# Imagine Working Here

## *Performance, Commerce, and Moral Capital*

Aria McInnes

2025

Exegesis in support of practice-based Thesis
Master of Visual Arts
Auckland University of Technology

# Abstract

*Imagine Working Here: Performance, Commerce, and Moral Capital* is a practice-led installation project that explores how consumer culture mediates the performance of authenticity and moral aspiration in both personal and public spheres. Drawing on the performative logics of reality television and retail environments, the project examines the tension between moral intent and commercial participation—specifically within service roles, where one is simultaneously "in service" and "being served."

Using humour, theatricality, and self-aware parody, *Imagine Working Here* navigates the contradictory nature of virtuosic pursuit within transitory commercial "non-places," where desire erases time and culture, leaving only the illusion of experience. At the project's centre is a collection of handmade souvenirs. These souvenirs, marked by mismatched references, disproportionate materials, and bathetic humour, appropriate retail aesthetics to expose the ideological operations of commercial environments and the moral ambiguity of critiquing the very systems in which one is complicit.

# Contents

# Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed

15 / 05 / 2025

# List of Figures / Image List

Figure 49. *Vacation Cap,* 2024, papier mâché, cap, acrylic paint.

Figure 50. *Vacation Cap (collection),* 2024, papier mâché, cap, acrylic paint.

Figures 51–52. *Sailor Hat,* 2024, papier mâché, wire, acrylic paint, metal eyelets.

Figures 53–54. *Soap on a Rope,* 2024, olive oil soap base, sisal rope.

Figure 55. *A Collection of Shells*, 2024, assorted scallop shells.

Figure 56. *Sea,* 2024, polyethylene foam, steel, tape.

Figure 57. *La,* 2024, polyethylene foam, steel, tape.

Figure 58. *Vie,* 2024, polyethylene foam, steel, tape.

Figure 59. Mark Schroder, *Minimum Viable Product (inside Game)*, 2015, multicomponent Installation, in AD15, St Paul St Gallery, Auckland.

Figures 60–63. Souvenir Shop test installation, 2024.

Figure 64. Sovereignty and Soul, Google Images store front screenshot, 2025.

Figure 65. 386 Point Chevalier Road drive by, 2025.

Figure 66. Allan McDonald, *Wairarapa Times Age 21.4.18 -24.12.18, Featherston, 2018, pigment print. From Here and Now, shown at Anna Miles Gallery 2022.*

Figure 67. Claes Oldenburg. *Pastry Case, I,* 1961–62, burlap and muslin soaked in plaster, painted with enamel, Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 68. Lucy McKenzie, *Faux Verdigris Statues (Zoya) I & II,* 2024 [left]. Atelier E.B (Beca Lipscombe and Lucy McKenzie), *Faux Sports Shop,* 2024 [right]. Cromwell Place, London, photo by Mark Blower.

Figures 69–72. Screenshots from Seoul cafés and bars publicly tagged as locations on Instagram: After Jerk Off @after_jerk_off_studio (Euljiro), Onion @cafe.onion (Seongsu-dong), Maggie Wonton @maggie_wonton (Hannam).

Figures 73–75. Trialing installation placement.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support, encouragement, and care that has sustained me throughout this journey. This project has been shaped by the generosity of many, including but not limited to:

To my supervision team, Lucy Meyle and Dieneke Jansen—thank you for your guidance, dedication, and unwavering belief in my work.

To the AUT staff and technicians—especially Glenn, Angus, Matt, Cornelius, Harriet, En Torng, and Sav—thank you for your technical expertise, patience, and generosity in entertaining my increasingly ambitious ideas.

To Hanahiva Rose—thank you for so generously proofreading this exegesis. And to our gorgeous sisters—thank you for your ongoing inspiration and warmth.

To my studio cohort—thank you for the conversations, the laughter, the late nights, and the occasional Vesbar karaoke. You have made this journey infinitely richer.

To Amber—thank you for your constant encouragement, for making space for this project, and for holding everything together while I've been stretched between two worlds.

And finally, to my family, and to Sam—without you, none of this would have happened. Thank you, always.

# Introduction

## The Shop and The Ship

As a starting point for my sculpture and installation-based practice-led research, I focused on two core fictional texts: Stanley Kramer's 1965 film *Ship of Fools* and Lara Williams' 2020 novel *The Odyssey. Ship of Fools* is set aboard a passenger ship travelling from Cuba to Germany in pre-World War II Europe. The film theatrically documents the interactions between passengers who, disillusioned by their lives, chase a brighter future in a world marred by prejudice and looming conflict. In contrast, *The Odyssey* takes place in some vague parallel-world dystopia—again, aboard a ship. The story follows its protagonist as she escapes the monotony of her everyday life by working on a luxury cruise liner, immersing herself in its anonymising environment, and eventually becoming wrapped up in a cult-like "employee betterment" mentorship scheme.

Figure 1. Stanley Kramer, *Ship of Fools* (Columbia Pictures, 1965) [film still at 0:43:41].

The texts are theatrical, with hammy character tropes and exaggerated luxury settings. *The Odyssey* was recommended to me after a friend mentioned that it reminded her of how I describe my carnivalesque world managing a luxury boutique in Ponsonby, a role that I feel often highlights my own contradictions and shifting moral perspectives.[1] In both texts, the dynamic between the service workers and passengers, and their relationship of mutual obligation, felt familiar to my own experience of reciprocal trade. As both service person and consumer myself, this unstable balance highlights the precarity of embodying and promoting a lifestyle I cannot realistically afford.

Both texts reference classical history. *Ship of Fools* draws from an allegory found in Book VI of Plato's *The Republic*, [2] representing the problems of governance in a political system not based on expert knowledge, resulting in chaos and potential disaster.[3] The relevance of this concept to our current political landscape is hard to ignore.[4] Meanwhile, *The Odyssey* is named after Homer's epic poem, an enduring tale of classical literature, exploring themes of cunning over strength, hardship as a path to personal growth, and the importance of home. It also highlights "xenia" (guest-friendship) and the dangers of temptation, portraying a world where fate is shaped not only by the gods but also by one's moral integrity. This fascination with tracing historical and symbolic links across pop culture and the process of identifying recurring themes and motifs is central to my creative practice and methodology.

---

1 Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque exists on the border of art and life and is often characterised by displays of grotesqueness and excess. See Andrew Robinson, "In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival Against Capital, Carnival Against Power," Ceasefire, September 9, 2022, https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-2/

2 T. D. Seymour, "On Plato's Ship of Fools," The Classical Review 16, no. 8 (1902): 385–88, http://www.jstor.org/stable/696180

3 Gary Randall, "Sacrificing Tara Reade," Faith and Freedom, accessed May 7, 2025, https://blog. faithandfreedom.us/2020/05/sacrificing-tara-reade.html

4 The allegory's warning about unqualified leadership feels relevant to recent political developments both globally and in Aotearoa New Zealand. Former Air New Zealand CEO Christopher Luxon became Prime Minister of New Zealand in 2023, part of a wider pattern where business or media fame acts as a substitute for political experience—echoing the rise of right-wing populist figures such as Donald Trump (former reality TV star turned U.S. president), whose outsider image and media skills appeal more than any proven diplomatic experience. Ironically, Plato's allegory has also been used to argue the other side of the coin. Gary Randall, writing for Faith and Freedom, a blog that is targeted to inform "Christians and conservatives on the most important cultural issues of our day," describes "far-left activists" as a "ship of fools… who believe they, rather than God, can captain the ship of life." Randall, "Sacrificing Tara Reade."

Another recurring idea embedded in both texts and now central to my practice is the concept of place, or the lack thereof. To me, the notion of "the ship" has a hyperarticulation of place whilst remaining fundamentally placeless. In both *Ship of Fools* and *The Odyssey*, the characters' withdrawal from society—whether it be the social-political turbulence of pre-World War II Europe or the dissatisfaction of twenty-first century life and a generation cast adrift by the "gig economy"—leads them to escape to the confines of a floating world. The ship becomes both sanctuary and prison. Tiny crew cabins, shared passenger quarters, windowless spaces and endless corridors—regardless of its type or purpose, the vessel always exists at the mercy of the tides, its course determined by mostly unseen hands.

Chapter One examines the reality TV confessional as a framework to critique authenticity and performative action within consumer culture. Drawing on Erving Goffman's theories of performance and sociological identity, alongside contemporary discussions on the accelerated collapse of the "self" into mass expression, it explores the commodification of emotion and sincerity through media, retail, and art. The chapter highlights the blurred lines between performance and reality, exposing the contradictions of so-called moral consumption. It also considers how my artistic practice, through self-awareness, low-budget theatrics, and ensemble-style staging, interrogates the weaponisation of the body, emotion, and vulnerability within systems that reward surface over substance.

Chapter Two explores my "prop" methodology and fabrication of hand-crafted "souvenirs" to to elicit memory through imaginative reconstructions shaped by cinematic tropes, chance encounters, and nostalgic longing. It also examines how, through deliberately rough and materially absurd fabrications, each souvenir relies on shared visual cues and symbolic logic to evoke fictional experiences. Working through a mash-up of performance theory and personal anecdotes, each souvenir embraces failure, humour, and improvised aesthetics to examine how materially flawed objects can still authenticate experience through visual familiarity. By "squinting" literally and metaphorically, viewers can believe in these fictions by locating truth in their imperfections.

