

The Kitsch Glitch: A practice-based exploration of lived experience and the impact cultural heritage has on cancer

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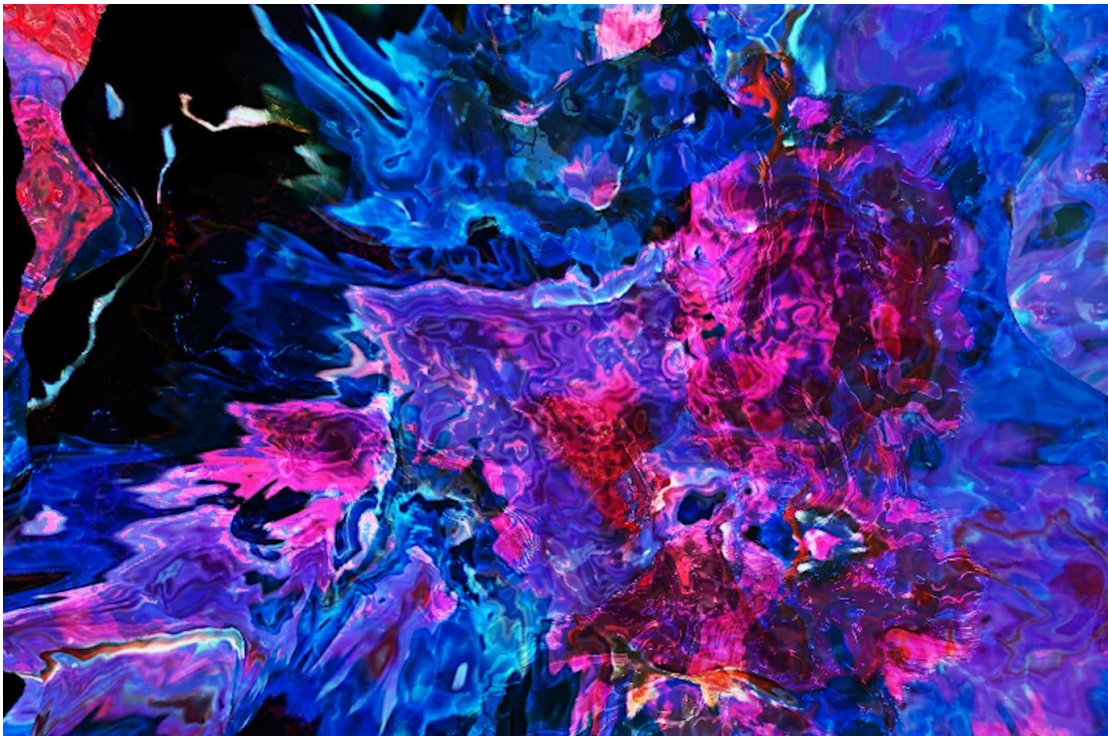


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The Kitsch Glitch

A practice-based exploration of lived experience and the impact cultural heritage has on cancer

Bec Litvan



A thesis in the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts (Research)

UNSW Arts, Design & Architecture
Faculty of Fine Arts
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Contents Page

Abstract	3
Preface	4
Introduction	6
Chapter 1: Personal History & Methodology	10
Chapter 2.1: Cultural Heritage & Disease	25
2.2: Louise Zhang Case Study	38
Chapter 3.1: The Rise & Effect of Soviet Kitsch	43
3.2: Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory Case Study	47
3.3: Soviet Kitsch (Continued)	51
Chapter 4.1: The Bodily Glitch	60
4.2: Refik Anadol Case Study	66
4.3: Harley Ives Case Study	71
Conclusion	78
List of Figures	81
References	83

Abstract

The Kitsch Glitch is a personal investigation of the impact of cultural shame and stigmatisation on the lived experience of breast cancer. My point of departure was the apparent inability of my inherited (Russian-Jewish) culture to admit any discursive practices that would do justice to such a lived experience. Influenced by family history, kitsch aesthetics, and glitch theory, I sought to combine these components in order to produce a set of works that open a space in which the received cultural perceptions of cancer could be challenged.

I refer to various aspects of “Soviet Kitsch” and Russian history to demonstrate that a restrictive and self-suppressing Stalinist mentality continues to pervade my culture, and even overdetermined my family’s perception of disability and illness. Utilising a punk-luxe aesthetic, my artistic practice takes an experimental approach in presenting cancer as a bodily glitch, while critiquing what I have discovered about my Russian cultural heritage.

This paper presents an empathetic perspective and eclectic iterations of medical and cultural aesthetics. This is articulated through a series of experimental digital and physical outputs. As a result, I argue that my work could be considered as a positive rendition of “cancerous propaganda”.

Preface

This paper is largely an emotional, artistic reflection of my personal experience throughout my mother's breast cancer treatment and social alienation. Much of it has therefore been written from a more emotional perspective, and is a reflection of my personal and visual investigation into how the breast cancer body has been affected by cultural stigma. Since my mother's diagnosis in 2007, and over the many subsequent years of treatment and disability, my artistic practice has been consumed with the problem of representing disembodiment and physical loss. I was at first primarily focused on the notion of the body under erasure: excised breasts, radio-burnt skin, dead hair, defunct internal reproductive organs. My practice became an index of my mother's body being torn apart in an effort to survive. At this point, however, I was still too concerned with the objecthood of the loss; that is, my work presented the irreparably disembodied objects as stray parts of my mother's now non-whole body. The conceptual breakthrough came when I began to incorporate my mother's extensive scarring into my practice. Until that point, my work focused on the purely negative effects on the body – breakage, disembodiment, loss.

My work continuously focused on the dichotomy of content and form, and the representation of colour and materiality camouflaging taboo content. This notion was at the core of my practice. My work then pivoted towards creating more immersive states for the viewers. Coming from a predominantly 2D medium in my Honours program, the desire to explore sculpture and video had grown. The sculptural exploration of my work led me to the next phase of my practice.

My recent practice consisted of producing works that were visually related to microscopically enhanced cancer cells. I created textured and highly tactile sculptures made from materials ranging from expanding foam to artificial flowers, yarn, and pompoms. Some of these sculptures were then transformed into 3D sculptural paintings and recontextualised as wearable mastectomy brassieres; the others remained as

tactile 3D pieces the audience could interact with. The brassieres were then modelled by my mother and photographed in high-fashion poses that reflected classical forms (Figure 1).



Figure 1: *Ten Years*, Photograph (Litvan, 2017)

Presenting cancer with a flamboyant aesthetic was always a conscious choice. I was consistently challenging the perception my immediate and extended family had of my mother when she fell ill. The alienation and cultural shame she felt after her diagnosis motivated the content of my practice, and inspired me to make works about breast cancer that people – specifically, my family – couldn't ignore. My work has naturally transitioned into a more immersive, digital, and kitsch aesthetic, while maintaining the personal connection I have always had to my practice.

Introduction

This research paper comes out of a critique of medical aesthetics. I do this through an analysis of my personal history, specifically drawing on my cultural heritage as a Russian-Australian, as well as encounters with medical science and breast cancer. This thesis is the product of what I have personally discovered about my cultural heritage and its relation to illness and disability. There were several aspects I came across as I was researching and experimenting with my work, but due to the limitations of this thesis, I am focusing primarily on my personal lived experience, kitsch, and glitch.¹ These three terms provide the framework for my research, and have been the defining terms when creating my works for this project.

