

*Baby,
you light up my world like
nobody else.*

Lily McElhone

The experience of the superfan is not unlike that of a religious fanatic. We congregate, make pilgrimages, worship idols, and live our lives in devotion to the figures we adore. It is obsessive and intoxicating. We lose ourselves in this dizzying, almost bacchanalian reverence. I remember vividly the ecstatic gibberish which escaped my mouth when watching new One Direction music videos as a fourteen-year-old, which wasn't all that dissimilar to tongues or a frenzied Pythian prophecy. In *Slow Cover*, an exhibition by Wellington-based artists Max Fleury and Sabina Rizos-Shaw, the experience of fan worship is explored through sculpture, video, and found-object artworks, drawing on the aesthetics of fan art, home craft, and amateur video tributes found on YouTube. I'm a fangirl for their vision.

The space is silent and darkened, the only light emanates from the works themselves. Sabina Rizos-Shaw's life-size stand-in paintings of red-carpet moments stand poised, ready to be animated by the viewer.

A video work, Max Fleury's acoustic cover of Robyn's *Honey*, plays at the far end of the gallery, soundless until the accompanying headphones are donned. It's an anticipatory affair, a nod to the hours spent queueing for concerts or the months waited for album releases: hallmarks of the fangirl experience. And experience is central to the exhibition's ethos, with the smell of Britney Spears emanating from a glowing coffee cup, the fairy lights, the sponsored RTDs on opening night, and the faux fur on the stand-in painting of Rihanna. Every sense is drawn upon, sweeping us into the glittery, sticky-sweet psyche of the superfan. As such fans, we are consumed by our fanaticism. Our idols permeate every facet of our lives, soak into the core of our being. And in turn, we become consumers, because buying the albums, t-shirts, stationery sets, perfumes, and figurines allows us to participate in their universe. We want to smell like Britney Spears, wear the same lipstick as Rihanna, or order the same coffee as Ariana Grande. Placing our face in a Lorde stand-in and singing covers of Robyn songs allows us, just for a moment, to feel bigger than ourselves. There's a reason we call these people stars.

While working in the former-music-store-turned-music-themed-café Verve, Fleury covered pop singer Robyn's song "Honey", and turned the performance into a video work. Scenes of the artist and a colleague making artworks from miscellaneous objects found around the café are woven into the video, creating both a tribute to Robyn, and a tribute to fanhood itself. The internet teems with similar fan covers of pop songs, pared down and accompanied usually by a sole guitar or piano. The artists borrow the exhibition's title from the phenomenon. Making such videos allows fans to produce public tributes to their idols, to participate publicly in a fanbase, and place themselves (in spirit) in the same sphere as the celebrities they worship. There are a handful of

celebrities who have become famous through their cover videos, Justin Bieber being perhaps the most salient example, after his cover of “With You” by Chris Brown had him picked up and turned into one of the biggest pop stars the world has known. In creating this cover-cum-video-artwork in his workplace, Fleury toys with the mythos of star-discovery, of the rags-to-riches storyline we have seen countless times.

There is something incredibly intimate about the collective experience of obsession. To share the vulnerability of being beside yourself in the presence of an idol, to cry and squeal and sing every word together, is to press together the rawest parts of yourselves, like a blood pact. This vulnerability is even more significant when we take into account which demographics are most associated with this kind of worship: young women and queer communities. When a group (and their tastes) are already subject to such scrutiny, dismissal, and belittlement, public fanaticism becomes a form of protest. When a heteropatriarchal society shuns the interests (and existence) of teenage girls and queer people, gathering in the thousands outside a music venue is radically assertive. They make noise and take up physical, public space. Collective fan worship is a means of saying “we exist.”

Fleury and Rizos-Shaw draw on the significance of the collective throughout the exhibition. In the lead-up to the project, the pair held “Fan Club”, a fanart workshop at Meanwhile Gallery in Wellington. While fan clubs, or on a larger scale, fan bases, are united by a shared fanhood, participants of the Fan Club workshop were united by the shared experience of fan-love in general. The doodles produced during the workshop were later scanned and edited into a montage video artwork, displayed in *Slow Cover*. While each work is an individual ode, the compilation of them becomes an ode to the very nature of being a

fan, to popular culture, and to the (often marginalised) groups that make up so much of fan culture. The images make their way over the screen, each fading into the next in a style reminiscent of 2000s lyric videos made on Windows Movie Maker and uploaded to YouTube by dotting fans. These transition effects evoke something deeply sentimental, each passing by as ethereally as a memory or daydream.

In a video conference with the artists in the leadup to the exhibition, it was noted that while involving other fans in the participation of the artworks is thematically aligned with the project, it is also simply an enjoyable thing to do. There are so many lenses through which we can analyse and elevate popular culture and its adjacent fandoms, but sometimes these things don't need to be justified academically. Silver glitter-coated toilet paper rolls suspend Rizos-Shaw's New Zealand Music Award off the ground because she wanted it that way, Fleury sings one of his favourite songs at work because it was fun. *Slow Cover* exalts the experience of liking something simply because you do. At its core, the project is an ecstatic celebration of pure, unadulterated joy. There is much we could say about the radical act of placing pop culture into a white-walled gallery space, but that's not what this is about. *Slow Cover* doesn't necessarily comment on or challenge the boundaries between high and low art, it disregards them entirely. The project is utterly disinterested in the definitions of such labels, and in resisting feeding energy into them, Fleury and Rizos-Shaw drain them of their power.

As art viewers, we often preoccupy ourselves with a search for meaning. At exhibition openings we stand in front of artworks with wine in hand and look for the insightful social commentary or radical statement. *Slow Cover* is radical because it's not. The artists are two friends who love

pop music and decided to make art about it. They involve others in the making of the works because it's fun. We experience the exhibition by taking photos with our friends in the stand-in paintings, by smelling the Britney Spears fragrance diffuser, by doing karaoke with the artists. It doesn't need to be intellectually rigorous to be worthy of occupying a gallery space. Fleury and Rizos-Shaw find fun in their art practice, and in turn, viewers find fun in experiencing the project.