Chapter Three examines commercial and transitional spaces—like malls, cruise ships, and souvenir shops—as contemporary "non-places" where identity, consumption, and performance intersect. Drawing on Marc Augé's concept of non-place and my own pop culture references, it explores how these placeless environments reflect societal values through material aspiration, nostalgia, and disruption. Using souvenirs to stage the "dress rehearsal" installation environment *Souvenir Shop*, I reinterpret retail aesthetics to critique consumerism, staging the storefront as both sculpture and satire. The work utilises commercial frameworks as a device within the practice, revealing the theatricality and temporality of modern material culture.

# Chapter One

## The Confessional as Format and Frame

Figure 2. Example of confessional format: Love Island UK contestant Maura Higgins. Screenshot: https://screenrant.com/love-island-uk-maura-higgins-best-quotes/

The reality TV format of "the confessional" perhaps most clearly reveals the exploitation and commercialisation of authenticity on screen. It offers a highly produced yet seemingly "unfiltered" glimpse into the cast members' innermost thoughts, away from the background noise of the full ensemble. This segment serves as a moment of solace, reprieve, and reflection, much like a twisted version of the religious practice of confession: acknowledging one's sins or wrongdoings as a step toward repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation with a deity or community—in this case, the viewer at home. Within the confessional, a cast member might express how they "truly" feel about a situation, in a moment of intimacy carefully crafted for audience consumption by both the cast and production team throughout the episode. The format could also be seen to adopt sociologist Erving Goffman's theory of the "front stage" and "backstage" self,revealing the contrast between public performance and private expression.[5]

This format has become an ongoing interest in my work due to its symbolic links to absolution and its stylistic flexibility. The confessional informs how I think about performance in my day job (especially in sales), it also appears in the tone and structure of my writing (often as self-reflective anecdotes or failure-as-content), and emerges in my work via the proud assemblage of provisional props within my installation practice. This format exemplifies the manipulation of the audience's perceptions of authenticity; and the blurred lines between staged drama and the real-life consequences of the commercialisation of moral courage, self-improvement, and virtue.

## Performing Sincerity: Faith and Fabrication

Rob Horning's essay "Mass Authentic" critiques how authenticity operates within consumer culture. Rather than standing outside of consumerism, authenticity becomes fully embedded in it, sold as both product and marketing strategy.[6] In a cultural moment dominated by performative action and overwhelming media saturation, "putting your money where your mouth is" becomes a form of cultural capital, suggesting that authenticity can be demonstrated—or even proven—through consumption. By buying the right products, making the right gestures, and "performing" the right values, individuals articulate their place within society, without cultivating a deeper sense of responsibility for it.[7]

In seeking emotional "truth"—a nostalgic ideal of sincerity imagined as free from ambivalence—we risk becoming further entangled in the very consumer logic we hope to resist.[8] Concern for our own authenticity can become a trap. Rather than escaping consumer culture, we escape into it, finding comfort in the polished coherence of brand messaging. Commercialised authenticity offers the illusion of emotional depth and col-

5 Peter Kivisto and Dan Pittman, "Goffman's Dramaturgical Sociology: Personal Sales and Service in a Commodified World," in *Illuminating Social Life: Classical and Contemporary Theory Revisited*, ed. Peter Kivisto (SAGE Publications, 2013), 280, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506335483.n13

6 Rob Horning, "Mass Authentic," *The New Inquiry*, December 20, 2016, https://thenewinquiry.com / blog/mass-authentic/

7 Horning, "Mass Authentic".

8 Horning.

lective belonging, while masking the transactional systems that produce it.

In their article "The Cost of Simplicity," Tatum Dooley explores this tension between appearance and substance, noting that "while production methods are now often highlighted as a form of marketing (accurate or not), distribution becomes more opaque,"[9] obscuring where and how feelings of belief and authenticity circulate. In response to this ambiguity, and as a gesture of self-awareness, I turn to the confessional as both a format and a strategy in my work, particularly in projects involving physical performance and text, as a way to seek out a sense of authenticity, even as I question its construction.

## Crying in the Production of Someone Else's Happiness

Figure 3. *Jennifer Has Forgotten Her Eggs*, 2024, video still.

The moving image work *Jennifer Has Forgotten Her Eggs* (2024) features a "chef" tearfully chopping onions, interspersed with confessional-style cut scenes delivering verbatim lines from *MasterChef* montage segments. The set is simple, constructed using a mix of found and handmade materials: an industrial sink salvaged from a rotting café fit-out behind my workplace; a papier-mâché chef's toque; a knife with a hand-carved fish tail handle; a knitted dish towel incorporating the borrowed phrase "always with our customer"; and an apron cut from PVC tablecloth. The front of the industrial bench also bears found text: "Home of the sing… And… 'The Taste of Hap"—originally encountered at a BYO in Kingsland.


Figure 4. "Home of the sing… And… 'The Taste of Hap," photo taken at BYO, 2024.

9 Tatum Dooley, "Cost of Simplicity," *Real Life*, March 19, 2018, https://reallifemag.com/cost-of-simplicity/

Figure 5. J*ennifer Has Forgotten Her Eggs*, 2024, video still.


Figure 6. *Jennifer Has Forgotten Her Eggs*, 2024, video still.

Figure 7. *Jennifer Has Forgotten Her Eggs*, 2024, video still.

Figure 8. *Jennifer Has Forgotten Her Eggs*, 2024, video still.

The chef smiles through tears, diligently completing the task of chopping despite his body being overcome by a physical response to the onion: crying in the production of someone else's happiness. The confessional excerpts, stripped of context, are both mundane and despairing—"I forgot my eggs, I can't even breathe right now;" "Without eggs, my mousse cannot bind… this is a worst-case scenario;" "This is not the right time to give up hope. Nerves, pressure, can get the best of anyone"—leaving the audience with the desperation of unknown pressure as the performer cycles through lines spoken by multiple contestants.

Figure 9. *Jennifer Has Forgotten Her Eggs*, 2024, video stills.

Scenes of the chef chopping are presented in black and white, using original diegetic sound—slow, repetitive, and meditative. The confessional segments, in contrast, flash briefly in colour, almost subliminal, easy to miss if one looks away, much like a missed deal when zoning out of a TV ad. This juxtaposition foregrounds the tension between "realist" labour and manufactured emotion. While the act of chopping is "authentic"—the onions and the tears are both real—the confessional slips between sincerity and scripted vulnerability, breaking the fourth wall and exposing the fabrication of emotional performance. The scene is absurd and affecting, charging a simple task with outsized emotional stakes. The confessional, here, functions not only as a narrative device but as a critical lens, exposing the performative nature of vulnerability and the construction of emotional truth in both media and everyday life.

## (Day) Role of a Lifetime

Figure 10. Imagine Working Here, 2024, two-channel video still.

The moving image work *Imagine Working Here* (2024) directly confronts my own position within the slippery and complex negotiation between commercial participation and the performance of the pursuit of morality. The work explicitly gestures towards my own complicity in the commodification of moral intention by positioning me as being both "in service" to others and simultaneously "being served" by the structures I seek to critique. Filmed inside the store I manage and performed by myself and my nowemployee, the tone of the work is light, playful, and even frivolous, despite the moral contradictions it surfaces.[10] Such complications include an internal questioning of where my performance of everyday life begins and ends, and to what extent I should be held accountable for perpetuating a system when my identity is so deeply enmeshed in a role that my body becomes a vehicle for corporate gain. This leads me to think about how willing my participation is, and to ask at what point that participation shifts from

10 I work for a high-end boutique in an affluent Auckland suburb, specialising in independent local designers alongside a curated selection of international labels. I've chosen to withhold the store's name to protect the privacy of myself, my employers, and our clientele—many of whom, I suspect, are also enthusiastic patrons of the arts in Aotearoa.

subjugation to complicity.[11] What happens when I become hyper-aware of the role I'm playing, and yet continue to perform it?

The truth is that a part of me believes in the role and sees it as important. The boundaries between service work and performance are often porous. In retail, particularly in aspirational or luxury environments, the employee takes on a role not unlike an actor, performing confidence, charm, taste, and even moral conviction. This labour of persona involves emotional control, spatial awareness, and an ability to respond to shifting audience expectations, similarly to improvisational theatre. The retail floor becomes a kind of stage, where sincerity and irony become interchangeable, and where the performance of authenticity can become indistinguishable from belief. The better the performance, the harder it becomes to tell where the act ends, and the self begins.

