

Make a wish

Sebastian Henry-Jones

Welcome to the first exhibition in LAILA's new Marrickville space. 2024 is the gallery's third year of operation in Sydney, where the extraordinary cost of rent has virtually snuffed out the very possibility of less commercially-inclined and funding-independent galleries existing. In its commitment to showing art that is experimental and complex under these economic conditions, LAILA's subsistence is something to be admired and supported. Wishing you every success.

Harrison has made light boxes using the transparent, plastic panels from the front sections of poker machines. Turned on, the light shines through the cheap plastic of these as if they were stained glass, the minimal uniformity of each box bearing similarity to the work of canonical post-war artist Donald Judd. Each panel gives aesthetic form to the activity of gambling and the notion of chance, popular tropes anthropomorphised into the figures of different animals: the suave Cash Chameleon, superhero Money Mouse, bandito figure of Loco Loot, the purity of Unicorn Dreaming and greedy – hence sufficiently moneyed – Cash Cat. The panels date to the late 90s, salvaged from de-commissioned poker machines produced by Australian Len Ainsworth through two poker manufacturing businesses, *Aristocrat* and *Ainsworth Gaming Technologies*. These businesses have made Len the second-largest manufacturer of poker machines in the world, with an estimated monetary worth of \$5.7 billion dollars. He has also donated generously to different institutions all over Sydney, including – amongst others, and specific to art people visiting LAILA – the University of New South Wales, University of Wollongong, University of Sydney and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. To the AGNSW's Sydney Modern Project, the Ainsworths have helped fund, part-funded or given almost 100 works, to the extent that there's a gallery named after the family in the new building.

Given there's a poker machine for every 113 people in Sydney,¹ it's upsetting to consider that some of the money used in the AGNSW's upgrade came from the gambling habits of those who are statistically the most vulnerable in our society. Money has been harvested from these individuals through poker machines, a portion of the proceeds donated to, or used to buy works to furnish a place for the most privileged in Sydney to spend their spare time. There's a contradiction at play here whereby in order for the gallery to do good on its mission of working towards a better society, it's forced to rely on those who have collectively created the circumstances which need repairing in the first place. If these circumstances were to be repaired completely, those who donate large amounts of money wouldn't be making any, and so, to fix things completely isn't in their interest at all². Under capitalism things are kept alive just enough to be useful to the ruling class but never nourished in a way that would make them autonomous. The cultural sector's dependency on such a small, ultra-wealthy philanthropic class (as magnanimous as they might be) is structurally flawed, or perfectly logical depending how you look at it. In a cyclical manner, it ensures a structural dependency on wealthy people, their money and the harmful activity that makes it. People like Len Ainsworth make an economic profit in the form of a tax break by donating money and art to museums, but the social profit – the naming of a gallery after you for example – is just as important in distracting from or even legitimising harmful, mass money-making activity.

As individuals living under economic precarity, artists in the West have always had to balance mirroring the values of those who hold power (historically The Church and State) with the creative freedom of making more socially divergent (and potentially transformative) art. Some time around the Renaissance, what might be called private art – distinguished from religious or official art – came into being with the establishment of an entrenched aristocracy, and over the course of time, a wealthy merchant class. These affluent individuals commissioned art to decorate their houses with, that embodied their more-often-than-not conservative values as beneficiaries of an extractive, post-feudal economic system. As long as an artist produced works that reflected their values he could expect steady employment and a receptive market for his output. From the end of the 18th Century these objects slowly made their way into public cultural institutions, shaping our Eurocentric (read narrow) understanding of what art is now. While patron classes of previous centuries had a deep appreciation for the idea of art as a driving force of culture, the narratives that artworks told and an intellectual investment in the kinds of art they commissioned, today's patron class is generally more interested in art as a means of wealth security and accumulation. Hence the art entering institutions today looks increasingly like the art found in commercial galleries. Finding its influence on cultural institutions growing at the same time that its literacy around art wanes, today's institutionally-embedded patron class and the artists they champion have produced a cultural standard that

¹ This statistic comes from a research paper developed at the University of Western Sydney, which received \$10 million dollars for building works from the Ainsworth family in 2018.

