

Steamed Hams

Cecelia Condit, Beth Frey, Claire Harris, Tiyan Baker, Matthew Griffin, Xanthe Dobbie, Rohan Weallans and Wuulhu

The Dowse Art Museum
Te Awakairangi Lower Hutt
12.08.2023—19.11.2023

by Eliana Gray

Steamed Hams, Installation view, Dowse Art Museum, Te Awakairangi ki Tai Lower Hutt, August 2023. Photo: Mark Tantrum

OPPOSITE
Beth Frey, 'Sentient Muppet Factory', 2022, AI-generated images and gifs produced with Dall-E prompts on printed wallpaper, looped gif files. Installation view, *Steamed Hams*, Dowse Art Museum, Te Awakairangi ki Tai Lower Hutt, August 2023. Photo: Mark Tantrum



Steamed Hams takes its name from one of the memedom classics, a clip from *The Simpsons* that has taken on a life of its own through retelling after retelling; made into short films, video game levels and endless internet fodder. The original *Simpsons* sketch ends with Principal Skinner setting his kitchen on fire, all the while claiming to Superintendent Chalmers that the chaos he can clearly see before him is just the northern lights. This farcical interaction is a metaphor at the centre of *Steamed Hams*. We all know what it feels like to be lied to in the face of mass destruction. We are the superintendent, the fire is capitalism and Skinner is a fucking idiot.

Memes are queer canon and anti-capitalist praxis (I'm only lightly joking), taking societally agreed-upon concepts and morphing them; adding meaning, destroying their intended message. The exhibited works in *Steamed Hams* employ a bevy of pop culture references, collaged images, meme-adjacent pieces and mythical retellings to illuminate the queerness underpinning our collective experience and the horrors of capitalism. This group show includes local and international artists—Cecelia Condit, Beth Frey, Claire Harris, Tiyan Bak-

er, Matthew Griffin, Xanthe Dobbie, Rohan Weallans and Wuulhu—who traverse the confluence of modern art and internet culture.

Still images that suggest everything from an outtake of a dystopian news programme to family portraits from the uncanny valley, the collection of pictures from Montreal artist Beth Frey's series 'Sentient Muppet Factory', utilising the DALL-E OpenAI digital image generator, is imbued with tragedy and heterosexual malaise. I am personally devastated by the use of AI in creative spaces, but simultaneously obsessed with Frey's creations. A mannequinesque reporter is frozen holding a microphone into the faces of women evoking sad Tweety Bird clowns. A child, also repping for the tragicomic, side-eyes the viewer in a way that implicates us all in the global clownery that is afoot. The clown make-up feels as if it has been thrust upon various characters as a means of survival, rather than adopted because of a connection to the aesthetic. It's almost as if the capitalist meat grinder demands performance ... oh, wait ... that's exactly what it demands. The disavowal of our personal and communal instincts, the performance of detached irony, the marriage-is-hard-work-but-I-love-

my-stupid-husband, get-your-foot-on-the-property-ladder-and-feel-passionate-about-your-job-of-it-all. Every day we saddle up our imaginary horses and ride into the rodeo, ready to entertain.

Marge Simpson, saddest clown of all, is staring into the void. Everyone has reckoned with the lonely chasm of Marge. Which is to say, everyone, at some stage of their lives, is confronted with the gaping rift between the promises and delivery of heterosexual capitalism. The consequences of Marge Simpson represent the generational chickens in their roost, the near-sentient reckoning with the industrial revolution and the dominoes of Freud's evil nephew Edward Bernays (the father of blending 'psychological warfare' [his words] with modern advertising). In another DALL-E image by Beth Frey, Marge is mildly impressionistic, fuzzy, wearing a dress suited to someone much younger, and sporting a stubble's worth of beard. Not to be all *poetic* about it, but, in this image, are we not all Marge? She is young and old, without specific gender markers, eyes bugged, looking like they've seen the future, and it's exhausting.

Not Today Satan, from the 'Heavenly Bodies' sequence by

Xanthe Dobbie, also plays with the idea of the contemporary void. Drag queens and topless men swarm Heaven and Earth, seemingly springing from the pulsing rainbow circling the void between. We've heard enough about the liminality of queerness that I don't have to press the point. Crossed sceptres, one topped with a dollar sign, guard our earthbound drag angel. Who would have guessed we'd be talking about the intersection between queerness and capitalism again? Who would have guessed that contemporary art would need to grapple with the global cage? This image also retells a type of creation myth, the splitting of the earthly from the divine. What Dobbie invites us to realise is the homogeneity (pun intended) of life. As above, so below, and all of it queer and clothed in performance.

Both art and the internet are at once a kaleidoscope and a mirror. We should see ourselves in the gloomy clowns, the unsettled children, the topless twerkers and the thousand-yard stare of Marge. We should ask ourselves who started the fire in our kitchen, and why they are insisting it is a beautiful natural phenomenon, rather than an act of needless destruction.