There's a modern-day Robin Hood logic I sometimes adopt: fleecing the one percent and redistributing their wealth to small, independent, locally based designers. But this logic—this "support small business" sentiment—is not without its complications. As Anna Aguiar Kosicki notes in her article "The Mall Gothic," this cottage-industry ideal has itself been weaponised, co-opted by state-sanctioned narratives around border control and productivity.[12] We're told, essentially, that if we want good things to exist, we must earn them through work and prove we deserve them through consumption—like an economic morality tale, "this is why we can't have nice things." And yet, another part of me quietly—persistently—wants a seat at the same table I claim to critique. A system that, no matter how ironically or critically I engage with it, still works *pretty well* for me. I can laugh about it all I want through shaky and silly self-admissions, but the reality is that I've become so good at selling the lifestyle, I've almost sold it to myself. *Almost.*

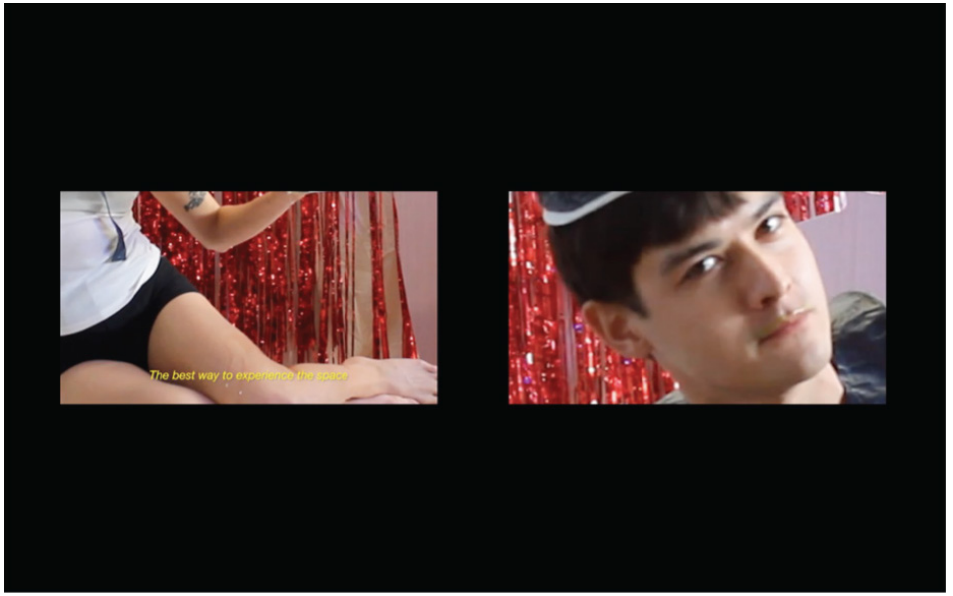


Figure 11. *Imagine Working Here*, 2024, two-channel video still.

In the casting of myself to demonstrate self-awareness of my own performance, *Imagine Working Here* attempts to unpack the performance of consumer interactions through a deliberately staged and self-reflexive lens. Again, the set is intentionally minimal, built from found and handmade materials: a curtain of red tinsel loosely conceals a display rack; a dinner-plate-sized Lazy Susan rests on a discarded courtyard platform; a sailorthemed peep board rounds out the scene. Within this setup, two sailor characters move through the space, sometimes performing directly to camera, other times dramatically averting their gaze, drinking green juice, or dousing themselves in olive oil. The sailor characterisation has been pulled from the background cast in *Ship of Fools*.

The audio is left largely unedited: the shop's tinny, distorted playlist plays over speakers while laughter and casual praise leak through from behind the camera, capturing our unscripted rapport as we alternate between performer and cameraperson. Subtitles function both as orientation and commentary—grounding the work in retail vernacular with phrases like "Are you on the hunt for anything in particular today?" or "The best

11 Rachel Connolly, "This Brand Is Late Capitalism," The Baffler, February 19, 2020, https://thebaffler.com/latest/this-brand-is-late-capitalism-connolly

12 Anna Aguiar Kosicki, "Mall Gothic," The New Inquiry, August 18, 2022, https://thenewinquiry.com/mall-gothic/

way to experience the space is to come and feel everything." There are moments where the subtitles conveniently point to gestures or glances as though guiding an unseen visitor, reinforcing the sensation of a performance tailored to an invisible guest.

## Self as a Luxury Product/Sales Theatre

In making Imagine Working Here, without formal direction, both my staff member and I naturally slipped into familiar sales routines—instinctively adapting to the imagined needs of a customer—selling the space, the performance, and the scene, blurring the lines between self and role, product and performance. Erving Goffman's concept of "role," which frames social identity as a construct shaped by the traits necessary to project a desired reality, offered a better understanding of this staged-yet-instinctual mode of performance. This is to say, to effectively sell luxury goods, one must become a luxury good, like Susan Stewart's notion of the "body-made-object."[13] The body, once rendered a commodity, leaves the self to become caught within cycles of exchange, display, and consumption.

Confined to their environment, the sailor characters operate within what I've termed sales theatre: a theatre of commerce in which the body becomes both prop and conduit. Here, dramaturgy is not used to tell a story, but to perform a transaction, one in which gestures of authenticity and vulnerability are co-opted as tools of persuasion. Whether in retail, moving image, or daily life, the mechanisms are the same: props, sets, tone, emotional cues, and even "genuine" feeling become instruments for selling.

This framing resonates with the carnivalesque described in the fictional texts, where exaggerated performance temporarily inverts societal norms. However, unlike the traditional carnival, which aims to dissolve boundaries between audience and performer to foster collective transformation, sales theatre is isolating.[14] It does not seek community, only conversion: a performance of moral or aspirational consumption enacted by individuals within a system that renders genuine dialogue obsolete. Rather than resisting the binary of good and evil within capitalism, sales theatre reinforces it, suggesting that redemption lies not in action, but in acquisition.

In this way, the work becomes a mirror, reflecting how we shape-shift to survive within structures that reward performance over sincerity, and commerce over connection. There is an underlying discomfort—a friction—embedded in this reinforcement. A sense of helplessness or lack of control over the situation, softened only by parody or humour, which operate as protective mechanisms: ways to deflect critique or grant temporary relief. Yet humour also offers a way through—it can disarm, reframe, and expose contradictions with a lightness that invites reflection rather than resistance. Terrifyingly, I often feel myself slipping within this performance; I am sincere in my interactions, I genuinely *do* believe the dress looks good. It *is* a worthy investment because you *will* wear it for years to come. It is precisely this moment that I want to investigate and articulate further. This tension between reinforcement and resistance, parody, and protection sits at the heart of the project. Within performative action, terms like absolution, redemption, and resistance become essential tools.

13 Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Duke University Press, 1992), 133, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1220n8g

14 Robinson, "In Theory Bakhtin."

## Comic Relief and Self-Implication

Figure 12. Li Ming Hu, *Where is the Art*, 2022, multi-component installation, commissioned by Te Tuhi, Auckland, New Zealand for the exhibition Elsewhere and Nowhere Else. Photo courtesy of Sam Hartnett.

Curator and writer Vera Mey describes artist Li-Ming Hu's use of radical carnival as a strategy of resistance.[15] In her 2022 video installation *Where is the Art?* Hu offers a loose representation of the artist's studio as somewhere between melodrama and spectacle. Faux-fur stand-ins of tools for creative labour and the filmed re-enactment of a bleak artist networking workshop, alongside earnest moments of insecurity or selfdoubt within the making process, exaggerate and critique the performance of artistic authenticity. Hu's work uses humour not to deflect, but to disarm—to create space for audiences to sit with failure, genuine effort, and the contradictions of cultural production. By turning the joke inwards, the work rebounds into critique, revealing the uneasy entanglement between sincere expression and performative gesture. Where is the Art? is a prime example of Hu's practice, operating from the inside out and positioning the artist knowingly within the industry she critiques—much like my own positioning as both retailer and artist, creator and consumer. The self-awareness of self-implication functions as a dual protection in both Hu's practice and my own: first through comedic deflection, and second by rebounding the critique inward, transforming and renewing itself through self-reflection. This process operates almost like a test subject willingly offering themself up as a sacrifice to propel a wider moral and ethical dilemma, leaving the audience to determine their level of participation—whether to feign ignorance and remain a tourist, or to include themselves within the joke and become an insider.

15 Vera Mey, "Elsewhere and Nowhere Else," Te Tuhi, accessed June 3, 2024, https://tetuhi.art/art-archive/digital-library/read/elsewhere-and-nowhere-else/

## The Full Cast

Which leaves me where? Framing the work solely through reinforcement and acquisition feels incomplete, even harsh, and not truly reflective of its intent. *Jennifer Has Forgotten Her Eggs* and *Imagine Working Here* had the potential to be too revealing, too earnest—spiralling me into a kind of capitalist vulnerability, an exposed contradiction I'm still learning how to hold. At the same time, they risked becoming too literal, too "on the nose," too flat, or didactic.

It was only through embracing the ensemble—the full cast of characters, props, and miseen-scène—that the work began to take shape. In the spirit of the reality TV ensemble, or what might be considered an "ensemblage," the artworks became more compelling when embedded in their full context.

An earlier test installation placed the moving image works as the central focus, with "props" serving as background features to offer contextual clues. But feedback affirmed the value of excess—the "more is more" sentiment—and marked a turning point in the project. I shifted away from isolated video and performance toward installation. The props and set—handmade, found, and intentionally theatrical—are no longer merely decorative elements, but active participants in the work. They ground the installation in a kind of low-budget opulence, underscoring its flirtation with both sincerity and satire. Embracing this full cast—moving images, souvenirs, sculptural components—allows each element to transcend fiction and accumulate its own material truth. The ensemblage of

objects, like bit-part players, populates overlapping, cacophonous spaces that perform their own layered realities.

Figure 13. Talk Week test installation, 2024. *Imagine Working Here* is split across the left and center screens. *Jennifer has forgotten her eggs* is on the right screen.

