

Anya Pesce
Surface Fetish
2023



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ANYA PESCE | SURFACE FETISH

Anya Pesce is an Australian born, Sydney based artist. Her practice explores concepts of contemporary painting, with a focus on surface as the external skin that embodies the themes explored in her work. These themes include material, embodiment, and excess, which together with manipulation of texture and visual aesthetics manifests in her works through a glossy exterior.

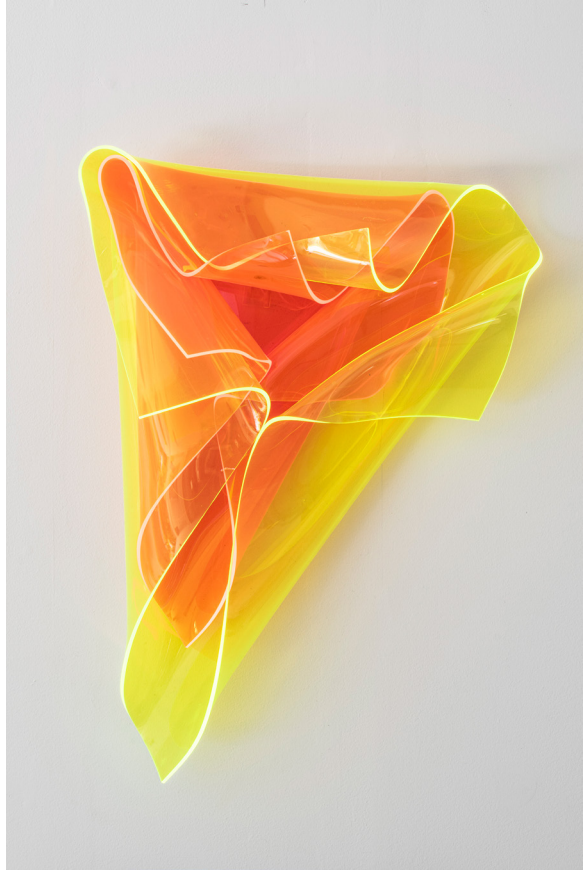
Studying at the National Art School, Pesce began to question traditional materials associated with painting, seeking out alternatives. Her work is best described as a fusion of painting and sculpture. Transforming the material to mimic fabric and suggested body, the forms become an implied gesture, which alludes to the world of art-fashion-design. Frozen swirls of movement in the material act to conceal and reveal something hidden under the surface, evocative of its content.

For Pesce, the sensation experienced by the viewer is crucial in determining what art can offer. Art can transfix and transport instantly, taking the mundane into the hyper-real. Tactility and sensory phenomena, via vision and touch are the essence of her work. Artists can manipulate the tactile connections related to body and exploit external material qualities to arouse sensation and perception in the viewer.

Anya Pesce is represented by .M Contemporary Gallery in Sydney. Pesce completed MFA at National Art School in 2017 and has exhibited both nationally and internationally.

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ANYA PESCE | EXHIBITION ESSAY BY LISA PANG, JANUARY 2023

Thou Shalt Not Covet – the Abstraction of Desire

Surface Fetish, a solo exhibition by Anya Pesce at .M Contemporary, Darlinghurst Sydney

January 25 – February 8, 2023

When a fetish is a want it is a deep craving; a yearning that goes far beyond need. When a fetish is the thing coveted, the object itself exudes power and attraction as the most desirable object in the room. In using the language of superstition, dark desire and psychological disorder to title her fourth solo exhibition *Surface Fetish*, artist Anya Pesce signals that perhaps, all is not as it appears on the surface, but that there are powerful undercurrents at play in this (art) world. And what a beautiful, gleaming world it is too. The artworks of this exhibition manifest the idea of surface as an abstraction of desire. Continuing the allusions drawn in Pesce's previous solo exhibition at .M Contemporary, *Finish Fetish* (2022), these lustrous surfaces provide a visual locus where the aesthetics of fashion, consumerism and desire collide in a shimmering membrane. The surfaces are beautiful, alluring, potent. They bend, twist, buckle and beckon; we could be yours; they suggest. We are all available; they murmur, for you. It is irresistible then to draw metaphors for contemporary life and particularly as it relates to culturally constructed cycles of production, consumption, and the knowing activation of desire within the consumer / spectator.