More specifically, my research is exploring cancer as a bodily glitch. This includes a practice-based exploration and an analysis of my Russian cultural heritage. My thesis has a personal approach, and examines how my experience of cultural shame and stigmatisation has affected my mother's lived experience of breast cancer.

My Russian cultural heritage acts as a driving force, as my practice explores aspects of Tsarist and Communist history that exemplify "Soviet Kitsch" (Bullock, 2006; Ekstein, 2000; Marco, 2016). These two political epochs play an influential role on how a repressive Stalinist mentality pervades my Russian culture and impacted my mother's experience with breast cancer. This connection is directly reflected in the practical output of my work: I intentionally choose bold, kitsch materials and colours to reference Russian history and its motifs in order to contest the shame and stigma that's operative within Russian culture. The denial of disability and illness, and the acute stigma and shame projected onto those who suffer from any ailment (Bown, 1991; Conquest, 1990; Miller, 2010; Sontag, 1978) is the reason why my

¹ The idea of the 'Grotesque' was also an initial focus, however abjection became a bigger focus for my research, as this term was more relevant to my practice. The history of the female body proved to be relevant when discussing my mother, and the impact female body image has on her. This encompassed the history of the male and female objecthood, which proved too large a subject area for the scope of this thesis.

mother was ostracised from her own family when she was diagnosed with Stage 3 Breast Cancer. This is a societal glitch in its own form, and is an integral component of my research, which I will be continuously referencing throughout this thesis.

Throughout my paper, I will be discussing the concept of camouflage and its relevance to both the direction of my own research, as well as the case studies I will be discussing. The French origin of the term ‘camouflage’ (from *camoufler*) is defined as: to hide, disguise, concealment—conceal the existence of something undesirable (Oxford Languages, 2021). In relation to my own work, I use camouflage in order to disguise taboo and stigmatised content with kitsch aesthetics. Camouflage functions as an aesthetic term and visual technique that explains the disguise and masking quality my work possesses. This allows the audience to interact with an otherwise confronting subject matter. I regularly use camouflage as a technique in the practical components of my research, as it introduces an empathetic relationship the audience is forced to have with the subject of cancer, and it has therefore become an indispensable idea in this thesis. My work is an avenue through which to camouflage uncomfortable subjects and create a visceral and enjoyable experience of them (Hickey, 1993).

Each chapter has been divided according to the key terms this thesis will focus on. The case studies have been specifically chosen in order to highlight and reinforce specific areas of my research, hence their placement throughout particular chapters. Chapter 1 gives an overview of what I witnessed of my mother’s lived experience with breast cancer, and also outlines the key questions my practice has raised about my culture. Putting these questions forward leads me to discuss how the process and methodology for my work was developed.

Chapter 2 critiques and questions various aspects of my cultural heritage. My cultural heritage plays an integral role in my current art making and thus needs to be discussed in some depth. The cultural shame and stigma that I saw my mother experience, and which remains prevalent even in my family today, was a major influence when creating my work. I will be using Susan Sontag’s writings from *Illness as Metaphor*

(1978) as a reference point to discuss Soviet shame and stigma. Sontag's insights correspond strongly to my own experience and therefore prove to be a crucial theoretical source for this aspect of my research. Analysing my cultural heritage leads me to introduce my first case study, contemporary artist Louise Zhang. The influence of her Chinese-Australian heritage parallels my Russian-Australian heritage and enables me to discuss its significance in my own practice. Zhang uses her cultural identity and her lived experience as a Chinese-Australian to guide her work, focusing on Chinese Horror and the Chinese cultural perceptions of the grotesque and the abject.

Kitsch is the focus of Chapter 3. The first part of the chapter discusses kitsch aesthetics, and will provide a contextual overview of its historical emergence and integration into the art world. The critique of kitsch aesthetics leads to a discussion of my second case study, the 1971 feature film *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*. This film is exemplary in its application of popular kitsch aesthetics and is therefore a key influence in my theoretical research and artmaking. In this chapter I will also discuss and critique my sculptural pieces which were displayed at Airspace Projects for my solo exhibition.² This component of my body of work has been strongly influenced by my Russian heritage and is a representation of my understanding of the "Soviet Kitsch" aesthetic and its impact on my personal experience.

The analysis of my sculptural pieces leads to the inspiration I've drawn from *Willy Wonka* and the "Soviet Kitsch" movement. A presentation of Russian motifs is presented through the era of the Tsars and Stalin's Communism, which I discuss as a reflection of a societal glitch. This chapter also consists of how the practical components of my research explicitly reference these aspects of Soviet history and how my theoretical research connects to my practice. I explore kitsch in the context of Russian history and how the "Soviet Kitsch" movement was used to camouflage Stalin's intentions for Communism and disseminate propaganda (Bown, 1991; Bullock, 2006; Ekstein, 2000; Greenberg, 1939; Marco, 2016).

² Titled: *La La Land (Get Out!)* May, 2021

Finally, the 4th Chapter focuses on glitch theory, the medical analogy of cancer being in effect a bodily glitch, and my final case studies. The exploration and analysis of these concepts are the main component of my research. I also discuss and reflect on the video work displayed at my exhibition at Airspace Projects. Discussing and analysing my own work enables me to bring in my final artistic case studies whose work is related to the themes of glitch and kitsch aesthetics, and who are my foremost digital influences – Refik Anadol, a contemporary Dubai based artist, working in the realm of AI generated art; and Harley Ives, a Sydney based contemporary artist who transforms traditional images into digital artworks. Glitch theory has proven to be a crucial component of my practice as it combines the key ideas present in my artworks.

Chapter 1 Personal History & Methodology

Death and disease are often beautiful, like...the hectic glow of consumption

–Henry Thoreau³

This project has largely been shaped by my family history, the visualisation of cancer cell imagery, and the practical development of my research. Throughout the process of my mother's diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer, and the impact this had on my extended family, I have gained a unique perspective on my cultural heritage. It was witnessing these medical and social processes undergone by my mother that enabled me to view her experience in a more intimate and revealing manner.

The personal discovery of my mother's extensive isolation and alienation was the driving force for me to research this perception and pose the following questions:

- § What was the driving force behind this mindset?
- § Why do they (my family) have such a stigmatising perspective on illness?
- § How can I create work which comments on and potentially contests this perception?

These questions led me to research aspects of Soviet history and culture, which led to explorations of “Soviet Kitsch,” the influence Stalinism still had on my family and their thinking, and the shame and stigma that illness continues to carry. This then led me to question how I can physically and practically execute this in an artistic format. Kitsch aesthetics was an intriguing avenue to explore, on account of its capacity to disguise taboo content. Because my work featured putting cancer on display, I needed to disguise and camouflage its confrontational nature with kitsch, that is, with bold and bedazzling aesthetic presentations. This method enabled me to mask such content for people whose perception of illness is

³ Henry Thoreau (1852), quoted in Sontag, S., *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 20.

skewed and stigmatised, and instead present it in a more palatable way. These questions have guided my practical methodology. I made these works to contest my family's perception of illness and disability.