# Chapter Two

## Dreamboat

I've never actually been on a cruise ship, but in my imagination, it exists somewhere between *Below Deck* and two fictional extremes: a black-and-white classic film and a glossy brochure for a modern, all-inclusive luxury holiday. The cruise ship—and by proxy, the cruise ship souvenir shop—exists as a fundamentally placeless space, which in Marc Augé's formation of non-place is a transitional environment with little concern for identity, relationality, or historicity.[16] In this sense, the signifiers confirming our presence aboard are communicated almost entirely through visual cues: a sailor uniform, nautical-themed collectable magnets, postcards, or vacation body tees. While the sailor uniform remains one of the few representations in popular culture that has stayed largely unchanged since its Edwardian conception, the cruise ship itself — shaped by cinematic representation—becomes an amalgamation of the hangovers of British imperialism, class conflict, and a drunken brawl over a cheating partner, followed by a reality TV-style confessional.[17]

Imagination, chance encounters, and the fabrication of stand-ins or placeholders— often made from only-just-sensical materials—are central to the methodology of this project. Theatricality and performativity, whether drawn from personal experience or performance theory, play a significant role in shaping this exploration. However, rather than being centred around a physical person performing a role, the reinterpretation of the souvenir shop relies on commonly understood object associations, using popculturally recognised symbols or motifs. These souvenirs, produced using intentionally rough making techniques, become the object output of the work. I like the idea that the

16 Marc Augé, Non-Places : Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity (Verso, 1995), 78.

17 Films/TV shows that have informed or intersected with this imagined portrayal of the cruise ship include Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953), Titanic (1997), Speed 2: Cruise Control (1997), Boat Trip (2002), The Love Boat (1977–1986), Triangle of Sadness (2022), White Lotus (2021–), and reality shows such as Below Deck (2013–). These representations oscillate between glamour, horror, satire, and melodrama—each contributing to a layered cinematic mythology of the cruise ship as both fantasy and failure.

works should be viewed through squinted eyes, appearing as "authentic" objects or "souvenirs" and that despite their unpolished or crude finishing, they still function as commodified embodiments—tangible evidence of travel.

## Souvenir Logic/Squinting

The concept of the souvenir is compelling to me, for its ability to both authenticate an experience and act as a substitute for the lived encounter.[18] Michael Hitchcock and Ken Teague note in *Souvenirs: The Material Culture of Tourism* that purchasers "link the authenticity of the artefact… to the perceived authenticity of the experience."[19] If a "souvenir denotes something as worthy of remembrance, yet it is also only a meager substitution for the original",[20] then the categorisation of "souvenir" almost demands a squinting—to re-establish the memorial link back to its origin. In this way, the souvenir behaves as a metonymic sample, adjacent to the original site of appropriation yet wholly incomplete. In *Relic, Souvenir, or Just Hair?: Exploring the Complexities of Objects as Actants and Things as Mementos in the Merchandise of El Vez, The Mexican Elvis*, Karen Jean Martinson writes that the souvenir inevitably operates as a fragment, an object trying to fill the void of a lost experience through partial physicality and narrative weight.[21]

The souvenirs I present differ slightly from this logic, in that they are not fragments of true vacationed loss but Frankenstein-ed mashups of pop-cultural ideas of the "iconic object" and relatively contrived personal encounters. There is no original event—only the illusion of one, shaped through tropes and aesthetic shorthand.

18 Karen Jean Martinson, "Relic, Souvenir, or Just Hair?: Exploring the Complexities of Objects as Actants and Things as Mementos in the Merchandise of El Vez,The Mexican Elvis," in Performing Objects and Theatrical Things, eds. Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 180, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137402455

19 Michael Hitchcock and Ken Teague, eds., Souvenirs: The Material Culture of Tourism Routledge, 2000), 5, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315187457

20 Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy, "Introduction: Object Lessons," in Performing Objects and Theatrical Things, eds. Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 12; Martinson, "Relic, Souvenir, or Just Hair?," 179.

21 Martinson, "Relic, Souvenir, or Just Hair?"

## Pop Culture Mash-Ups and Personal Mythologies

An example of this is a collection of nine hand-cast aluminium olive oil cannisters (only one whole, the others sliced in half), based on an olive oil tin I noticed at a friend's parents' house—chosen for its easy pouring and reasonable control during "sparse oil times," as rising grocery prices continue to divide pantry choices amid ongoing inflation.

Figure 14. Olive oil cannisters in development, 2024.


Figure 15. OLIO D'OLIVA olive oil can at a friend's house, noticed at New Year's 2023/4.

A rough version of the piece first appeared in an earlier video work: a hand-cut aluminium model, loosely riveted together. Given the labour-intensive nature of sandcasting, I decided that only one mould needed to be completed—or "stage ready"—with the others lined up in varying stages of completion.

This decision was made to reflect a broader interest in the performativity of production. These objects don't merely serve as prototypes or process detritus—they function as a material mise-en-scène that critiques the illusion of abundance, often seen in retail and theatrical environments. Within the souvenir collection, the objects are hierarchised: some act as "hero" pieces—the leading actor cast member, polished and display-ready—while others remain in flux. This stratification gestures to the labour of making and the instability of value itself. As Jean Baudrillard argues, the copy no longer refers to an

original but exists in a system of signs where value is simulated.[22] In this way, the "half" cans are not incomplete, in process, or discarded failures; they are critical components in a system of representation, which questions the fetishisation of the "makers mark"—artisanal authenticity, limited editions, and the aesthetics of scarcity.

The idea of "olive oil" here fuses two references: an imagined boutique gift item; and Olive Oyl, companion of Popeye—one of the most recognisable sailor figures of all time, with a penchant for green juice and championing the underdog. The duality of Popeye's spinach-fuelled strength and pipe-smoking could even be classified as an early version of "girl dinner", a TikTok trend that swept the internet ahead of Charli XCX's equally green *brat* era. (My mother has also lovingly compared me to Olive Oyl throughout my life, citing my gangly limbs, large feet, and occasional dippy-ness).

My souvenirs are curious because they are detached from any real cruise ship experience. They are imaginary artefacts, sculpted from chance encounters and molded to fit the logic of a faux-nautical souvenir shop—surrogates for a loose thematic idea, turned into haphazard assemblages. Despite their physicality, they remain half-baked: trial-and-error constructions. The souvenirs function almost like a "substitution of a substitution". Individually cast and hand-formed, each object possesses its own agency, collaborating with the larger sculptural space to guide the viewer toward an understanding of its invented origin: authenticating their location within a cruise ship souvenir shop.

Artist Erica van Zon practices a similar deliberate detachment between conceptual origin and material resolution in her sculptural practice. This distancing is especially pronounced in her 2013 exhibition *The Light on the Dock*. Drawing inspiration from three major twentieth century American novels—Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (1970) and *Run, River* (1963), and Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948)—van Zon argues that the affective power of these texts lies less in their dialogue, settings or

Figure 16. Erica van Zon, *The Light on the Dock*, mixed media installation, shown at City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi 2013 – 2014 [detail]. Photo courtesy Hamish McLaren.

Figure 17. Erica van Zon, *The Light on the Dock*, mixed media installation, shown at City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi 2013 – 2014 [detail]. Photo courtesy Hamish McLaren.

22 Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 99.

characters and more in the objects threaded throughout them.[23] The recurring motifs of heavily trademarked all-American branded food products, rattlesnakes, and firearms convey deeper themes of alienation, isolation, and disillusionment with the American Dream.

van Zon recreates these literary artefacts using inexpensive, domestic materials, embracing their amateurish, sometimes awkward materiality. This intentional roughness humbles the objects while distancing them from their narrative origins, reducing complex characters or ideas into their most essential, tactile form. While this could suggest fragmentation or detachment, van Zon's installed sculptures reassemble these parts into new constellations.

## Greatest Hits: Top of the Props

In a similar spirit, artist Mark Schroder describes his methodology as a "Magpie Snatchand-Grab"[24] —the rapid reproduction, seizure, or appropriation of material from pop culture, theory, history, and art. This approach resonates with mine as I draw from a preexisting backlog of cinematic and cultural references. I carefully compile and catalogue objects I've encountered—some found through intentional searching, others led by a gut instinct, stumbling across the "perfect" object primed for replication to construct a narrative around a fictional lost experience. Maybe rather than a Magpie Snatch-andGrab, it's like a "Greatest Hits" compilation album, *Top of the Props*! In this way, the souvenirs are believable not because they are grounded in actual thematic events but because they conform to collective visual memory and symbolic logic.

Examples of "Greatest Hits" methodology (A selection of remade, re-performed, or materially elevated visual encounters):

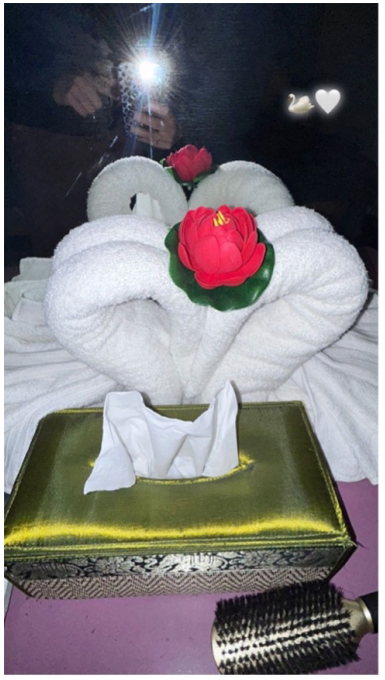

Figure 18. Screenshot of Instagram story, March 13, 2023

Figure 19. *Napkin chicken*, 2024, cotton tea towel, PVA [test installation view].

