

Louis Grant

awash

ambient behaviour

hovering on the water's surface / you / catch
a single ray of light / through the grey storm
clouds / guess I'm feeling unmoored / each
time I see your eyes I know how
this ends / two circles meeting mine / the
words bubble on my tongue / lips sealed shut
/ two sheets fused / I'm not sure if you're
breaking into me / I'm breaking into you

'awash' is an exhibition of work that is unashamedly personal, drawing from Louis Grant's experiences of loneliness and desire. "These works are, in a way, about sitting with grief and they all have this duality of stillness and movement. I'm thinking about where peace fits into my life," Grant says.¹ The artist has consistently challenged the idea of binaries, and his practice searches through the performance of self: what we show and what we hide. Grant defines himself and the material he works with as queer, as glass is a fluid medium that is in a constant state of becoming and unbecoming.

As I write this text thinking about 'awash', music that comes to mind immediately is the track 'Good Boys Go' by Cub Sport from their album *Bats* (2017). It is easy to define 'awash' and *Bats* as artistic works exploring heartbreak, but both have an urgent melancholic power that fuses vulnerability into strength: a steely softness.

At first glance, *don't want no other shade of blue, but you* is reminiscent of outdoor pools and interior bathroom design, all grey and dark shades and squared off into tiles. Of course, there is much more at play here as I begin to take in the tones of storms, water, earth becoming muddied, and the black of night sky voids. Throughout Grant's practice, he has dived deep into colour, using pinks and reds and greens. 'awash' is a distinct departure from this, requiring time from the viewer to sit with each artwork rather than having a sudden reaction to bold bright colour.

When I think of slick, wet tiles I am drawn to thinking of cruising spaces such as saunas. Bathrooms are sites of queer desire. Cruising spaces were predominantly designed for

cisgender gay men to meet each other at a time when there were no other places to meet. While they are centres of pleasure, connections made are often temporary. The euphoria dissipates.

Traditionally, those working with glass ensure that flaws are hidden; they strive for perfection. Grant works in direct opposition to this as he is interested in bringing the process of glass-making to life for the viewer. In some glass pieces, you will see large bubbles that have formed, and this is intentional. With a sense of playfulness, Grant has introduced bicarbonate soda to react with the fusing of glass sheets. These are not tiles made for mass production. Each piece is made to be unique through a process of trial and error. Throughout Grant's practice, he has been inspired by the writings of Jack Halberstam, who describes the queer art of failure as turning on "the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being."²

You could say that queerness is the antithesis of productivity; it pushes against power and authority while sometimes hiding in plain sight. We are used to seeing queer aesthetics as rainbows and corporations marching in Pride parades; rainbow capitalism is used to quiet down radical ideas and shift attention from reimagining the world to a focus on relationships. You might see Grant's pieces as straightforward, but as you spend time with 'awash', I hope you see this exhibition as a rallying call for queer ruggedness. You are looking at work that separates itself from the brightness and repetition that has become queer art.

The word awash implies a suddenness, a feeling of being overcome and out of control. The process of glass-making is at odds with this; it is full of intention and relies on the maker having the upper hand over the material. Most of the works here are kiln formed glass, a process that requires several stages of hard labour and long hours working with heat and cold.

In *if I could never give you peace and it's washin'*

over me, I am struck by the simple complexity of these structures. They appear cold and distant but also beckon like suspended pools of water or raindrops layered over each other. Grant has explained to me that the primary glass material in these works is opaline glass. This material behaves in a similar way to how light works in the sky; it reflects the darker, bluer end of the white light colour spectrum while also revealing warmer tones.

These works and their titles remind me of a poem I have been working on, where I am in the viewpoint of a photographer, and reflecting on a relationship.

film photo of you lying in grass / from an old
camera I've used maybe twice / the angle /
off centre and above / your eyes closed / an
accurate image / we had both half-exited /
speaking in echoes we don't even listen to /
it is easy to move past an outline / bats row
in twilight sky unheard / yet I listen to your
absence as it travels / in a second glance ache /
I'm restrained to your ambient behaviour

How do we survive the love that we lose? We often avoid or outrun it, not facing ourselves and the role we had to play in a relationship's end. I feel this is at work here in 'awash', as I look at the story Grant is trying to tell. Dissociation is a coping mechanism that many queer people and I employ, especially when unsafe.

I turn to these words about this state of mind from queer artist Alok Vaid-Menon often:

In one story we dissociate because we're broken. In another, we do it precisely because we want to heal. My body fought for me before I could. It innovated and insulated me: creating the space for me to daydream myself into existence.³

In heartbreak, we may come undone. What Grant has achieved with 'awash' is a demonstration of this, but also of how we can press ourselves together again by acknowledging the loss we feel. We can turn it into strength and we can see ourselves through it.

Kin Francis is a Melbourne/Naarm-based writer, producer, and events organiser.

1 Conversation with the artist, 24 September 2022.

2 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2011, p 88.

3 Alok Vaid-Menon, *Your Wound / My Garden*, ALOK Enterprises, New York, 2021.