The emotional and physical toll that cancer took on my mother was monumental. The alienation she felt from family members she thought would stand by her throughout this perilous and dehumanising process was immense. Subsequently, her body image eroded and in turn, her sense of identity and self-worth. Having my mother's body image, sense of femininity and beauty be questioned, inspired me to create work which compelled her to see her own beauty. My artistic practice was significantly influenced by this experience, and I therefore had an ardent desire for my work to reflect this. My work had previously focused on my mother's body image, as I had her model cancer cell inspired mastectomy bras (Figure 1).

Visualising cancer cells in a playful and colourful way was, for me, an effective way to contest the subject matter, as well as being my own way of personally processing this experience. The process initially began with creating moulds of smaller sculptures – which visually represented graphically animated cancer cells and tumours – and then transforming them into more tactile and softer iterations (Figure 2). I chose to use polyurethane foam, since it's the exact material of a stress ball. Creating a cancer cell and then transforming it into a stress ball was another conceptual breakthrough for me, as it realised my desire of camouflaging taboo content within a more captivating and intriguing form. Stress balls function as tactile sensory objects that eliminate feelings of anxiety and stress – which is exactly what I was striving for in my own work, namely to create sensory and immersive environments which at a distance present as both intriguing and hypnotising, but on closer examination reveal a darker or more difficult subject matter.



Figure 2: Image of experimental cancer stress balls, polyurethane foam, yarn, artificial flowers (Litvan, 2020)

Although this pivot was heading in the right direction, I still felt as though my practice wasn't meeting my theoretical concepts. I then progressed into experimenting with watercolour and ink, as they mirror bodily fluids.



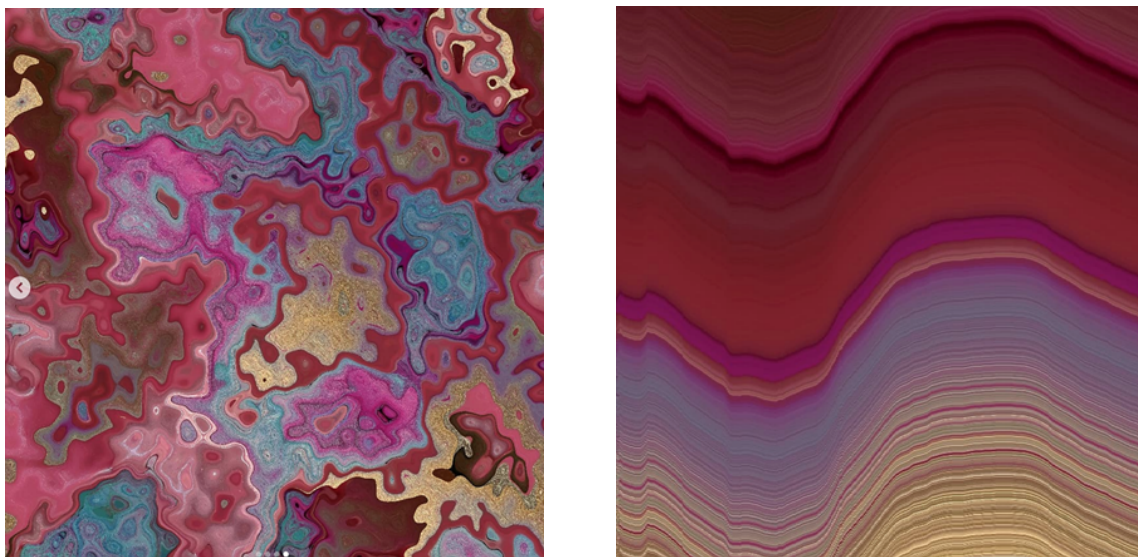
Figure 3: Ink experiment (Litvan, 2020)



Figure 4: Watercolour experiment (Litvan, 2020)

This change in material removed the control I initially had when creating my work. The lack of control, and the movement inherent to both ink (Figure 3) and watercolour (Figure 4) strongly reflected the fluidity of the body and how illness develops within the body.

I then chose to further explore the juxtaposition of content and form with the use of the *Glitch Lab* application. This application uses AI technology to combine fractals and randomness to transform the chosen image. The origin of the word “glitch” denotes a sense of malfunction, or an image which has been technologically tampered with (Betancourt, 2017). The growth of cancer cells can be likened to a glitch in the body, to an individual's own body betraying itself (Betancourt, 2017). Although a “glitch” is usually defined as a term within technology, it is also a general term to describe a sudden, usually temporary malfunction or fault. Within my research, I use it as a term to describe a malfunction within the body. In order to emphasise this idea of error generation, I used a range of materials and methodologies, such as watercolour and graphic design apps (Figures 5 and 6), which generate images beyond my explicit control. My work fits into the medical analogy of cancer being an error that the body generating within itself. This theory and concept will be further discussed and analysed in chapter 4.



Figures 5 and 6: Glitch Lab experimental stills (Litvan, 2020)

The images that I was able to generate through this app exemplify my concept of camouflage. A visual trick is present in my work; it looks sumptuously beautiful and camp on the surface, but upon closer examination it presents deadly and confronting content (Kristeva, 1982). This visually explains the concepts and similarities my work possesses with those of my theoretical references. *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971) successfully camouflages its more confronting storylines with the use of singalong music, bold colour schemes, and a frivolous atmosphere that plays to a younger audience. Although a departure from fine art, this film is a fine iteration of the themes I am exploring throughout my research. The visual aesthetics, the abjection, and pervasive camouflaging this film possesses all serve as a parallel to my own research and artistic intentions.

“Soviet Kitsch” and kitsch aesthetics, which will be outlined further in my third chapter, play an integral role in the development of my practice. I am intentionally choosing especially bold and kitsch materials and colours to reference Russian history and culture, particularly the use of various motifs designed to camouflage and disguise anything that might be seen as shameful and stigmatised. The referenced motifs include the flamboyantly styled churches, the iconic Fabergé eggs, and kitsch fashion. The flamboyant, kitsch and ‘bling’ styles are quite common and feature regularly in Russian culture, which is a key reference point in my work. My use of vibrant colours and multivalent textures seeks to mitigate the confrontational and unspeakable nature that is associated with illness and disability, and is a means of camouflaging such content. Camouflage is being used here in order to compel people to rethink their relationship with cancer because of the presence of empathy. Susan Sontag speaks to this theory in her novel *Illness as Metaphor*. Sontag explains that due to cultural ignorance, victim blaming and shame is embedded within societal norms and people’s minds when faced with illness. This therefore creates a strong sense of stigma and a pervasive projection of shame onto individuals who are disabled (Sontag, 1978).

My work process ultimately came full circle. I began with creating textural and tactile cancer cell stress balls. The next step was to create a larger formatted sculpture which transforms into a landscape rendition

of what I thought of as a ‘cancerous world’. I am then able to feed an image of these larger sculptural pieces through *Glitch Lab* which gives me less control than typically desired. Thus I began with a 2D image, transformed that into a 3D object, and then the object back into a 2D iteration. You can see from this that my work has a hermetic set of connections.

