendota, explores two ideas related to the exhibition's title *Praxis*. Firstly, notions of heritage and background as they might be discerned in the six participating artists' works – social and cultural traditions from locations as disparate as New Mexico, Iran and Yorkshire. In a globalised, digital world, what customs and characteristics associated with the place an artist is from, or where they live, might permeate their life and work? Secondly, the exhibition invites consideration of the idea of 'praxis' in terms of an artist's physical practice – the processes, methods and techniques involved in making their work, aside from their critical concerns.

London-based Carl Anderson (b. 1990, Brighton) works primarily with ceramics to make sculptures that reference medieval European heritage in ways that are bold, brutal and often decidedly droll. Viewers might encounter, for example, what appears to be a copper glove from a suit of armour, seemingly aged with verdigris, posed amusingly with index and little fingers outstretched in the 'horns of rock' salute. Remarkably, it's made in glazed stoneware and resembles a prop from a film. Knights' helmets, simulated in ceramics, make an occasional appearance in his oeuvre, customised with monstrous sea creature heads or as curious cockerel hybrids. For *Praxis*, Anderson has made a new work inspired by a gruesome hunting trap, any unwitting prey suffering the indignity of death by grimacing gargoyle head. Anderson's take on pre-Modern, feudal Britain is skilful and sardonic in equal measure.

Sculpture is also represented in the exhibition through the striking work of British-Lebanese artist Alia Hamaoui (b. 1996, Albi, France). Hamaoui's practice spans painting, sculpture, installation and digital technology to create mixed-media objects with architectural ambitions. Viewers might encounter what appears to be the blue, beaded, zigzag frame of a mirror, only there is no glass; distressed ceramic tiles with a sickly green glow offer no reflection. Towards the top, a light-blue, three-dimensional stylised head, as if it is a cartoon depiction of a bearded man from an unspecified ancient civilisation, stares out with large, wide-open eyes. There is a lot to unpack across Hamaoui's practice, the artist extricating imagery and motifs from one cultural context and inserting them into entirely new, hybrid forms and spaces. One work resembles something between the flight deck of a spaceship and an extrovert's dressing table, saturated by a gloriously egregious, rainbow-hued, low-fi 1980s theatre-set aesthetic. A mysterious organic, three-dimensional ornament hangs within it as if suspended in a portal from a different point in spacetime. There are so many questions to ask the artist.

Leeds-based Mohammad Barrangi (b. 1988, Rasht, Iran) is known as a printmaker and for his drawings and illustrations referencing the rich visual and literary history of Persia. Barrangi claimed asylum in Britain in 2017, exiled from a homeland that was, in the not-so-distant past, described as part of the 'axis of evil' but which, until the fall of the Shah during the Iranian Revolution of 1978–9, had, for millennia, been an international centre of culture and thought. Indeed, Barrangi's works (both small and large-scale) often resemble ancient manuscripts, their gentle brown grounds stages for

lyrical imagery of women in beautiful clothes welcoming owls onto their open palms, or minotaur-headed princes dancing with ballerinas as if in a bullfight. With figures riding on horseback through orange groves and wolves howling to the night from the forest floor, these enchanting scenes are like illustrations of age-old myths and legends overlaid like palimpsests onto the present.

Mythology and modernity are also themes of significance in the practice of London-based James Owens (b. 1995, Middlesbrough). Having grown up between Yorkshire and the Cotswolds, Owens partly attributes his fascination with folklore to the time he spent in the Yorkshire fishing village where he visited his grandmother and where his grandfather had been a fisherman. Among the works Owens is presenting in *Praxis* is the painting *Wrap your wings around me, glide me across the water* (2022), which depicts a young man holding a sword being taken under the wing of a large swan. The star-filled blue night sky shimmers above a serene lake. While this Wagnerian – perhaps Beowulfian – work could be set almost anytime, *A Walk in Peckham Rye* (2022) feels distinctly contemporary, two hipsters passing each other as they walk around a pond in a South London park. Colourful, patterned, and with an informal, relaxed painterly language, Owens' intoxicating works are beguiling reveries, wistful tales from the neo-folk imaginary.

Things take a darker, more profound turn in the paintings by New Mexico-based Joshua Hagler (b. 1979, Mountain Home, Idaho). In the mixed-media work *Book of Hours (Yeso, New Mexico, 1957)* (2021), pages have been ripped and collaged from a 1957 catalogue of wind-powered water pumps that the artist found at an abandoned post office in the ghost town of Yeso, New Mexico. In a text about the work, which borrows its title from Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Book of Hours*, Hagler explains how in New Mexico, one of the poorest states in the USA, 'small isolated communities, often in final stages of neglect and ruin, contrast against the immense geological displays of the natural landscape'. The bible-black abstract painting, resembling an aged and worn leather book cover, speaks of religious devotion, of reflection and prayer for allocated hours in the day. That existential, philosophical questions of faith and mortality are important to Hagler's work is further demonstrated in *Out of Existence XIV* (2021), a mixed-media work on unstretched canvas that looks like a section of blackened rock from a cave wall, while in *The Double* (2022) a seated figure appears, among the abstract marks, shapes and forms, to morph into their spirit double.

The late Rosa Lee (b. 1957, Hong Kong; d. 2009, London), is represented in *Praxis* by a number of works that demonstrate her formalist approach to painting – making striking yet delicate and complicated patterns and shapes by building up intricate, light impasto textures of paint and wax. This she often achieved by using highly patterned stencils. In the painting *Ariadne* (2002), with its orange-red ground like an arid, treacherous, sun-beaten Mediterranean landscape, aquamarine swirls like ribbons evoke the thread that Ariadne gave to Theseus to help him escape the labyrinth. Even in seemingly pure pattern, Rosa Lee's work can suggest a narrative, create an atmosphere, intimate an idea. Sometimes it feels as if we are viewing the subjects up close, other times from a great distance – scale, materiality, shape, colour and light conspiring in myriad ways across her oeuvre.

This exhibition is a proposition – an open-ended conversation between disparate practices across cultures, spanning diverse critical interests and traversing mediums and materials. Each artist’s work tells us something about the person who made it, and something of the context in which it was made. Each invites questions about the world in which we live. On a fundamental level, that’s perhaps what art is – a personal exploration by artists into what images and objects can tell us about our lives and our civilisation, their ideas turned into forms that can turn into new ideas in the viewer’s mind.

- Matt Price