*Napkin Chickens*: First spotted at a massage parlour. Recreated using tea towels dipped in PVA to hold their crumpled form.

23 Abby Cunnane, The Light on the Dock: Erica van Zon (City Gallery Wellington, 2013), exhibition catalogue.

24 Mark Schroder, "Minimum Viable Product (Inside Game)" (Master's thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2015), 43.

Figure 20. *Sea La Vie Neon*, 2024, pool noodles, steel rod.

*Sea la Vie Neon*: A hand-sculpted sign, based on a text from my dyslexic father. Misread wisdom becomes a sculptural pun.

Clockwise from top left: Figure 21. Brass Mermaid reference image from sovereigntyandsoul.co.nz Figures 22–23. Plasticine mermaid model to be aluminium cast

*Brass Mermaid*: Inspired by a kitsch online listing from the now-closed Sovereignty and Soul. Modelled in plasticine for casting in aluminium.


Figure 24. THANX GOD I'M A V.I.P. Paris, 2024.


Figure 25. *THANX GOD I'M A V.I.P.*, 2024, MDF, glue [process image].

*THANX GOD I'M A V.I.P.*: A street sign spotted in Paris, re-staged as part of the Talk Week installation.

Figure 26. Cocktail umbrellas in studio, 2025

*Cocktail Umbrella Magnets:* Umbrellas collected from the university bar by a studio peer, to be replicated as fridge magnets and displayed en masse.

## Seeking and Stumbling: On Winning and Losing

This tension between seeking and stumbling, control and serendipity, shapes how I rework an object. The degree to which an object is reshaped—or must be squinted at to be believed—reflects the nature of its discovery. If it was stumbled upon, it might only need light massaging. If it was sought out, it may demand more drastic reworking to fit into the fictional souvenir logic. In this way, the method of discovery directly informs the visual labour required of the viewer to locate meaning within the work.

Figure 27. Screenshot, Webb's online auction portal, October 10, 2023.

One such encounter happened when I stumbled across a vintage sailor hat while scrolling through Webb's online auction portal. Through its "vintage" status, the hat had become entirely functionless, its only viable uses now being costume or display. I thought it was beautiful and was desperate to own it. I loved how it had been staged in the auction photo—catalogued for purchase with perfect ribbon placement, faded and bleached with age. Only the original owner could know if it had ever been to sea, but the online photograph appeared to me to be the real thing.

The next day, I reopened the auction portal to purchase it, only to find, to my dismay, that it had already sold. I can't remember exactly how much it cost, but I think it was in the $20–30 range. I was devastated. All I had left was a screenshot—like that silly souvenir tee: "My family went to New York, and all I got was this lousy cap!" I went online, and all I got was this lousy screenshot.

In *Ship of Fools*, one of my favourite scenes features a "funny-hat-themed" dinner party hosted for first-class passengers. The guests sit at assigned tables, eating and socialising as a Spanish dance troupe performs Flamenco in the background. Their costume hats range from birthday hats to fez, paper plates, cabaret feathers, fake flowers, and princess crowns. The performative effort of "high-low" by the first-class passengers, from costuming to behaviour, creates a stark contrast against the service staff and dancers dressed in their traditional cultural garb. Expensive eveningwear is paired with cheap costume hats, forced polite conversation, and lackluster engagement with the Flamenco performance. Each guest displays varying levels of enthusiasm, nodding in acknowledgement and tapping along to the beat, emulating an audience witnessing a "cultural performance" and paying their socially normative respects, like a metafictional parody that satirises performative action itself.

Figures 28.Wire frame stage of Sailor Hat, 2024, paper-mâché, wire.

Figures 29–30. Various stages of Sailor Hat, 2024, paper-mâché, wire.

A desire to replace the lost auction item led me to hastily replicate it by making a paper-mâché version made from leftover grocery packaging, the internal wireframe quickly estimated by fitting it over my head. Maybe there's something special about wanting or desiring something you'll never have, only to be left with a slightly pitiful, bathetic rendition.[25] The physicality of the paper-mâché version offered me a tether to the lost object, albeit through a flimsy and ineffectual reproduction. Still, the same sense of excitement from the initial encounter remained. This making method does its own performative "high-low," much like the first-class passengers on Kramer's cruise liner, leaving each object or souvenir offering an "enthusiastic nod" to its origin. Capturing the energy of the moment of encounter, they are to be staged into a broader installation, politely socialising while half-heartedly observing the commodification of cultural performance for tourism capitalism.

25 Bathos refers to an "unsuccessful, and therefore ludicrous, attempt to portray pathos in art". Britannica, "bathos," last updated June 13, 2016, https://www.britannica.com/art/bathos .

This model of rapid reproduction, used to create the papier-mâché sailor hat, informed the subsequent souvenir attempts. I continued identifying moments of desire or longing in falsified, vaguely topical, now-distanced experiences to create object-souvenirs that would evoke and resonate with the original encounter, yet never fully recoup due to both materiality and image.[26]

For the sake of (re)production or manufacturing, several elements came into play: time and efficiency, material accessibility, and quantity. Like the fleeting nature of the encounter itself, the objects had to be fast and loose. Out of frustration, an ex once described me as a cowboy: refusing to measure twice and cut once, always jumping straight into the cut. This approach, sometimes mistakenly described as laziness or impatience, felt like second nature. The only exception to this need for speed came during batch manufacturing processes, like aluminium casting or soap pours (fig 31), where time and consistency formed the decisions around the priority of quantity or quality.

Figure 31. Soap on a Rope, 2024, thirteen individually cast fish soap, sisal rope [process image].

26 Stewart, On Longing, 136.

Each made-souvenir carries the energy of its signification, made more absurd by its material and production method. Tourist souvenirs, primarily and by nature, are silly–cheap, tacky bibelots, or curiosities whose value lies more in the purchaser's personal narrative than in any intrinsic material worth. Their material absurdity heightens their "cash-grabbiness," enhancing the humour of a "public" memory made "private." This transformation happens through manual, ad-hoc assemblage using whatever materials are most readily available, deliberately resisting the sleek efficiency of industrial manufacture.

## Failure, Humour, and Confessional Objects

The souvenir, already a suspect object in its mass-produced form, becomes almost absurd when remade by hand. In my versions, accessible materials and visibly imperfect construction deliberately privilege representation over materiality.[27] Rather than attempting to elevate the object through craftsmanship, these souvenirs indulge in their own failure, abandoning technical mastery in favour of performative sincerity. Their value lies not in artisanal skill but in their confession of trying: a visible labour that mimics the structure of both theatrical set-dressing and the false promise of the bespoke. As a result, these objects sidestep the notion of authenticity altogether—not because they deceive, but because they confess too much—believed because they resemble something believable.

In "The 'Magic of the Mall,'" theorist Jon Goss critiques the high-cultural disdain for consumerism, tracing it to a puritanical suspicion of material excess.[28] This disdain often extends to the tourist souvenir: seen as culturally reductive, emotionally manipulative, or in poor taste. But while the irony of kitsch might appeal to the self-aware traveller, most souvenirs still operate within a flat economy of replication, where sentiment is standardised and originality is dissolved. My project engages this terrain by rendering the already-generic even more unstable—reproducing and reshaping these items not to

27 A concept tied closely to Guy Debord's theory of the "Spectacle," where representation overtakes reality. See Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle (Bread and Circuses, 2012).

28 Jon Goss, "The 'Magic of the Mall': An Analysis of Form, Function, and Meaning in the Contemporary Retail Built Environment," Annals of the Association of American Geographers 83, no. 1 (1993): 18–47.

refine them, but to expose the fragile line between performance, failure, and the desire for something real.

Failure in the work is structural, not incidental. The objects do not go through a beta program, improve with repetition, or hide their limitations. They settle. They just are. Or *they'll do*. [29] This resistance to refinement resists capitalist and artistic logics of progress, quality, and optimisation. Like theatrical set dressing or window displays, these souvenirs mimic the forms of authenticity without ever arriving at it. Their success as props lies in their believability in spite of (or because of) their incompleteness. They function as souvenirs by referencing something no longer fully there—an experience, a place, a person—shifting "success" from function to form, comfortably sitting within their crassness.

This kind of failure also invites humour—a bathetic, self-aware humour rooted in mismatched references, disproportionate materials, or ill-fitting meanings. These aren't jokes, but glitches: points where meaning slumps just a little. The humour softens critique, acting as a social lubricant, lowering its guard and allowing the viewer in. These objects are self-reflexive and self-deprecating: they don't pretend to be more than they are. That self-awareness—of process, of imperfection, of artifice—becomes a form of intimacy. As with confession, failure becomes a gesture of authenticity—not the authenticity of perfect craft but of flawed effort, vulnerability, and overexposure. In a way, the objects become emotional decoys, believed not because they're convincing but because they ask to be believed. My objects operate in that space: not pointing back to something "real," but standing in for a desire to remember, to attach, to feel. They don't aim for replication, but for resonance. The souvenir—failed, funny, fragile—becomes a site of mythmaking, of longing, of gentle self-deception. The project reclaims the inauthentic as a space of imaginative potential through humour and handicraft.

Pages 25-49 Prop Product Catalogue:

29 This turn of phrase reminds me of my grandfather, a Dargaville based farmer with the Kiwi classic "she'll be right" attitude—I like this NZ DIY sensibility.

Figure 32. *Olive Oil Cannisters*, 2024, aluminum cast, edition of 9.