Glitch Lab enables me to present the glitch within the body in a non-realist visual manner. The app enables hundreds of output images, which is also a reflection of the process whereby cells generate inside the body. It’s an uncontrollable process; the amount of possibilities likens to how normal cells – which are normally regulated and not uncontrollable – are invaded by cancer cells that cause irregularity and chaos, which then leads to a tumour (Alford, 2018).

The colourful and otherworldly landscapes that are created within the app evoke the idea of an alien world. This ‘world’ is manifested from a graphically visualised cancerous / tumour-infested sculpture (Figure 7). There is a poetic connection present here: using an app called ‘glitch’ to manifest a cancerous world; creating uncontrollable iterations of my sculpture which represent a bodily invader that cannot be controlled. The images generated from this app reinforced the medical analogy of cancer being a bodily glitch.



Figure 7: Sculptural experiment, polyurethane foam, spray paint, artificial flowers, pearls (Litvan, 2020)



Figure 8: Still from Glitch Lab (Litvan, 2020)

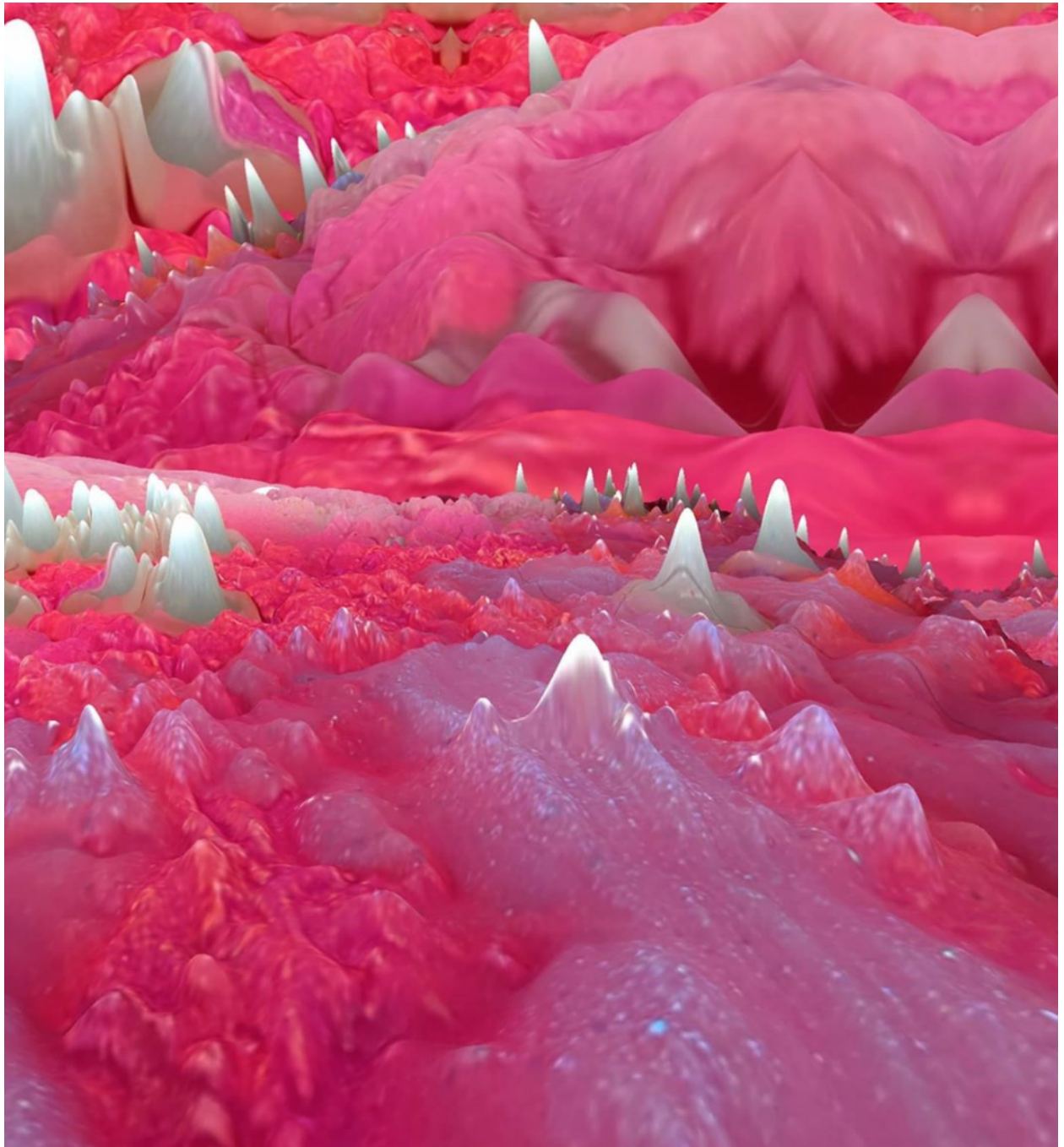


Figure 9: Still from Glitch Lab (Litvan, 2020)

The visual concept of camouflage (Lock, Scheper-Hughes, 1987) is strongly reflected in what I have visually produced in my landscape simulations. I sought for my images to remain visually seductive while masking the reality of breast cancer and the toxicity of its social stigmatisation (Figures 8 and 9). This further emphasises my focus on transforming “cancerous” content into works which comprise beautiful harmonies and symmetries. These images are decorative and kitsch, yet they remain confronting as the image itself unintentionally reflects the internal body.

The addition of stop frame animated videos derived from *Glitch Lab* act as a tour through my sublime, cancerous world. This progression is both ambiguous and hypnotising. Zooming into the space parallels the act of zooming into a specimen, or examining a cell under a microscope. I am therefore exploring the macro/micro paradigm through these short videos. The glitch videos manifested through the app is a reflection of medical scans and testing. The movement and visuals that are executed from the glitch videos can be likened to breast ultrasounds, CT, and MRI scans. I am personifying the cancer cell / tumour as an uncontrollable “glitched” presence within the body. With the simple edit of adding a loop to the video work, it reflects the philosophical notion that cancer cells have a never-ending life span. Since cancer cells have no expiry date, they do not stop reproducing and therefore have a more significant chance of creating an error (Alford, 2018). This idea is reflected within various iterations of my work.



Figure 10: Still from Glitch Lab (Litvan, 2020)

The process of accidentally coming across video stills (Figure 10) and 2D images which reflect the action of a ‘glitch’, reinforces the analogy of a glitch as the process of cancer growing and reproducing itself inside the body.

Recent discoveries have enabled me to produce arresting and intriguing photographic stills through *Glitch Lab*. This iteration of my sculpture (Figure 11) can be visually likened to a Rorschach ink-blot test (Figure 12). The Rorschach test is a psychological test in which subjects' interpretations of inkblot images are documented and analysed. Some clinicians use this test to identify an individual's character, and has even been a measure of cognitive performance (Harrower-Erickson, 1945).