² For example, The University of New South Wales offers a gambling and recovery support course yet received \$10 million dollars from Len Ainsworth in 2014.

doesn't require much thinking on behalf of audiences at all, just go to the NGV Triennial if you don't believe me. Many point to the 'accessibility' of these kinds of displays as anti-elitist, but to my mind they are disrespectful of diverse audiences by treating their intellect as a child's might be. In terms of its aesthetic properties, the art that largely succeeds in institutions today engages audiences with the same visual language that pokies and casinos do, which is to say an array of simplistic forms and associations designed to please children.³ These works provide familiar, one-dimensional narratives while also being incredibly mediagenic: bright colors, reflective surfaces and flashing lights, really big things, really small things, novelty and seriality. A casino that looks like the pyramids of ancient Egypt! A casino that looks like a medieval castle! A casino that's a pirate ship! A Cash Chameleon! A Cash Cat! Money Mouse!

At its worst, today's more commercial, mainstream art and culture are instrumentalised to distract from the growing inequality that people like Len Ainsworth produce and the structures that make things like today's mainstream art possible. The often naive aesthetic of works made in this context aid in concealing the reality that some kind of scam is happening; be it extraction through gambling on a mass scale, philanthropic artwashing or otherwise. But there's something sadder here in the way these kinds of aesthetics distract through a paralysis of the mind – that is, something about them and their mobilisation at scale slowly deadens our capacity for critical inquiry. Walking through the NGV Triennial gave me the same hollow feeling I get when doomscrolling on Instagram. Something about the easy repetition of spectacle in each room, something about the cartoonish simplicity of the Elmar & Dragset display, the rudimentary and reactionary engagement demanded of audiences at every turn. The exhibition itself became a sequence of cheap thrills, triggering dopamine hits in my brain that became smaller and smaller over the duration of the experience. The Triennial amounted to a group of works intended for capture on social media, structured along a curatorial methodology modeled on the physics of social media. The mechanics of poker machines and their enhancement through a childlike aesthetic draws forth the same bursts of dopamine so as to be addictive, the serious risks of gambling obfuscated as harmless fun for pokie players, chemically manipulated into dissociating from the responsibilities of real life through a rainbow of tokens and blinking lights. There's a synchronicity between the repetition involved in playing slot machines, of scrolling Instagram and how the art market has always rewarded artists for making work that amounts to varieties of a single aesthetic idea, the abstract expressionists and proponents of Minimalism being perfect examples of this. What is it about repetition that appeals so strongly to our lizard brain, to thousands of years of inherited compulsion? Lit up at LAILA, in their seriality these light boxes embody our biochemical and cultural moment.

The patron class and their for-profit world have well and truly infiltrated the structures of our largest not-for-profit institutions, influencing the art they collect, and from which unimaginative cultural standards are set. Like the rest of the world, the arts is not the meritocracy that it seems from a distance but rather a plutocracy when viewed up close. Both the ruling class and the disadvantaged employ very imaginative strategies to maintain the reality that we live in the former: The ruling class weaves heroic narratives to legitimise their success and the disadvantaged revere them, because deep down they hope that one day they'll be millionaires too. Underpinning these narratives are usually the virtues of talent, hard work and luck. For the vast majority of artists, the luck of it all is being born into economic advantage, of having the luxury of embarking on an arts career and it not being a gamble. As the wishing well in the middle of the room suggests, luck and chance are predicated on access to money.

So make a wish! You might wish for a sustainable career in the arts. Or you might wish for more institutional funding from our government, for without its support there is no counterweight to the interests of wealthy individuals structurally implanted into our public institutions. After all, I'd much prefer the culture that our public institutions are capable of giving us than what our algorithms do. Though to couch your action towards a healthier arts ecosystem in a wish feels so passive and symbolic, so abstracted from the harsh reality of it all that you may as well be voting for a political leader (the democratic process perhaps upholding more than any other the illusion that we're living in a meritocracy). There is something inherently flawed about both the vote and the wish as agents of change. At wishing wells where wishes are made in exchange for coins, eventually the money is collected by the individual who owns the well. The same can be said of gambling, where to play the game is (statistically) to give away your power. Indeed wishing, gambling, or even voting within a-symmetrical structures of power constitute a further investment in the very thing that's hurting you, contributing to the status quo conditions that you're trying to transcend in the first place. For an arts industry rhetorically committed to notions of social justice, is the creation of art to serve the interests of the ultra-wealthy – to be bought, sold and donated by the likes of Len Ainsworth – any different?

³ It's not that children inherently prefer these aesthetics over something more complex, rather that they are conditioned to like them very early on in their young lives.