If a surface could be distilled, here it is, manifested in elemental, tangible and seductive form. Disarmingly simple in appearance and presentation, the twenty-three surfaces that make up *Surface Fetish* are monochromatic (though this descriptor of hue alone does not do justice to the dazzling range of metallic lustres, satin finishes and powdery pastels). A mere 3 – 6 mm in width, they are about a finger pinch of skin. Most are on the wall though a few will be freestanding. Resembling thick pools of poured or bewitched paint - each inhabited by Pesce's signature frozen gestures they are made luscious and evocative of bodily sensation through the ripples, folds and distensions which appear to heave beneath the surface. As reflective surfaces that also seemingly wear the impression of bodies, it is as if the artist is holding up a mirror to us in a surface that enhances the phenomenon of consumption virtual ponds for today's Narcissus.

With this glossy line up of freshly fabricated works, Anya Pesce invites us (and of course, my darling friend, she does so with a theatrical hand flourish, a rustle of fabric, and a carefully trained spotlight) to examine why, how, and what we want. As consumers in general (including art collectors), our wanting of art / things occurs on a sliding scale with degrees of desire.



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On one side there is economic demand; market-based, logical, as acquisition it is an investment to be recouped at some time in the future. At mid-scale the desire to possess is affected by the more fallible elements of speculation, risk, and personal taste while still justifying economic satisfaction. At the other extreme however, the wanting becomes craving, builds to lusting, and if it peaks at coveting what thou should not, it slips into sin (biblically defined) . Pesce locates her artworks deliberately at that precipice, when the innocent desire for beauty could, potentially become dangerous. Pesce, herself eminently describable as a fashionista, works in the fashion industry, and is alert to parallels, visual and psychological, in the commodification of art and consumer goods.

From fashion as commodity and materialism, it is but a short, loaded, and slippery slide into the material, an area where all sorts of paradoxes arise within Pesce's practice. Her choice of material is (chemically named) polymethyl methacrylate, also known as PMMA, acrylic glass, acrylic sheet and under a range of trade names including Plexiglas and Perspex. It is a high-grade plastic, mass-manufactured, and was developed in the 1930s for a number of current industrial uses; car windshields, Covid visors, dental cements as well as optical and contact lenses. Essentially, it's a transparent thermoplastic – malleable when heated and brittle when cooled – and so the first paradox is that each work wears its high-heat volubility in a fixed, cooled mask. Another is that Pesce makes each piece by hand, from industrial sheets in a factory setting of furnaces and protective equipment. If you look closely, you may see dimples; forensic indentations of her (gloved) hand. Then, while the surfaces have an uncanny resemblance to fabric and textiles skimming over a moving body, they are inflexible and unwearable. The organic gesture so resonant of the body is contained in, and began with essentially, a planar geometric shape, circle, square, or triangle in a ready-made and selected colour. Then there is that vexed plastic issue; the sheets of bright and supple colour that initially attracted Pesce, so synonymous with industrial modernity, have also become a marker of excessive consumption and waste. The aesthetics of paradox only contribute to the layers of meaning rippling beneath the surface.

To the edge of the art world and with increasing acknowledgement of its influence on her practice, Pesce works in a parallel world of high-end designer fashion, draping bodies in garments, establishing a look and individualised identity for the wearer. Increasingly of late, her own artworks have been contextualised into interior design settings and images , in collaboration and alongside her gallery shows and sales.



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Just as there is a performative and transformative element to wearing a distinctive cut of cloth, so too does an Anya Pesce work perform to transform space. Like soft architecture, abutting an entranceway corbel, emerging from a panel, or placed asymmetrically over a mantelpiece, the work projects a certain mood and effect into the space. In these presentations, the position of clothing / art takes on a rarefied power, bestowing a unique aura, even status, by association with the item and its context. It is the power of the fetish. And if imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Pesce's material and method of visually conflating gesture, fabric, and heat-moulded plastic have many admirers in the art world. The apparent ease and fluency of her work, despite years of development perhaps lends itself to imitation, as happens so often in parallel worlds operating on cycles of creation and consumption. So not only does this lead in to commentary on the fetishised aura of the artwork, the outcome of its commodification but so too to notions of authorship of the creative act, artist-as genius, exclusivity, originality, and blurred boundaries between art, fashion and design.