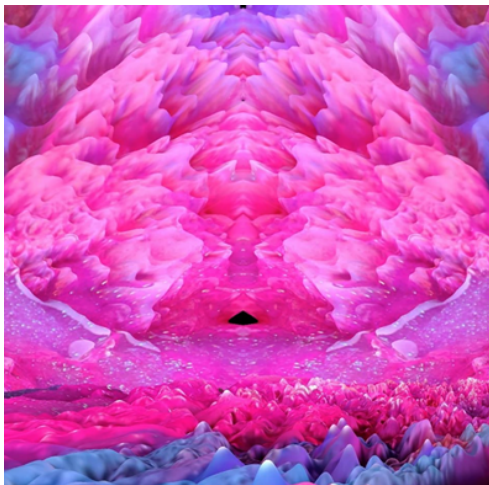


Figure 11: Symmetrical Glitch Lab Image still (Litvan, 2020) Figure 12: Example of Rorschach ink-blot test

The symmetrical images are further iterations that depart from the chaotic mess the previous images were. The prints remain within the visual purview of medical imagery, namely the Rorschach test, and therefore retain the visual presentation of a particular medical test. The images, however, have now become lush, ostentatious, and opulent. There is an innate attraction humans have to symmetry – it is satisfying and aesthetically pleasing – which harkens back to my intention of creating confronting content with flamboyant and vibrant visuals.

Physicist Alan Lightman explains:

The search for symmetry, and the emotional pleasure we derive when we find it, must help us make sense of the world around us, just as we find satisfaction in the repetition of the seasons and the reliability of friendships. Symmetry is also economy. Symmetry is simplicity. Symmetry is elegance (Lightman, 2013).

Humans impose order into the world as it is about controlling their environment; these images are a strong reflection of this. Introducing symmetry in an image which initially was pure chaos imposes control back into the process (Peterson, Wagemans and Roos, 2017). Creating symmetry within the image brings back a sense of control and in a way serves as a treatment for all the chaos and uncertainty, much like how surgery, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy work to mitigate the growth of cancer cells – typically with quite brutal and dehumanising effects on the human body. These medical treatments present a sense of control, but not in the delicate way symmetry does. I am ‘treating’ these chaotic images with visual symmetry (Balcioglu, 2012). The colour palette and images which have manifested within these works are also quite feminine (Figure 12) and erotic through the glitchy outcomes of unintentional patterns and floral imagery. These stills have become seductive and hypnotic images of cancer. Some of these images still have the effect of simultaneously alluring and repelling the viewer (Figure 13 and 14) (Kristeva 1982; Warke, 2013), similar to the intent of much of Louise Zhang’s work, which I will be discussing later.



Figure 13: Symmetrical Glitch Lab Image still (Litvan, 2020)



Figure 14: Symmetrical Glitch Lab Image still (Litvan, 2020)

I have drawn on my cultural heritage for a framework that would help make sense and instil some order onto the practical iterations. The widespread flamboyant and decorative forms of representation in

Russian culture are key factors for my art making. The opulent and symmetrical patterning found in traditional clothing, for instance, informs the aesthetic choices in my own work (Figures 15 and 16).



Figure 15: Example of a 17th C. Russian Kokoshnik



Figure 16: Traditional 18th C. Russian Dress

It is noteworthy that the symmetrical images generated through the app were a chance discovery, and one that redirected me back to the medical world. Although a literal glitch – where the outcome is uncertain and difficult to control, much like cancer inside the body – my work process has maintained a constant feedback loop between the domains of art and medicine. I have made a series of selections and decisions – some consciously, others not – which have led to my work being in part a product of chance. However, much of what I have created is a conscious reflection of the concrete situation in which my mother found herself. Although the result of my works are based on a certain degree of randomness or contingency, the process of finding the images involves a great deal of technical decision making and curation.

Chapter 2.1 Cultural Heritage & Disease

A surprisingly large number of people with cancer find themselves being shunned by relatives and friends and are the object of practices of decontamination by members of their household, as if cancer, like tuberculosis, were an infectious disease.

–Susan Sontag⁴

The influence my cultural heritage has had on my work is significant, as the cultural shame and stigma I watched my mother experience has come to be a fundamental building block for my practical and theoretical research. Despite being raised in Australia, Russian culture has saturated my life and upbringing, and I identify with it as my own. The act of contesting the stigma imposed onto illness and disability was therefore at the forefront of my research and desired practical outcomes. Throughout my research process, I have found that a very restricted and stigmatising mentality prevails within older generations, which inevitably had a severe negative impact on my mother's experience with breast cancer.

Alongside the pervasive equivocation with which my extended family has always talked about cancer, I noticed the way the subject would be discussed in popular contemporary Russian soap operas. Rather than saying the word 'cancer' (Rak), which is simply too taboo an utterance, it would be substituted with a euphemism of one kind or another. Some examples of these include:

§ It's bad...*really bad*

§ What are we going to tell people?

§ Are they sick, or are they *sick* sick?

§ It's already too late

⁴ *ibid*, 6.

The taboo behind the word “cancer” is developed further in Dr. Daniel Dohan and Dr. Marya Levintova’s 2007 study “Barriers Beyond Words: Cancer, Culture, and Translation in a Community of Russian Speakers.”⁵ The “terrible emotional burden” and desire to “take out the hard parts” mentioned by one of the interpreters used in the study related to the cultural taboo against disclosing a cancer diagnosis – or even saying the word – within the Russian community. Telling patients, especially elderly patients, that they have cancer is often seen as “taking away their hope and spirit,” and it could cause them to become extremely depressed and withdrawn, and it could even diminish their willingness or ability to survive. Drs Dohan and Marya describe how some avoided the “C” word with Russian-speaking patients altogether: “I say tumour [and] I think everybody in the room knows what it is and the treatment for a tumour is pretty much the same as treatment for cancer. And we get around it by just kind of using a code word for cancer.” For interpreters, standard disclosure practices sometimes lead to personal and professional dilemmas. One interpreter described an incident that began when a resident “pull[ed] rank” and insisted he tell an elderly man he had cancer. The patient replied, “I don’t have cancer. No, no, no, this is a mistake.” The incident continued:

The son comes by and I’m talking to him and I pull him aside and I said, “do you know that your father has cancer?” And he very matter of factly goes, “Of course I know. He’s had it for two years. We’ve been hiding it from him.” I say, “Well, you know, he didn’t know.” And I’ll never forget his face. It just froze and he stared daggers into me. He said, “You told him? You’re a Russian man and you told him?” I said, “Well you know, I’m just a translator, I’m just translating.” He says, “Do you understand what this means to a Russian man? It means you’ve just given him a death sentence; he is going to lose all hope, he’s going to stop eating, he’s going

⁵ Published in J Gen Intern Med. 2007;22(suppl 2):300–305. A sample of 74 individuals were the participants of the 2007 study. They used community based participatory research to examine the experiences of Russian-speaking cancer patients in San Francisco, California. The objective was to analyse the impact specific language had on the individual and which linguistic barriers were present when giving the individual a cancer diagnosis.

to stop drinking, he's just going to curl up in a corner and die. You have just ruined two years of us carefully hiding this from him. (Dohan, D; Levintova, M.)⁶

The findings from this study reflect Sontag's reference of Dr. Karl Menninger's observations in his book *The Vital Balance: The Life Process in Mental Health*:

The very word 'cancer' is said to kill some patients who would not have succumbed to (so quickly) to the malignancy from which they suffer... as long as a particular disease is treated as an evil, invincible predator, not just a disease, most people with cancer will indeed be demoralised by learning what disease they have. The solution is hardly to stop telling cancer patients the truth, but to rectify the conception of the disease, to de-mythicize it (Sontag, 1978: 6).