Figure 33. *Olive Oil Cannister*, 2024, aluminum cast, edition 1 of 9 [side view].

Figure 34. *Olive Oil Cannister*, 2024, aluminum cast, edition 1 of 9 [side view].

Figure 35. *Olive Oil Cannister*, 2024, aluminum cast, edition 1 of 9 [front view].

Figure 36. *Olive Oil Cannister*, 2024, aluminum cast, edition 2 of 9 [side view].

Figure 37. *Olive Oil Cannister*, 2024, aluminum cast, edition 3 of 9 [front view].

Figure 38. *Olive Oil Cannister*, 2024, aluminum cast, edition 4 of 9 [front view].

Figure 39. *Olive Oil Cannister*, 2024, aluminum cast, edition 5 of 9 [front view].

Figure 40. *Olive Oil Cannister*, 2024, aluminum cast, edition 6 of 9 [front view].

Figure 41. *Olive Oil Cannister*, 2024, aluminum cast, edition 7 of 9 [front view].

Figure 42. *Olive Oil Cannister*, 2024, aluminum cast, edition 8 of 9 [front view].

Figure 43. *Olive Oil Cannister*, 2024, aluminum cast, edition 9 of 9 [front view].


Figure 44. *Fish Knife*, 2024, knife blunt, wood, acrylic paint, gesso.

Figure 45. *Chef Toque*, 2024, papier mâché , wire, paint [front view].

Figure 46. *Chef Toque*, 2024, papier mache, wire, paint [back view].

Figure 47. *Napkin Chicken (1)*, 2024, cotton tea towel, PVA.

Figure 48. *Napkin Chicken (2)*, 2024, cotton tea towel, PVA.

Figure 49. *Vacation Cap*, 2024, papier mâché, cap, acrylic paint.

Figure 50. *Vacation Cap (collection)*, 2024, papier mâché, cap, acrylic paint.

Figure 51. *Sailor Hat*, 2024, papier mâché, wire, acrylic paint, metal eyelets.

Figure 52. *Sailor Hat*, 2024, papier mâché, wire, acrylic paint, metal eyelets.

Figure 53. *Soap on a Rope*, 2024, olive oil soap base, sisal rope.

Figure 54. *Soap on a Rope*, 2024, olive oil soap base, sisal rope [detail].

Figure 55. *A Collection of Shells*, 2024, assorted scallop shells.

Figure 56. *Sea*, 2024, polyethylene foam, steel, tape.

Figure 57. *La*, 2024, polyethylene foam, steel, tape.

Figure 58. *Vie*, 2024, polyethylene foam, steel, tape.

# Chapter Three

## The Cinematic Mall or the Fictional Ship

> "One day, the need for space makes itself felt…. It comes to us without warning. And never goes away. The irresistible wish for a space of our own. A mobile space which can take us anywhere. A space where everything is to hand and nothing is lacking…." Just like the aircraft really. "Already, space is inside you…. You've never been so firmly on the ground as you are in (the E)space," the advertisement ended pleasingly.[30]

Marc Augé's non-place concept describes spaces lacking tangible cultural meaning or relational depth.[31] This idea emerges from the understanding that the transition into supermodernity has created environments that, rather than serving as anthropological sites of memory or identity, are reduced to transitory spaces, prioritising efficiency, functionality, and movement over connection or belonging. Augé uses the shopping mall as an example: once a symbol of American consumer culture, the mall offers a climate-controlled, hyper-surveilled, and time-efficient one-stop destination. While it promises comfort, safety, and year-round accessibility, it also presents a curated array of consumer choices that invite individuals to construct meaning through consumption, building their identities and social personas via what they purchase and display.

Artist Mark Schroder describes the mall in his installation Minimum Viable Product (Inside Game) as a "pseudoplace"—a transitory environment that accumulates time while existing as both temporary and permanent.[32] Drawing on the mall's familiarity, Schroder incorporates self-referential and recycled imagery in his work, allowing frequent viewers to navigate the installation like regular mallgoers navigate the conventions of these spaces, recognising patterns, layouts, and routines such as peak hours or parking convenience. At the same time, newcomers can rely on the installation's intuitive design, familiar colour schemes, and climate-controlled ambience to orient themselves.

30 Augé, *Non-Places*, 4.

31 Augé, *Non-Places*.

32 Schroder, "Minimum Viable Product," 44.

Schroder's maximalist, immersive installations—featuring constructed walkways, screens, and a mix of found and fabricated objects—simulate a space without a fixed physical location, defined instead by aspiration and contradiction, where social, economic, cultural, and political tensions converge and collide.[33]

Figure 59. Mark Schroder, *Minimum Viable Product (inside Game)*, 2015, multi-component installation, in AD15, St Paul St Gallery, Auckland.

## The Mall as Myth and Mechanism

In the essay "'A Kind of Instinct': The Cinematic Mall as Heterotopia" Douglas Muzzio and Jessica Muzzio-Rentas chronicle films that feature the mall as either a setting or a star from 1978–2004. These depictions include mall shoppers as zombies—mindless, desperate, and consumed by an insatiable need to purchase or need for blood. The mall as an all-encompassing, perfect world where every want or need is at your fingertips, through your wallet. The mall serves as a refuge for bored or misunderstood teens and

33 Schroder, "Minimum Viable Product," 44.

young adults on the fringe of society, offering them a means of escape, a way to find purpose, commit petty crime, or a place to participate in the gig economy through precarious afterschool or summer jobs. Muzzio and Muzzio-Rentas suggest that the mall acts as "the system" or "establishment" within which "disciplinary agents must be challenged, tricked and overcome".[34] These cinematic portrayals offer reference points within my work regarding presentation, idealism, narrative, commercialism, and theatricality.

Reflecting on these ideas, I considered how the cruise ship might fit within this framework. Themes of disruption and consumption—heroic or mutinous—are central to its cinematic portrayals. In *Titanic*, Leonardo DiCaprio dies saving Kate Winslet in an act of selfless love. In *Below Deck*, Captain Sandy consoles Chef Dave during a panic attack triggered by drunken text messages—her leadership immortalised in YouTube compilations. These reel (cinematic) moments capture the real tensions embedded in spaces marked by luxury and labour, similar to my experience in the store where I work.

Considering Augé's non-places and Schroder's mall-like pseudoplaces, the cruise ship can also be understood as a placeless location—a floating environment where social expectations rather than geographic boundaries reinforce aspirational materialism. Like the mall, the ship embodies a complex duality as both a site of leisure and escapism and a space of low-wage labour, loitering, petty crime, and identity commodification. These elements are performed and experienced on-screen and in life, revealing the cruise ship as another potent symbol of supermodern non-place.

In turning my attention to the ship, the work *Souvenir Shop* (fig 60) became an installation of transitional and temporary spaces, where the raw and unpolished handcrafted objects disrupt conventional consumerist logic. Their intentional shonkiness transforms them from simple mass-produced products, such as magnets, postcards, and tee-shirts, into satirical commentary on unmediated commerce.

34 Douglas Muzzio and Jessica Muzzio-Rentas, "'A Kind of Instinct': The Cinematic Mall as Heterotopia," in Heterotopia and the City, eds. Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter (London: Routledge, 2008), 137–149.

## The Souvenir Shop

Figure 60. *Souvenir Shop* test installation, 2024.

Figure 61. *Souvenir Shop* test installation, 2024 [process image].

Figures 62–63. *Souvenir Shop* test installation, 2024 [detail].

The window space at AUT's WE Building became the site for a first rehearsal of a *Souvenir Shop*, actively subverting my background in traditional retail merchandising, which typically aims to drive foot traffic, enhance customer experience, and boost sales. Instead, the installation embraced the transient nature of non-places, conflating time and space. The work was installed and window-dressed to appear in flux, somewhere between an inhale and an exhale, always in progress or regression. Feedback from peers likened the installation to corner dairies in suburban neighborhoods, referencing sun-faded life-sized advertisements (perhaps a rugby player holding an UP&GO), the glossy covers of porn magazines, or a sad, inflation-shrunk dollar bag of lollies. One peer shared an anecdote about her local Flight Centre during COVID: permanently closed yet, according to leasing agents, still operational, with deals just a mere inquiry away.

Although the project conflated gallery and storefront display, the glass windows didn't quite deliver on the ambiguity I'd hoped for. The work didn't draw the viewers into believing it was some kind of fantastical functioning store or fully critique the artifice due to the institutional architecture and the existing display methods (screens and printed posters). I realised I needed to construct my own version—a deliberately off-kilter, locationally unmoored commercial shell that would foreground this tension.

## Commercial Shells and (Sub)urban Ouroboros

After scouring the suburbs of Auckland, I found inspiration in a defunct shop in Point Chevalier, formerly "Sovereignty and Soul". Its 1920s exterior retains the history of its conception in façade alone. At the same time, its interior easily adapts to modern commercial needs. A vessel waiting to be refilled—an endlessly rebrandable container for whatever aesthetic or business trend came next.