When I first wrote about Pesce's transition to working with polymethyl methacrylate surfaces, the prompting was her first solo exhibition, *Fantastik Plastik* (2016) . She was, at that moment poised in a fundamental directional pivot in her longstanding practice as a painter. Over her career Pesce has painted her way from abstract expressionism into a reductive series of saturated orange to red monochromes. Frustration with the traditional painter's limitations of brush, paint and canvas in conveying surface led her to experiment with other materials, including initially, soft plastics. Pesce's continued adaptation of a painterly sensibility in her use of gesture, mark and geometric containment eventually took her to a factory fabrication process in which surface and object come as close as possible to unity. She acknowledges a legacy, both in fabrication methodology and a near-obsession with flawlessness of finish from the Light and Space artists of 1960s Southern California. Like theirs, her work is characterised by pristine surfaces made possible by the merging of hand crafting with industrial technology. The term *Finish Fetish* , was perhaps (or not) light-heartedly applied to this group and it is a term also adopted by Pesce as homage for her third solo show. So, her arrival at this metier is a result of a material and conceptual evolution, a fusion of the hand and factory. While many – and she - describe her work as a fusion of painting and sculpture, since that first solo exhibition, I like to cling to the idea of a monochrome painting out for a dance. Somehow it melds the austere rigour of formalist vanguard painting with provocation and a touch of levity.



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Dancing on with that metaphor in mind provides a rich ground for locating her within a cohort of artists, predominantly painters, reframing, critiquing, and subverting the self-referential 20th century modernist altar of the monochrome. The artist Christine Dean, one of Pesce's MFA thesis supervisors, writes that the cultural portability of monochrome painting has enabled it to adapt to a multiplicity of discrete circumstances both historically and globally. Paradoxically, the monochrome, with its silent obdurateness and lack of clues and external reference is a fertile field for commentary about culture. In asking the artist about her influences though, Pesce nominates John McCracken and Donald Judd, and (surprisingly) Sylvie Fleury. Working at scale, Fleury's works deploys the motifs, palette, objects-in-reproduction, even scents, of desired luxury goods - shopping bags, lipsticks, perfume, brightly coloured synthetic fur and high heels - a parade of conspicuous consumption. While Pesce's work is far less literal there are parallels in the way both artists work to amplify the aesthetics of desire and product. There is much conveyed about the look, feel and buy-me pressure prevalent within the subculture of fashion and commodity-infatuated capitalism. Like Judd and McCracken though, her work has more of the considered gravitas of the object, a certain full-frontal inexplicability of abstract painting – the works need time and consideration to reveal themselves.

As an exhibition *Surface Fetish* examines the essential nature and inherent superficiality of an alluring surface. There, pulses a strange attraction, at once desirable and repellent. It is but a thin skin between perception and sensation, psychology and technology, materiality, and concept. All these aspects are critical in interpretation; however, the visual acuity of these works lies in their appearance and composition. Their confluent surface is at once beautiful but also rippling with darker forces of hidden, unacknowledged influences that shape the nature of a human desire to know, to need, to have, to own. A surface fetish offers an opportunity to consider both sides of the surface, so providing a simultaneous critique of and implication in the very phenomena it either reveals or conceals.

ⁱ Anya Pesce, *Finish Fetish* (2022), solo exhibition at .M Contemporary, Darlinghurst, Sydney

ⁱⁱ *The Bible* (Exodus 20:17) Tenth Commandment: Thou shalt not covet ...

ⁱⁱⁱ For instance, Natale, Greg *The Layered Interior* (2022,) Rizzoli International: Sydney

^{iv} Anya Pesce, *Fantastik Plastik* (2016) solo exhibition at Factory 49, Marrickville Sydney

^v The term *finish fetish* was coined by John Coplans in the late 1960s to referencing a trend where artists made use of plastics with glossy finishes and highly polished surfaces.

^{vi} Dean, Christopher [now Christine], *The Pink Monochrome Project: The Transformation of Monochrome Painting Since the 1980s* (2010), unpublished PhD thesis, University of New South Wales p80



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