Conventions of concealment with cancer can be extremely strenuous. In France and Italy, Sontag writes, it was still the norm for doctors to communicate a cancer diagnosis to the patient's family but not to the patient; doctors consider that the truth will be intolerable to all but the exceptionally mature and intelligent patients. In Russia however, this was enforced by law until the early 1990s, stating it was illegal for the doctor to tell their patient they have terminal cancer (Sontag, 1978). This reflects how powerfully shame functions within Russian culture. The denial and desire for ignorance which is present in Russian culture, and that we received from extended family, is in many respects the reason for this thesis and body of work. What I thought was a relatively unique personal and familial experience, proved to span across the entire community.

Fear and shame are intimately intertwined with one another. Fear can control behaviours and sustain ignorance, neglect and exclusion regarding the disabled bodily form. In particular, I am thinking of the sociocultural context of prior generations whose upbringing coincided with the "State Terror" of Stalinism

⁶ This exchange mirrors the exact scenario I experienced with my grandfather when he was given his diagnosis. He was told without warning and further information that he has Hodgkin's Lymphoma, unable to say which stage or the severity, to which he responded: "How long?" in broken English. The lack of bedside manner and information on the part of the doctors, combined with the lack of knowledge and stigmatising enculturation on my grandfather's part, proved to have adversely impacted his mental state and willingness to fight the disease. As a result, his quality of life significantly declined.

in the Soviet Union, a policy introduced by Stalin as a way to control the masses.⁷ This sociocultural context rendered disabilities and serious illnesses hidden and unmentionable due to embarrassment, which subsequently generated anxiety and repressive practices as people struggled to survive in a society that exploited shame (McDermott, K; McLoughlin, B, 2002). There is an overwhelming amount of ignorance and shame aimed at disability, especially cancer. It is terrifying to feel compelled to hide one's illness or disability to survive.⁸ People's unaccepting responses to disabled (unconventional) bodies, and disability in general are largely a product of their environment and upbringing; they are only responding according to what they have either observed or what is enforced upon them through inherited societal standards (VanScoy, H. 2016). Illness is a difficult concept for many individuals remaining in such a mindset to both understand and confront. Such has been the case with much of my own family.

The metaphor of cancer, illness, and disease as a descriptor for undesirable races or social subgroups has been invoked commonly throughout history. Totalitarian movements during the twentieth century have been revealingly inclined towards the use of disease imagery. The Nazis declared that someone of mixed racial origin was like a syphilitic; European Jewry was repeatedly analogized to syphilis, and particularly to a cancer that must be excised from the social body. Disease metaphors were also a staple of Bolshevik polemics. Stalinism was called a cholera, a syphilis, and a cancer.⁹ To use deadly illnesses for imagery in politics is a means of imputing guilt and prescribing punishment. As was said in speeches by Hitler about 'the Jewish problem' throughout the 1930s, "to treat a cancer, one must cut out much of the healthy tissue around it" (Sontag, 1978). The imagery of cancer for the Nazis prescribed 'radical' treatments. To

⁷ This aspect of history will be further explored in my third chapter, where I explore the "Soviet Kitsch" movement.

⁸ When we discuss shame from a religious perspective, we begin to uncover one of the many roots of dismissive and abusive behaviour with regard to disability. Biblical examples of the religious representation of disability demonstrate that being disabled or contracting an illness was thought to result from that individual's own behaviour. In reference to biblical theologies on disability as sin, both the old and new testament adduce to the fact that disability is placed upon a person because they have sinned, which therefore increases public scrutiny and societal and cultural shame. Disability was considered the result of sinful behaviour and therefore propagated shame. This shame manifested itself through generations, leading to discriminatory and contemptuous behaviours about one's own disability as well as others. Cancer is a disability. This means that cancer—in particular breast cancer, which often leads to the eradication of embodied feminine signifiers—is relegated to silence (Otieno, 2009; VanScoy, H. 2016).

⁹ Trotsky called Stalinism the cancer of Marxism (Sontag, 1978)

describe a social phenomenon as a cancer is thus an effective and commonplace incitement to (potentially genocidal) violence. This political-discursive use of cancer was used to justify severe eliminationist measures. The notion of disease is never innocent, and in fact it could be argued that the cancer metaphors are in themselves implicitly genocidal (Sontag, 1978). These findings and the references Sontag makes to historical leaders using the cancer metaphor in such a way inspired me to produce works contesting this cultural stigma. Creating a body of work utilising a bold colour palette, while also using a range of materials which were related to my Russian culture – and that referred to my personal relationship with my mother – has always been my intent with this project.

This leads me to discuss the framed and decorated prints which came from using the *Glitch Lab* app and were mentioned briefly in the previous chapter. My goal was to convert the symmetrical images produced from *Glitch Lab* into glossy, ostentatiously decorated prints, thereby transforming them into unique, camp, and bedazzling iterations of cancer. My work's particular focus on colour and form is a strategic means by which the audience is covertly invited, even solicited, to acknowledge and discuss the difficult subject matter of breast cancer, disability, and illness. I am trying to visualise cancer and destigmatize it whilst using my mother's personal experience and my cultural heritage as a filter.¹⁰

¹⁰The 2016 exhibition *The Patient* curated by Bec Dean included works by Jo Spence, Bianca Willoughby (formerly John A. Douglas) and Eugenie Lee is an example of a different approach of contesting the stigma surrounding cancer. Dean's selection of artists presented their personal experiences of cancer and illness through a medical lens, and deals theoretically with the concept of the medical gaze. (Unfortunately, a proper treatment of the medical gaze proved to be beyond the scope of the current thesis. I ultimately decided not to include a discussion of the medical gaze and instead to leave it for a subsequent research project.) Although this exhibition does not speak to the visual intent and approach I have with my own practice, it does present and address medical issues and the way in which their bodies as "patients" are perceived. At its core, *The Patient* explores how art has the capacity to impart new approaches in visualising disease, medicine and art (Strachan, F, 2016).



Figure 17: Install image of prints at Airspace Projects from exhibition *La La Land (Get Out!)* (Litvan, 2021)

My intention for this series was to create unique, flamboyant framed prints which camouflaged the cancerous context. The prints (Figure 17) vary across 2 sizes; 45 and 30 cm diameter, however with each different frame I created, the work came into its own unique size, without any two having the same shape or dimensions – much like the growth of a cancer cell, or a tumour. Due to *Glitch Lab* being AI generated, each image was markedly different, with the colouring, composition, and the design itself all unique and unrepeatable. This idea was particularly noteworthy for my research, as this outcome once again reflected the process of cancer and the formation of cancer cells. The app is predominantly used to distort, manipulate, and “glitch” an image for commercial, and aesthetic purposes. However, I have used these features to create pleasing and palatable images that contest the taboo content of cancer.

