

# JAMES BARTH

## THE SHUDDER AROUSED BY LIQUIDITY AND DECAY

BY TIM WALSH



*Heap*, 2022

Two paintings by the Meanjin/Brisbane-based artist James Barth share a wall. *Spilled Blueberries* depicts a languid, reclining figure in an *Olympia*-style pose; the second, *Heap* (both 2022), is a tiered feast of domestic waste and detritus. They share a humid, decomposing atmosphere—tempered intriguingly by their cold, clearly digital source images. Despite their artificial base, smells of fecund leaf matter and petrichor are evoked. The word *decomposition* feels particularly resonant. De, prefix: down or away. Compose, verb: form, structure. *Pose/position*, verb/noun: the former, a figure's arrangement, but also in popular culture linking to the camp and queer mannerisms of ballroom culture; the latter, arrangement again, but also where you are situated or placed, perhaps within and by the world or within that society. Like this word, these scenes are decidedly down in the muck, their arrangement focused on an earthbound body and still life. This

word and these works represent a significant movement in Barth's practice to date: away from the focused, earlier attentiveness to more traditional depictions of her self-image toward a new form of expanded self-portraiture. In this recent development, the self is diffused, atomized as a means of capturing Barth's desire to decompose the bounds of identity and representation.

Born in Melbourne but trained as a painter at Brisbane's Queensland College of Art, Barth initially focused almost exclusively on self-portraiture. Barth's early paintings were of her in a direct sense. At the time, the emphasis felt vital to the artist: self-determined representations of trans women like her in Australian art were either severely lacking in nuance or simply absent. In *Untitled (self portrait in a towel)* (2014), the immediacy is captured in the artist's pose: her shoulders held up and back, wrapped in a sage-colored towel, and



*Spilled Blueberries*, 2022

against an exposed ply wall. She stares directly at the viewer with warm openness in her eyes. The bouncing of light from her body and eyes allude to a photographic base source—and the importance of that particular medium to her emerging practice. In her chosen oil, however, the gravitas of the medium with its linkages to the canon are reapplied to rightfully exalt the subject. Despite this exaltation, at times, this raw vulnerability became unsafe with her audience—in part prompting a desire to generate distance between herself, her image, and the baggage of self-representational painting. Thus, Barth's work has increasingly challenged the limitations of this genre and her medium.

From 2016, Barth began dabbling with digital modeling software as a means of embracing greater control over the types of images she wanted to create and prioritize. It was not until 2018 that the artist

began practicing her unique conflation of the painterly and the digital more seriously. These new paintings are created using digital 3D modeling software like Blender, where Barth manipulates avatars and objects to create intricate compositions that reflect her immediate environment, which she describes as a kind of “sub-tropical non-place,” and items of everyday banality such as plastic garden chairs or those with greater personal significance like lemons and shattered eggs. These

source images are transferred to a series of silkscreens, which are then printed onto the material support using varying tones of greyscale oil to build up the painterly image. As a last step, Barth returns to the work's surface with a brush to blur the surface. In *Screen Tests* (2019) and *The Placeholder* (2021), her two major bodies of work that preceded *Spilled Blueberries* and *Heap*, Barth tested these methods to fuller effect, refining the outcomes in paintings such as *Screen Test*,





Earthbound, 2022



Earthbound, 2022



Earthbound, 2022

*Umbrageous Self Portrait* (2019), where the avatar poses moodily in a Wassily armchair with her features obfuscated by the heavy shade (the titular umbrage) of rendered foliage. The atmosphere of the painting is like a light gauze curtain drawn across our vision, a cinematic effect that subtly troubles the viewer's apprehension of the work's subject.

In 2021's *The Placeholder* at Milani Gallery, Barth's representing gallery, the 'tests' of the previous body of work were increased in scale and complexity—and also represented a shift in the tone of how the avatar was treated and manipulated by the artist. These recent works pursued the self-image with a sense of being wronged by it, awoken to its fallibility. But also, awoken to the constant demands of the art world and broader society to represent and depict her selfhood—often without a fuller, more nuanced reflection on what lies beneath as an individual. Barth's paintings are typified by a wry deprecation of her "avatar," but in this series, this deprecation shifts to a more loaded, even psychological degradation. Humiliation and shame are reoccurring sub-themes. These works respond to a time where Barth had been made to feel by a partner like a placeholder for someone else. In *Adumbral Placeholder* (2021), she is reduced to a purposefully unconvincing wooden cut-out with a wig slapped on and brandishing an oddly mixed bouquet of floral cut-outs and sunflowers. The ensuing silhouette, cast by the floodlights that douse her from out of frame, is a figure of jagged bolts and fraying hair—almost monstrous, like the Babadook on acid. In *Gleaming, I'm Shown* (2021), two avatars cradle each other on a couch. The sitting figure is formed from clothes only, the only visible 'skin' is what appears to be a long surgical glove that spills like a river across the other figure who lies in her lap. It is as if she may have simply vaporized. In *Surprised to fall* (2021), the avatar sits up in shock with enamel thrown across her face, the figure down in the dirt with a rudimentary stand-in lying next to her, constructed of hewn wooden blocks and string, holding a marionette's amateur form together. Etymologically—pointedly—humiliation refers to the act of being brought low to the earth, humbled by the recognition that the human is not at the center of all.<sup>1</sup>

