



Anran Guo at YYZ

By Philip Leonard Ocampo

YYZ Artists' Outlet



The year is sometime during the First Century BC. Imagine being a slab of marble, to which a hammer and chisel rendered your form into that of a pseudo-unidentifiable bust of a man. In the year 2023, a postdoctoral Roman art specialist at the *San Antonio Museum of Art* hypothesized that your resemblance to Sextus Pompey, (the son of Roman general Pompey the Great) is likely.¹ The *New York Times* disagreed, stating that you could be a different Roman commander.² In 1848, you were somehow stationed at the *Pompejanum* in Aschaffenburg, Germany, reminding the viewing public of a bygone city covered in volcanic ash.³ After World War II, a US soldier placed you in his return baggage, after his comrades bombed and destroyed the *Pompejanum*. In 2018, Texas antique dealer Laura Young buckled you into the back seat of her Honda Civic after purchasing you from an Austin Goodwill for \$34.99. Quite the deal, honestly. After consulting Sotheby’s, your ancient status was verified, and you were exhibited publicly as *Portrait of A Man* before being repatriated to Germany. Apparently, this is where you are now⁴

The term ‘sonder’ encapsulates the existential realization that every single person you pass by has lived a life as vivid and complex as your own: Carrying their own embodied histories of pain, joy, and heartbreak as their presences so briefly flicker in and out of proximity to you. If the above exercise in empathy is any indication, if you approach the inanimate objects around you with this same sense of sonder, you may open yourselves up to the many lifetimes that can be experienced by even lifeless things; and thus the altered and documented assortment of objects that constitute Anran Guo’s *At Your Convenience*.

Presenting a liminal take on a kitchen set in the Window Gallery of YYZ Artists’ Outlet, Guo seeks to turn an intimate, domestic space outward into public view. Here, the cutlery and baking pans usually hidden away in stove drawers or overhead cupboards emerge from storage and perform anthropomorphically. These cake pans, formally intricate molds for shaping batter and gelatin, forgo their original function in their caricaturization. Guo’s hand punctures each pan, rendering them useless as a baking tool, yet imparts each with expressive sorrow in their alterations. A big bird cake pan sobs inconsolably, with the weight of its many dangling spoons emphasizing its lamentation. A teddy bear cake pan sheds two spoon-tears, but gestures towards agitation in the way that two metal rods jut out from its punctured eyes. Sourced second hand, their heartbreak nods to their own abandonment, in both practical function and prior ownership.

Guo’s intentional selection of objects begets an intuitive understanding of the life force and potentiality of previously owned things, all sourced from local thrift stores. These objects are so specific in the way they point to their own rejection. Transcending a base human function of simply needing to eat, these personalized cake pans demonstrate extra care and love in their symbolic presence. Deserts themselves are sweet treats served after the primary meal is finished! Pointing to the polarization of an object’s worth: If these objects were so charged with affection in their good service, so tragic are they thrown away with complete indifference when deemed no longer useful.

Anran and I both agree that only people who take keen interest in baking would buy something like a big bird cake pan. Was the previous owner an avid fan? Or was a single use for a child’s birthday party enough? While the journeys of these various objects leave much to the imagination, the common act of abandonment permeates through the set. Thrift stores, as a dumpsite only slightly short of an actual landfill, house items completely relinquished by their previous owners. And so, the

readymade objects included in *At Your Convenience* present a precarious assemblage of care as determined by human need and want. Guo points to an object’s use-value through the lens of convenience in fickle hands. Worry not, however, as this installation isn’t just a cutting critique of material consumption. With humor and curiosity, Guo seeks to reattribute some agency to this assortment of misfit objects, distorting their material shape into apparitions of their former selves. With reciprocity, Guo nods to their existence as vividness of their own existence, as they in turn mirror the artist’s own existential musings on destiny, abandonment and use value.