Conceptually, my prints are presented as round compositions, as they act concurrently as emblematic of breasts, cancer cells, and the metaphor of cyclicity. There is a stark contrast here with regards to the borders and frames, as I have intentionally chosen to use a specific combination of soft and hard textures in order to impose a sense of playfulness and opulence. The carefully chosen materials consist of faux fur, artificial jewels, artificial flowers, and handmade flowers made from royal edible icing. The former three materials (fur, jewels, and synthetic flowers) are an explicit reference to my Russian cultural heritage on account of their kitsch and ostentatious quality. When discussing Russian culture, fur and jewels are

distinguishing materials. Fur coats – both faux and real – have always been a stock standard wardrobe piece, while jewels and pearls pervasively adorned the women of the community. In fact, the traditional style Russian fur coat was such an indelible cultural emblem that my mother was gifted one (which she still owns) after her first marriage – in the middle of the Sydney summer (Figure 18).



Figure 18: Examples of Russian ‘shuba’ (fur coats)

Synthetic flowers are prevalent in both Jewish and Russian culture. Although live flowers (due to their short life span) are forbidden to be involved in association with a person’s health or death, it is common for synthetic flowers to be substituted for both stones and live flowers to symbolise people’s love for the departed and a sign of mourning. The materiality of the handmade edible flowers (Figure 19) speaks to the collaborative and personal quality of my work, as the frame was handmade by my mother. The collaborative aspect of my work reiterates the personal connection I carry with my research and artistic

output. This piece is particularly special to me, not only because the peony roses were handmade, but also because of the historical significance of the flower in Russian culture. The flower symbolises honour, life, and love, and was a staple in every celebratory bouquet in my family. The inclusion of the gold leaf along the petals was another homage to the displays of opulence and grandeur that feature in Russian culture. I exaggerate the use of gold in my work as it is not only kitch, but it is also bold and bears strong connotations to Russian culture.

Moreover, not only does gold possess specific cultural ties, but the material itself is being utilised as a material in cancer treatment.¹¹ Photothermal therapy (PTT) is a central application of gold nanoparticles in cancer treatment. The gold nanoparticles absorb incident photons and convert them to heat to destroy cancer cells. The abnormal vascular structure of a tumour is inefficient in dissipating heat, thus the tumours are more sensitive to hyperthermia than healthy tissues. When irradiated by light, the heat generated by the gold nanoparticles causes biomolecule denaturation and cellular membrane disruption and kills tumour cells (Day, ES, Riley, RS, 2017).¹²

¹¹ Hainfeld *et al.* (2011) conjugated gold nanoparticles with polyethylene glycol and anti-Her2 antibodies (Herceptin) as Her2-targeting diagnostic tools. An *in vitro* study showed the nanoconjugates specifically targeting Her2-positive breast cancer BT-474 cells vs. Her2-negative breast cancer MCF7 cells with a gold mass ratio of $39.4 \pm 2.7:1$. In the studies, the BT-474 tumours showed 1.6 times higher CT attenuation than MCF7 tumours after intravenous injection of anti-HER2-conjugated gold nanoparticles. The Housefield Unit of BT-474 tumours was 22-fold higher than that of surrounding muscles, enabling the detection of small tumours on micro-CT (Hainfeld *et al.*, 2011). This is an extremely interesting discovery, as this is the exact rare form (Her2+) of breast cancer my mother was diagnosed with in 2007.

¹² Although gold nanoparticles offer an exciting platform for new cancer treatment, the long-term toxicity of nanoparticles is an issue for their use in humans (Astruc, D, Boisselier, E, 2009). The mention of toxicity again mirrors itself to the toxicity of cancer, and the kind of “seductive toxicity” my work has.



Figure 19: *Decadence*, Photographic print, resin, 24K Gold leaf, artificial flowers, royal edible icing (Litvan, 2021)

The use of delicate, flamboyant, and tactile materials to frame my prints echoes my concept of visually presenting a dichotomy of content and form, whereby I create delicate and sumptuously beautiful images of cancer (Figures 20, 21, 22). Each print was sealed with a coat of resin, with the inclusion of either flakes of 24K gold leaf, glitter, or iridescent pigment. Again, the choice of materials was a reference to

my cultural heritage, as I was making conscious decisions based on my perception of what reflected a bold, kitsch, and flamboyant aesthetic. The glossiness of the resin elevated the work visually, since it exaggerated the prints' ostentatious and luscious quality. The bright colour palette, glossy reflection, along with the tactile and bold textures of the frames epitomised my work as seductively toxic. The symmetrical details, and the intricate inclusion of the artificial jewels outlining the prints echoed the ornament and lavish details found in Russian jewellery (Figure 23).



Figure 20: *Funfetti*, Photographic print, artificial jewels, feather boa, resin, glitter (Litvan, 2021)



Figure 21: *Zolata*, photographic print, artificial flowers, pearls, 24K Gold leaf spray paint (Litvan, 2021)



Figure 22: *Razzle Dazzle*, Photographic print, artificial jewels, resin, feather boa, glitter (Litvan, 2021)