Though at times dark, perhaps even nihilistic in their implications, Barth's practice measures these tones with lighter scenes of beauty and reverie. In Barth's video works this is especially evident—such as *ZONWEE: The last known recording of a daydream* (2019) and *Earthbound* (2022). In these works, Barth's painterly compositions are animated, widening the frame to explore the intricate worlds that her avatars inhabit—a form of generous world-building. And these environments, though hermetic in atmosphere, fertilize Barth's other

works, crosspollinating and drawing from the successes and failures of each. *Spilled Blueberries* and *Heap* are the latest examples of the iterative development of this new form of working, where video and painting sit in dialogue, and linking the artist's visual and conceptual interest with photographic and print-based processes with a legacy of painterly production. The outcome are works where varying boundaries are broken down: post-medium, post-internet, post-genre works of 'portraiture' where digital and analog, growth and rot, collapse and growth co-mingle.

In *Spilled Blueberries* (2022), the body leans back seductively, yet this sense of desire is complicated. Fruit and their skins are littered everywhere. The titular fruit is across her face, her chest, even over the low plinth on which she lies. The whole damn punnet seems to have burst: a blueberry bukkake if you will. A single one clings to a white string bikini top, itself threatening to slip from her shoulder. Where in *The Placeholder*, the avatar at times was a victim of actions done against her, in this latest work, a sense of agency and humor has returned. She toys with us, reveling in absurdity. A banana pressed to her ear becomes—in child-like fashion—a rudimentary phone, a half-peeled mandarin sits forgotten to the side. Her vibe is playful, aloof, self-aware, a little flirty, a little foolish. But also, she's a sweaty mess. Things are falling apart around her and within—but it all seems okay. The cloth backdrop is smeared with finger paint and the sheet doesn't quite meet the edges of the scene. Lemon wedges sit over her eyes; she either misinterpreted the cucumber treatment tutorial or has taken a citrus-led approach to Charon's obol, a Roman funereal practice of placing coins over the eyes or mouth of the dead. With these coverings, the avatar's face is largely hidden by a fruity bouquet—a reference itself to the sixteenth-century Milanese painter of fruit and vegetal portraits Giuseppe Arcimboldo. Humus builds at the edges, creeping up to touch her toes; the studio where she dwells is slowly being reclaimed by damp rot. The heat has got to her in more than one way; her limbs look like they're suffering due to the humidity, taking on the texture of pulled taffy. Plus, she's gone and lost her panties. Though still ambiguous in its feeling, the work reinstates some sense of restrained triumph to the subject.

Of this new direction, it is *Heap* that particularly intrigues me: what Barth describes as one of her ongoing "compost" paintings. At points, these compost works, like the earlier *From potluck to compost* (2021), are more fixated on decay in the negative. Down in the dirt and mud they recall, if only in spirit, the American photographer Cindy Sherman's *Disasters* series of 1986–1989, in which Sherman saw a need





*Earthbound, 2022*



*Earthbound, 2022*



to explore the inverse of her now ubiquitous *Untitled Film Stills*, where her critique of representations of women and women's bodies had begun. In *Disasters*, this hardens. They are crime scenes of disembowelment, sex, and the body itself represented by its excretions, turned inside out by the violence of the gaze.<sup>2</sup> Barth's portraits are not obscene—if that term still holds relevance—but retain elements of abjectness, depicting neither subject nor object but some in-between, and trauma, when thinking back to the context surrounding *The Placeholder*. Decomposition as a process is framed very differently between Sherman and Barth. When considering the power of the compost—a space where 'waste' heats and as if under alchemical collapse becomes new fertile energy—Barth's *Heap* and similar works point to the site of decomposition as deeply fertile. Allusions to Donna Haraway's theorizing of compost resonate too.<sup>3</sup> Though the avatar is now absent, there is a sense we can still read her through her discarded belongings and the waste she generates. Broken eggshells, lemon wedges, candles, and gloves reminiscent of those in *Gleaming, I'm Shown* are carefully arranged to become a domestic backyard altar—no obscene dark art, but some kind of sensitive offering to an approaching transformation or transition. The same scene animated in *Earthbound* is accompanied by fine mist, as if rising from a primordial bed. This is decomposition as a means of significant material change and renewal. Or as Barth describes it with potent ambivalence, as a "site where identity and meaning are kind of lost." But loss as a natural process through which new growth emerges.



*Earthbound*, 2022



*Earthbound*, 2022



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