

# Curiosity and the Crap

—a response to *Crap Encounters [Shot on iPhone]* by Gitanjali Bhatt

By Ronia Ibrahim

*Crap Encounters [Shot on iPhone]* at play\_station is an exhibition that celebrates the joy of Crap. Gitanjali Bhatt, a multidisciplinary artist from Auckland, responds to the urban landscape of Pōneke through sculptures made from salvaged junk, accompanied by absurdist videos of these sculptures in their surrounding environments.

Walking in, the space is dark and moody, as projections run on the walls, and colours flickering against the floor, where sculptures sit, and TVs are arranged like dining plates for us to feast on a crap encounter. It's a symphony of scraping, shuffling and swishing. It feels like I've entered a disco for metal sculptures only, or a workshop room, or a mechanical zoo.

Each sculpture is made from found materials from around the city, supported with a phone or TV showcasing short iPhone-shot videos of the objects that document their neighbouring sites. These videos are equally improvised, filmed as if we are going undercover in the city, chucked into the sleeve of a flailing arm. I make a connection to one of those cat POV videos, where the viewer is attached to a camera on a collar of a cat, and try to adopt a similar sense of feline dexterity as I continue to explore the exhibit, bending down, peering, and restraining the urge to paw at and ponder all the plastic and metal.

Pre-exhibition, I meet with Bhatt and she tells me that her work is inherently site-responsive. Relying on improvisation and encountering her materials enables her to create objects that respond to her environments in surprising ways. The way she creates her sculptures are also aimless, rubber bands and duct tape aggressively wound, strung and strapped around pipes, planks and wires. Sometimes I spot a rubber band hanging like a necklace on a plank of wood, while other times I find duct tape delicately wrapped around a cord like a braid.

I identify other objects that suggest femininity in the room. In *bus 2 zoo*, a deconstructed lamp features a bright pink phone case shaped as a pair of lips. Pink Lips reminds me of the Pixar lamp, and I think about how somehow if she existed in the Pixar universe, they'd be a canon couple, with whole Deviantart comics drawn about them.

In the farthest corner of the room, *birds n trains* includes an object made out of a hot pink, smashed tin-disc, attached to a wooden stick. Connected to a wire, below her pink complexion, is a metal hubcap that functions as a silver tutu, as she poises herself on a silver tin can. *birds n trains* has the most visible video here, with giant pigeons projected across the whole back wall. The hot pink ballerina watches the birds and trains for what seems like hours. I catch her at one point where the video projection ceases, lit against a bright pink projection on the wall. Surrounded in what seems to be the epitome of her femininity, she seems lonely and sad.

In fact, I notice that many of the objects feature some kind of sense of longing about them. Several of them feature an outstretched arm of metal wire, or pipe, as if holding up a mirror or ring light.

I notice however, that looking at crap and trying to be deep, will come with no avail. It's when I encounter *oriental bae*, that I realise this. In *oriental bae*, planks of wood are fashioned into a craning neck that dangles a VHS tape titled, "Human Civilisation."

In *central park boogie; scratching and scraping*, Bhatt, in her bright red sweatpants and docs drags us around, a smartphone mounted on a vinyl, attached to a wooden plank. It's not clear what's going on in the video, but perhaps the title speaks appropriately. From down here, it looks like Bhatt drags us around aggressively in this contraption with metal chains. Sometimes the dragging stops, and Bhatt's hands fiddle methodically with the scrape of chains. We may desperately assume she is adjusting the camera angle, outstretching our arms for Bhatt to pick us up like a helpless beetle, but instead we are left with more scraping and fiddling, and the sight of wilted camellias and red docs.

Irony and joy oozes effortlessly when you're not trying to project meaning onto Bhatt's work. 'Crap Encounters' offers an alternative way of seeing landscapes that opposes certain western cinematic ideals of how we view waste and landscapes. So instead of trying to project or read beauty on these sculptures, I relish in their absurdism, and encounter a curiosity and joy more worthwhile and long lasting. If Bhatt drags me around on this Te Aro-chain roller coaster, I'm just going to enjoy the ride.

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