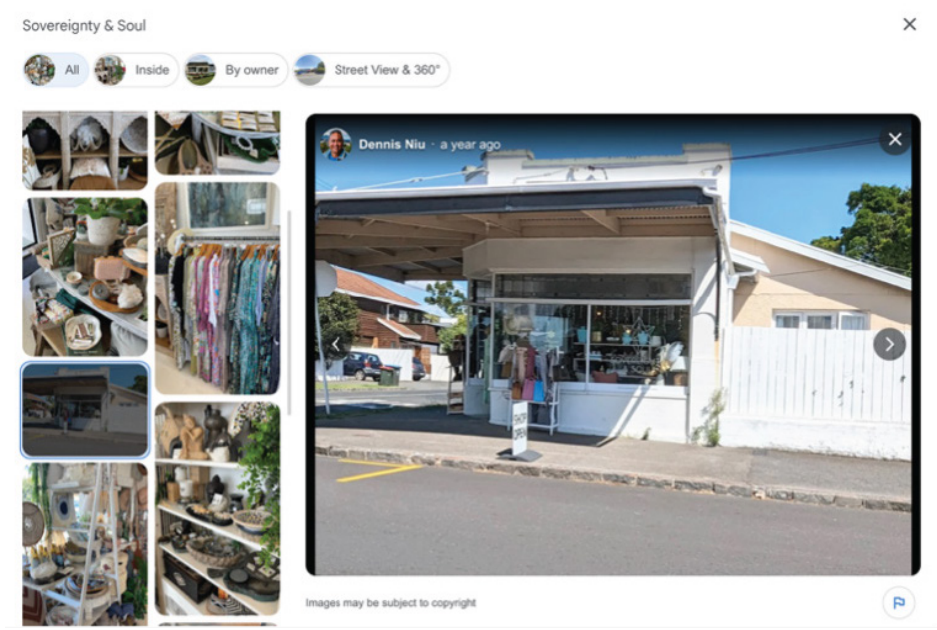


Figure 64. Sovereignty and Soul, Google Images store front screenshot, 2025.

Figure 65. 386 Point Chevalier Road drive by, 2025.

Figure 66. Allan McDonald, *Wairarapa Times Age 21.4.18 -24.12.18*, *Featherston*, 2018, pigment print. From *Here and Now,* shown at Anna Miles Gallery 2022.

While Sovereignty and Soul might have offered kimonos, puka anklets, brass mermaids, and "aura-protective" mists for the modern boho, what fascinated me was its potential to cycle through endless commercial identities, reinventing itself with the tides of the New Zealand economic landscape, yet externally remaining frozen in time.

This sense of flux echoes Allan McDonald's photographic series Here and Now, exhibited in *Material World* (2022). McDonald documents suburban storefronts on the brink of obsolescence, caught between the slow decay of traditional small businesses and the advance of gentrification. His work captures transitional moments in urban space where individual character gives way to chain-store uniformity, and visual diversity is smoothed into sameness.

As Marc Augé reminds us, non-places never exist in pure form: place is never entirely erased, and non-place is never wholly achieved.[35] 386 Point Chevalier Road becomes a kind of urban Ouroboros—a snake devouring its own tail—a symbol of capitalism's endless cycle of consumption, collapse, and renewal. Borrowed now as a template for my installation practice and to be reimagined as a large-scale "replica," this quiet suburban façade becomes a reference for my own *Souvenir Shop*: a symbolic non-place where commercial desire dissolves time and culture, leaving only the illusion of experience—or the trace of an imagined journey.

35 Augé, Non-Places, 79.

## Window Trimming: Space Within a Space

There is a longstanding lineage of artists who have intervened in the shop as both subject and site. Claes Oldenburg's *The Store* (1961) explores this directly, staging a performance of commercialism that questions both the commodification of art and the dual role of the artist as creator and vendor. Most notably presented at 107 East Second Street from December 1961 to January 1962, The Store responded to the shifting urban landscape, monumentalising the fluid boundary between workplace and city life, and anticipating the spread of suburban consumer culture.[36]

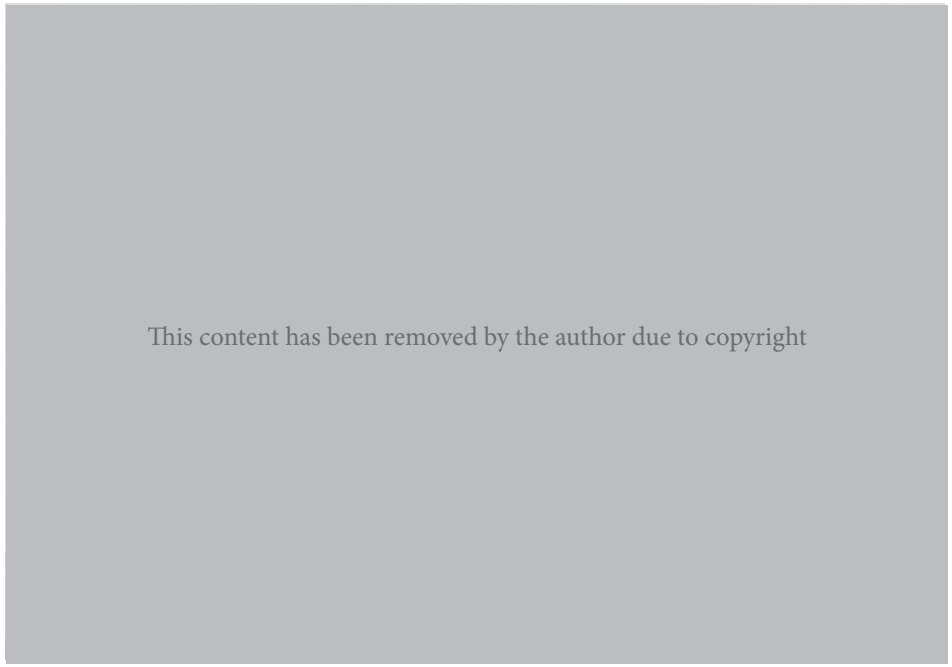


Figure 67. Claes Oldenburg. *Pastry Case, I*, 1961–62, burlap and muslin soaked in plaster, painted with enamel, Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Atelier E.B, the collaborative practice of designer Beca Lipscombe and artist Lucy McKenzie, also reimagines traditional exhibition formats through a "space within a space" approach. Their rotating, evolving installations take the form of a "faux shop," toured through galleries and showrooms as part of a direct-to-customer strategy for their eponymous clothing line.[37] This model blurs the boundaries between fashion, commerce, and art, while resisting the pressures of conventional fashion marketing systems. Each installation is site-responsive and rooted in the fading tradition of the professional window dresser. By embracing this nearly obsolete craft, their displays function as time capsules, intentionally out of sync with current trends and market demands. Their practice merges historical research with contemporary art, fashion retail, and a radical rethinking of curatorial norms.


Figure 68. Lucy McKenzie, *Faux Verdigris Statues (Zoya) I & II, 2024* [left]. Atelier E.B (Beca Lipscombe and Lucy McKenzie), *Faux Sports Shop*, 2024 [right]. Cromwell Place, London, photo by Mark Blower.

36 Katherine Smith, "The Public Positions of Claes Oldenburg's Objects in the 1960s," Public Art Dialogue 1, no. 1 (March 2011): 25–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/21502552.2011.536710

37 "Atelier E.B Bring 'Big Tobacco' Collection to Cromwell Place," SHOWstudio, accessed May 1, 2025, https://www.showstudio.com/news/atelier-eb-bring-big-tobacco-collection-to-cromwell-place

Atelier E.B's 2024 clothing collection *Big Tobacco* toured private apartments, galleries, and showrooms, blending 1980s women's tennis aesthetics with the nostalgic glamour of vintage tobacco advertising—a potent symbol of late twentieth century marketing. The collection employs retro design cues such as Atari-style typography and an intentionally dated colour palette. These references evoke both humour and melancholy, underscoring the absurdity of pairing smoking and sport, two concepts now seen as fundamentally incompatible. McKenzie reflects on the ongoing pressures faced by women in the public eye, particularly female athletes who must continue to perform femininity while being sponsored by brands that once marketed cigarettes as appetite suppressants.[38] The public act of "trying on" these garments within the exhibition setting becomes a kind of performance, foregrounding the blurred lines between fine art and commercial display. In doing so, *Big Tobacco* questions cultural hierarchies and highlights the porous boundary between high art and mass culture.

The reference to window dressing—or "window trimming"[39] —in an interview with Atelier E.B particularly resonated with me, especially when placed alongside McDonald's concern about the vanishing uniqueness of urban storefronts. Where shopfronts once strived to make a distinct visual impact, we now witness a cultural shift toward standardisation and digital mediation. Our most intimate moments—curated, branded, performed—play out in algorithmic spaces owned by corporations.[40] Having spent over a decade dressing store windows for the various retail positions I've held, I feel I've observed this transformation firsthand.

38 Serpentine Galleries, "Atelier E.B," accessed March 5, 2025, https://shop.serpentinegalleries.org / collections/atelier-e-b

39 Atelier E.B., "In Conversation with Atelier E.B.," interview by Mairi MacKenzie, V&A Dundee, February 26. 2020, posted October 17. 2024, by V&A Dundee, https://www.youtube.com / watch?v=OTRF2SnfhOE

40 Dooley, "Cost of Simplicity."

## Flat Pack Café Culture

While living in Seoul, I encountered a hyper-charged version of this phenomenon. In suburban districts, aesthetic individualism isn't resisted—it's mass-produced. The Instagrammable café reigns supreme. Whether retro-pop maximalism or brutalist minimalism, each venue is instantly recognisable, reproducible, and disposable. "Independent" cafés are often flat-pack installations: purchased as brand kits, complete with faux-aged façades and ready-made narratives. These businesses emerge wherever the trend dictates, vanish just as fast, almost as fleeting as an Instagram story.