Throughout the installation, Guo makes considerable effort to archive, document, and preserve the intricacies of these readymade objects. Objects such as a children’s dollhouse and plaster casts using cake pan in the shape of a girl are covered in tin foil: as a casserole would require covering before storing in the fridge, or foil would individually wrap a sweet treat. A gesture of wrapping attempts to secure their detailed forms with a newfound sense of discovery, and thereby, value. With the assistance of print technician Wang Zi, Guo archives the traces of these cake pans in a series of prints that look like tasty-sweet drawings. The five on the right feature cake pans molded after faces, while the two on the left use more common, utilitarian cake pans. As a process combining a traditional Chinese rubbing technique with standard intaglio printing, wet Kozo paper wraps around the object the rubbed with blue soft pastel, recording the grooves and other details of its form once separated. With no space between each wooden frame⁵, the prints allude to home decor in the YYZ vitrine, while centering these discarded objects as complex characters at the centre of their frames.

To my pleasant surprise, Anran informs me that she has dabbled in some antique reselling due to the accumulation of objects she employs in her various installations. I in turn tell her that I visit regional flea markets frequently out of my own interest in discovering whatever wondrous trash I might deem to be treasured. We agree that spaces like thrift stores and flea markets are so interesting because of the infinite backstories that can be projected onto any single object in any single booth: If an unsuspecting bust can hold the legacy of an ancient Roman artifact, who knows what other lives objects as simple as spoons or cake pans have lived in their golden days. As a meeting point for abundant objects sourced from different places and times, they were deemed disposable and useless at some point in their journey but still remain alive as something else entirely.

NOTES

1 Da Silva, Chantal. “A Woman Bought a Sculpture at Goodwill for \$34.99. It Was Actually a Missing Ancient Roman Bust.” NBCNews.com, May 6, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/woman-bought-sculpture-goodwill-3499-was-actually-missing-ancient-roma-rcna27617>.

2 Ibid.

3 Da Silva, Chantal. “A Woman Bought a Sculpture at Goodwill for \$34.99. It Was Actually a Missing Ancient Roman Bust.” NBCNews.com, May 6, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/woman-bought-sculpture-goodwill-3499-was-actually-missing-ancient-roma-rcna27617>.

4 Ibid.

5 The spacing of Guo’s wooden frames references Mike Kelley’s 1991 series *Ahh... Youth*, in which the artist similarly lines up portraits of inanimate-yet-expressive objects next to his own, all for uncanny effect.

PHILIP LEONARD OCAMPO is an artist and arts facilitator based in Tkaronto, Canada. Ocampo's multidisciplinary practice involves painting, sculpture, writing and curatorial projects. Exploring worldbuilding, radical hope and speculative futures, Ocampo’s work embodies a curious cross between magic wonder and the nostalgic imaginary. Following the tangents, histories and canons of popular culture, Ocampo is interested in how unearthing cultural touchstones of past/ current times may therefore serve as catalysts for broader conversations about lived experiences; personal, collective, diasporic, etc. He holds a BFA in Integrated Media (DPXA) from OCAD University (2018) and is currently a Programming Coordinator at Xpace Cultural Centre and one of the four founding co-directors of Hearth, an artist-run collective based in the city.

ANRAN GUO is a queer female artist and art educator currently based in Hamilton and Toronto. She grew up in China and came to Canada in 2014. Guo holds a Master of Visual Studies in Studio Art and an HBA in Art and Art History (a joint program with Sheridan College) from the University of Toronto.

Guo is primarily focused on sculptures and installations. Her works are metaphorical and playful, offer layered readings in critiques of social and political systems. By utilizing everyday objects, Guo creates low-barrier conversations and calls upon the viewers to question invisible power dynamics at play in society.

Guo’s work has been exhibited at the Art Gallery of Mississauga, Hamilton Artist Inc., Centre[3], and the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, among others. Her practice is generously supported by the Ontario Arts Council.