

POST POP

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CULTURE



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On my way to meet Kathryn Andrews inside Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong, pre-vernissage, for her inaugural Asian solo exhibition, I all but stumble over a steel pipe or telescopic tube on the floor, which I hadn't seen, so distracted was I by the highly technical, ultra-glossy confections attached to the walls. It's an odd but seemingly Andrewsian quirk: expect the unexpected. Andrews conjures art that re-arts the iconicity of Americana, repurposing it as glossy Koonsian and Kapoorian seductisements that simultaneously promote, question and undermine notions of semantics, celebrity, sex, politics, gender, nostalgia et al; a series of seemings that bespeak instant likeability but resist easy categorisation. The Alabama-born, Los Angeles-based artist's mainstream and oftentimes menacing mindset is most often pigeonholed as pop meets minimalism, but on the evidence of this show, quirkily titled *Candy Butchers*, she's on the tipping point of post-pop. And proud of it. Post-stumble, and pre-introduction, a work on the back wall demands attention. It proffers a red single baseball cap with its brim pointed left, atop a group of different-coloured caps with rims headed right, sitting atop an American football. The ball is unmarked, and so are the hats. It's the most branded non-branded piece of work you could find – an art-vertisement – whose letters or tagline don't exist. It's also a wave-array of visual culture sent out as decorative, message-laden statement. And concerns The Donald's carousel of onion-loaf-coloured Trumpian leadership and the LGBT movement, in the world's greatest pop-democracy. It's about tolerance, or its lack, on the part of not just President Trump but the United States of America. And not just in the context of today's latest tweet, but once upon a time and 4ever.

Decorative. Does Andrews find the term pejorative in relation to her work? "I've been thinking a lot recently about whether the decorative can be political. And I would say 99.9 percent of decorative art isn't, but it's possible. Maybe." She's distracted by what looks like a smudge or handprint on the steel pipe. "I think it depends. An artist once said to me, 'It's not important how my work looks, it's more important what it does.' And I think my body of work is purposely tricky or deceiving, and it certainly is decorative or at least it's adopting the tropes of decorative. That was something I was sort of playing with – different aesthetics from different cultural social histories. These works are looking at certain ways of making images and histories of making images, but aren't decorative. But I'm not running away from that, or apologising. It's just another gesture within – hopefully over time – the many gestures I'll make." And how pejorative or stimulating has been Trump's effect on American artists and their creative process during the one year, 231 days, 7 hours, 13 minutes and 28 seconds since he's been in power? "I think a lot of artists are in denial, sort of hoping it will go away soon, and that it won't have the effects that it likely will, so I think some artists are on autopilot," she observes. "I think others are attempting to

“SILK SCREEN IS A SORT OF OUT-OFDATE TECHNOLOGY NOW AND IT'S GONE TO THE WAYSIDE IN THIS DIGITAL ERA”

directly address it, and see the situation entire. And then, perhaps there are others who are turning more towards beauty because the situation is perhaps so depressing that one feels hopeless." No sooner has she inventoried art's presidential sentiment in the US than she lasers in on an offending mark smudging the steel pipe I'd almost tripped over. "Sorry. Let me get a cloth. I'll be right back." And she is. And she wipes it pristine clean in a flash. Andrews can be very hands-on for one whose work can feel so handsoff and she disports a calculating, almost forensic obsession with the process of art and its making. *Candy Butchers* is a term Andrews has appropriated from the confectionary world of 1920s America without entirely understanding its genesis. "Were they slicing candy in sheets?" she asks rhetorically. Certainly she's butchered her works – images silk-screenprinted on shaped aluminium sheets – by welding a stainless-steel mirror down the middle of each, in a seamless sheeny symmetrical slaughter that adds surprising dimension to each work. Again though, there's Andrewsian conflict; she explains that aluminium and heavy custom-polished steel make terrible bedfellows in matters of art technique and that the two materials "don't agree" when

combined. Having started the first work with two mirrors, she found the disagreement so pronounced she ditched the idea. “I also thought simplicity works better. It shows the human intervention,” she says. Andrews still uses silk-screening – Andy Warhol’s favourite method – as a technique. “Silk screen is a sort of out-of-date technology now and it’s gone to the wayside in the digital era. As a result, people don’t use silkscreening to make large works, so a lot of people don’t have skills for such large image-making any more.” Cue Andrews’ favourite territory. “I enjoy that as a problem. Making the last series we were able to develop quite a lot and use skills people don’t use. I was referencing works from the ’50s.” The works at Simon Lee are surprisingly point-and-shoot given her previous – and much lauded – Black Bars series, in which visual motifs from the ’50s were largely “obfuscated” behind bars. Once again, Andrews’ trickery and conundrum were manifested in overly detailed titles which denied almost all they purported to show: Black Bars: Dejeuner No. 16 (Girl With Chinese Take-Out, Gummy Worm, Towel, Lotion and Macaroons) being the triumphant moment. “I had more fun with this series,” says Andrews. “This work is more visible ... but then it’s not. These works are looking to languages that have been developed prior to me being an artist. It’s taking the guise of pop art, strongly referencing tradition and colliding that with the mirrors, which have to do with minimalism like Donald Judd’s boxes coming off the walls, and what happens when you mix these things together. It creates a very beautiful phenomenological effect, but I’m more interested in how this image and this symbol combine, and what happens when they do – and also, just the making of them. They’re very engineered; the production value has more value because it’s made by an artist using techniques which are not easy to access now. The mirrors we polished in collaboration with an aerospace factory that does airplane parts. So there’s a lot going on.” Andrews’ favourite piece of writing about her work was by art historian Christine Styles. “She was talking about my approaches and interests being too diverse to be easily languaged. I really appreciated what she wrote.” But Andrews disagreed. “I think it can be languaged. And I’m waiting for the writer to come in who would actually talk about how maybe this body of work was looking at a specific history and this body of work was looking at another history, and that my interest in fact is being an author who shifts the gaze across histories, and advocating for a position about what does it mean to make something when you don’t have attachment to a position.” That’s not a new approach. “Remake, reuse, reassemble, recombine – that’s the way to go.” So said Lutz Bacher, an artist who explored ideas of authenticity, iconicity, the making of artistic celebrity and the nature of the creative process itself. Andrews tips her hat to both Bacher and Elaine Sturtevant as American artists who’ve embraced similar positions but hopes she “tries to do it in more subtle ways”. So while she’s pop-y and minimal-y, she’s also beyond that. “Pop has so much to do with image and I’m interested in how the opportunity to experience image dominates contemporary experience in a way that’s very different from what it’s like to experience objects in their material state. And one aspect of our time is the presence of images everywhere – our consumption of them has become so normalised. So I’m offering a more complex experience where there’s the possibility to see the image and the possibility to see material itself.” Right on cue, she offers a glass of champagne. “It’s post-pop,” we tell her. She runs with the pun. “Yes. It’s a post-pop position. I’m post-pop.” Andrews goes on to explain that she’s not sure if pop exists as a separate category any more because it’s so ubiquitous. “But I do often use it, in quotes, or as something that’s almost nostalgic. But I don’t want to stay in a nostalgic place about pop, but to overturn it and offer another way of experiencing how we exist in the present.” And that telescopic tube on the floor? That’s a trip you must take to Simon Lee.

Candy Butchers by Kathryn Andrews runs at Simon Lee Gallery until October 26