Figures 69–72. Screenshots from Seoul cafés and bars publicly tagged as locations on Instagram: After Jerk Off @after_jerk_off_studio (Euljiro), Onion @cafe.onion (Seongsu-dong), Maggie Wonton @maggie_wonton (Hannam).

McDonald's observations on homogenisation, Atelier E.B.'s commitment to obsolete forms, and Seoul's prefab café boom have all informed my artistic thinking as I seek to practice these contradictions—to locate the installation work within the shifting "space within a space." An early line of inquiry emerged through the *Good News For You* initiative, when I was offered a near-abandoned site in Auckland's Strand Arcade to test-install my work.[41] Though it never came to fruition, this opportunity prompted me to question the project's intent. Was I inadvertently commodifying the artwork? To what extent did it need to be activated? I considered performance, but second-guessed myself—was I staging an exercise in salesmanship, or testing my ability to "sell"? Was I interrogating the relationship between art and commerce by placing the installation within a functioning retail environment, or allowing commerce to infiltrate art?

## Between Display and Dispositif: Mall Kiosk as Sculptural Strategy

The concept of a mall kiosk—positioned at the intersection of retail, spectacle, and ephemerality—became a way to solve some of these questions. Kiosks operate within retail codes as a semi-permanent, modular enclosure that also resists the mall's totalising logic. Its openness on all sides renders it both stage and object, foregrounding its construction. The kiosk functions not simply as a site of transaction but as a dispositif: a mechanism of visibility, discipline, and desire. Viewable from above via the second-story balcony within the WM building, through the street-facing windows, or within the atrium, the placement of the proposed installation aims to appropriate and estrange the visual grammar of the retail environment, to expose the performativity of consumer space and its ideological operations.

Through these varied precedents—Oldenburg's parody of commercial excess, Atelier E.B's embrace of obsolete display forms, and Seoul's prefab cafés that mass-produce the 'unique'—the shop emerges as a medium in its own right. Within these contradictions, my sculptural practice finds its provocation, seeking neither to resolve nor escape them, but instead to exist between the cracks. The kiosk, as a "space within a space," functions

Figures 73–75. Trialing installation placement using the bottom plate of the to-be-constructed space.

as both framework and metaphor: at once architectural and affective, stable yet mobile. It enables the work to engage with the aesthetics of consumption while simultaneously estranging their logic. Within this deliberately unstable enclosure, questions of authorship, activation, and authenticity remain open. Unfolding not toward resolution, but through continual rehearsal.

## Dress Rehearsal

This unfolding through rehearsal has helped me come to terms with the closing of the project. Writing this exegesis has felt like a kind of rehearsal itself—less a final performance than an ongoing staging of ideas, where concepts are tested, refined, or left behind. This framing echoes the theatricality that has run through the project, from its earliest fictional touchstones to its engagement with retail and installation as performative spaces. Like the transient structures of consumerism, the work remains in flux, unresolved and provisional.

Grounded in the manufactured spectacle of reality TV, my practice continues to explore the staging of sincerity across both personal and public spheres, as mediated by consumer culture. I've confronted the contradictions embedded in commercial retail environments, where authenticity is commodified and emotional labour becomes

41 This was an open call initiative for artists invited to produce and exhibit their work on site, within an empty store located within the historic Strand Arcade department store.

currency. By employing humour, theatricality, and self-aware parody as tools of resistance and critique, I have begun to navigate the moral ambiguities of participating in the very systems I seek to question.

I don't claim resolution. Much like the props in my installations, I take my place within the ensemblage—a methodology that privileges irresolution, contradiction, and constructed truths. This approach foregrounds the layered, performative realities of consumer space, reinforcing the deep entanglement of both art and retail in the commodification of identity and experience. If this text is a matinee, perhaps the opening night still lies ahead—after more iterations, more scenes, and more rehearsals.

*Sea La Vie.*

Reference List:


Atelier E.B. [Beca Lipscombe and Lucy McKenzie]. "In Conversation with Atelier E.B." Interview by Mairi MacKenzie. V&A Dundee, February 26. 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTRF2SnfhOE

Augé, Marc. *Non-Places : Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Verso, 1995.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Connolly, Rachel. "This Brand Is Late Capitalism." *The Baffler*, February 19, 2020. https://thebaffler.com/latest/this-brand-is-late-capitalism-connolly Cunnane, Abby. *The Light on the Dock: Erica van Zon*. City Gallery Wellington, 2013. Exhibition catalogue.
Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Bread and Circuses, 2012.

Dooley, Tatum. "Cost of Simplicity." *Real Life*, March 19, 2018. https://reallifemag.com/cost-of-simplicity/

Goss, Jon. "*The 'Magic of the Mall': An Analysis of Form, Function, and Meaning in the Contemporary Retail Built Environment.*" Annals of the Association of American Geographers 83, no. 1 (1993): 18–47.

Hitchcock, Michael and Ken Teague, eds. *Souvenirs: The Material Culture of Tourism.* Routledge, 2000. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315187457

Horning, Rob. "Mass Authentic." *The New Inquiry*, December 20, 2016. https:// thenewinquiry.com/blog/mass-authentic/

Kivisto, Peter and Dan Pittman. "Goffman's Dramaturgical Sociology: Personal Sales and Service in a Commodified World." *In Illuminating Social Life: Classical and Contemporary Theory Revisited,* edited by Peter Kivisto. SAGE Publications, 2013. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506335483.n13

Kosicki, Anna Aguiar. "Mall Gothic." *The New Inquiry,* August 18, 2022. https:// thenewinquiry.com/mall-gothic/

Martinson, Karen Jean. "Relic, Souvenir, or Just Hair?: Exploring the Complexities of Objects as Actants and Things as Mementos in the Merchandise of El Vez,The Mexican Elvis." In *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things*, edited by Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy. Palgrave MacMillan, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137402455

Mey, Vera. "Elsewhere and Nowhere Else." Te Tuhi. Accessed June 3, 2024, https://tetuhi.art/art-archive/digital-library/read/elsewhere-and-nowhere-else/

Muzzio, Douglas and Jessica Muzzio-Rentas. "'A Kind of Instinct': The Cinematic Mall as Heterotopia." In *Heterotopia and the City*, edited by Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter. Routledge, 2008.

Randall, Gary. "Sacrificing Tara Reade." *Faith and Freedom*. Accessed May 7, 2025. https://blog.faithandfreedom.us/2020/05/sacrificing-tara-reade.html Robinson, Andrew. "In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival Against Capital, Carnival Against Power." *Ceasefire,* September 9, 2022. https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theorybakhtin-2/

Schroder, Mark. "*Minimum Viable Product (Inside Game).*" Master's thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2015.

Schweitzer, Marlis, and Joanne Zerdy, eds. *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137402455

Serpentine Galleries. “Atelier E.B.” Accessed March 5, 2025, https://shop. serpentinegalleries.org/collections/atelier-e-b Seymour, T. D. “On Plato’s Ship of Fools,” *The Classical Review* 16, no. 8 (1902): 385–88. http://www.jstor.org/stable/696180

SHOWstudio. “Atelier E.B Bring ‘Big Tobacco’ Collection to Cromwell Place.” Accessed May 1, 2025, https://www.showstudio.com/news/atelier-eb-bring-big-tobacco-collection-to-cromwell-place

Smith, Katherine. “The Public Positions of Claes Oldenburg’s Objects in the 1960s.” *Public Art Dialogue 1*, no. 1 (March 2011): 25–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/21502552.2011.536710

Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Duke University Press, 1992. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1220n8g

## Pages 60-69 Appendix:

Aria McInnes, *Imagine Working Here,* in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery Gallery as part of the *Masters of Visual Arts Graduating Exhibition II*, July 1st-4th 2025.

Mixed media installation (mall kiosk, water fountain, Thanx God I’m A V.I.P sign, Sea La Vie neon sign, vacation caps, cast mermaids, olive oil canisters, cocktail umbrella keyrings, shell magnets, postcards, napkin chickens, sailor hat, fish knife, souvenir spoons, video of ‘Jennifer Has Forgotten Her Eggs’, video of ‘Imagine Working Here’, souvenir body tees, vacation sandals, shell ashtrays, chef toque, crab mugs, soap on a rope)

Figure 76. *Imagine Working Here,* 2025. Multi component installation, [top view]. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery. Photo courtesy of Paul Chapman.


Figure 77. *Imagine Working Here,* 2025. Multi component installation, [side view]. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery. Photo courtesy of Paul Chapman.


Figure 78. *Imagine Working Here,* 2025. Multi component installation, [back view]. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery. Photo courtesy of Paul Chapman.


Figure 79. *Imagine Working Here,* 2025. Multi component installation, [detail]. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery. Photo courtesy of Paul Chapman.


Figure 80. *Imagine Working Here,* 2025. Multi component installation, [detail]. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery. Photo courtesy of Paul Chapman.

Figure 81-82. *Imagine Working Here,* 2025. Multi component installation, [detail]. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery. Photo courtesy of Paul Chapman.


Figure 83-84. *Imagine Working Here,* 2025. Multi component installation, [detail]. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery. Photo courtesy of Paul Chapman.

Figure 81-82. *Imagine Working Here,* 2025. Multi component installation, [detail]. Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery. Photo courtesy of Paul Chapman.