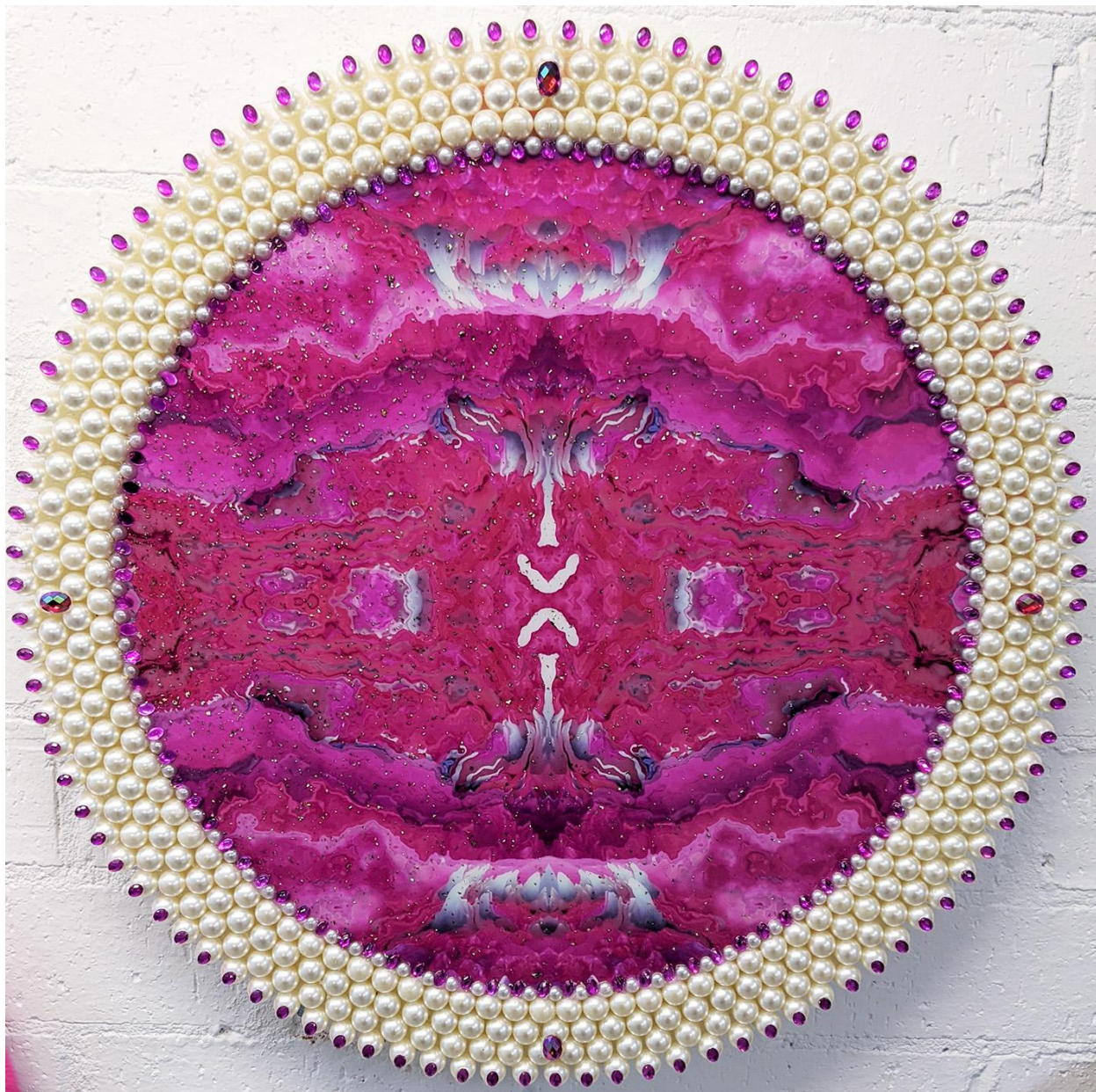


Figure 23: *Mother of Pearl*, Photographic print, pearls, artificial jewels, resin, glitter (Litvan, 2021)

2.2 Louise Zhang Case Study

My lived experience and cultural heritage have been fundamental areas of research and inquiry for me, and are ultimately the reason for this paper and body of work. This gives me an opportunity to discuss Louise Zhang, whose work is consumed by her personal history and sense of where she fits within her culture as a first generation Australian (much like myself). Louise Zhang is a Chinese-Australian artist whose multidisciplinary practice spans painting, sculpture and installation. Her work has had an ongoing influence on my practice. Her focus is the relationship between the attractive and repulsive. Zhang makes reference to Chinese horror cinema, and the complexities of horror as an art form, in order to explore the idea of viscerality, she directly refers to her Chinese culture through symbolic visuals of Chinese Scholar rocks, traditional flowers such as orchids, and Chinese architecture – much like I’ve done in my own work referencing my Russian heritage. Her work epitomises the dichotomy of content and form, which has also been a key feature of my project. She creates objects that are designed to at once allure and repel. Zhang’s paintings and painted sculptures are blob-like in form, alien in appearance, slippery in texture and lurid in colour. Their brightness and playfulness are striking, yet their formal character can be unnerving (Figure 24). In one sense Zhang’s works are entirely abstract – they do not represent forms from the real world (Gallo, 2015).

In my own practice, I create surreal prints that are derived from alienlike sculptures, which in turn had been abstracted from cells that live within the body.¹³ Cancer is the disease of the Other. Cancer proceeds by a kind of science-fiction scenario; an invasion of ‘alien’ or ‘mutant’ cells, stronger than normal cells.¹⁴ One standard science-fiction plot is mutation, with either mutants arriving from outer space or accidental

¹³ The notion of ‘alien’ is relevant, as it is also present in the physical body and the mind of a breast cancer patient. The patient, after the female signifiers being removed and amputated, is left with a mentality that forces them to believe they themselves are an alien as their body does not adhere to what a female is anymore; a freak. This idea is reinforced by the women in Chloe M Parton, Jane M Ussher, and Janette Perzs' study “Women’s Construction of Embodiment and the Abject Sexual Body after Cancer,” and Dennis D. Waskul and Pamela van der Riet's study “Symbolic Interactions.”

¹⁴ Popular examples include *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978), *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957), *The Blob* (1988), *The Thing* (1982).

mutations among humans. Cancer could be figuratively described as a kind of mutation. As a theory of the psychological genesis of cancer, the Reichian imagery of energy checked, not allowed to move outward, then turned back on itself, driving cells berserk, is already the stuff of science-fiction (Sontag, 1978).



Figure 24: *Pinky*, Polyurethane foam, enamel, glitter, resin, plastic and glass (Louise Zhang, 2015)

Zhang is working within a long tradition of representing the grotesque in art. This is invaluable to my own research, as I am striving to juxtapose the beautiful and the grotesque. When bodily forms are not quite as we expect them to be, there is a response of fear and abjection. This notion reflects Julia Kristeva's theory on abjection: She defines abjection to refer to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. The abject has to do with "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, 1982: 4). Much like my own exploration of the abject, Kristeva believes most

contemporary art and literature explores the place of the abject, a place where boundaries begin to break down, where we are confronted with a liminal space that precedes linguistic binaries such as self/other or subject/object.

In Zhang's work, an additional layer of dissemblance is introduced by her use of colour. Her saturated neon pigments are eye-catching, seductive, oftentimes even cute and friendly. Her colour palette and playful sense of the grotesque take their cues both from art history and contemporary culture (Gallo, 2015). The references to contemporary horror culture can be seen in the gruesome textures and monstrous bulges of Zhang's expanding polyurethane, silicone, and enamel sculptures (Figure 25).



Figure 25: *Feed you pink #5 (Series)* (Louise Zhang, 2018)

Rebecca Gallo writes:

We are initially attracted, which makes it all the more disturbing when we do come to contemplate the underlying forms and substances (Gallo, 2015)

This quote epitomises my own creative intention. With the visual similarities of our sculptural pieces, we both aim to attract and invite the viewer to interact with the work, without immediately realising the content of the work is vastly more grotesque than it initially appears. We are both camouflaging the confronting and grotesque nature of our work – Zhang’s being about the monstrous body acutely inspired by Chinese horror, and my own work being about the internal, destructive, disabled body – and presenting it in a more attractive, exciting, and palatable form. The colour palette and materiality is very much alike visually, however the overall content differs. For this reason, Zhang’s work is vital to my exploration of the visual “trick” of camouflage that pervades my work. Zhang is exemplary in her use of camouflage in order to make her work appear as something seductive, while in reality having very toxic content. In this instance, Zhang’s ‘toxic’ subject matter refers to her sense of identity within her Chinese culture. Zhang imposes upon the space with her alluring yet monstrous sculptures (Figure 26). Her work forces the audience to be consumed by the grotesque. This intention parallels my own wherein disability, and specifically cancer cells, invade and consume the human body.



Figure 26: Install shot from *Bury its young and all its demons* at Arterreal gallery (Louise Zhang, 2019)

Art critic Dave Hickey insists that in cases where we witness art that challenges contemporary views of beauty, we "transcend the gaze," whereby we see with our hearts and simply concur with the aesthetic authority of the image (Hickey, 1993). In some cases, the beauty of a piece allows transcendence of the terror within a subject matter. When the "real" is present, it creates discomfort and a more powerful response from the viewer. Art allows the person viewing the piece to feel the power and discomfort of the abject. This is particularly relevant to my own research and art making. By using kitsch and aberrant colours and materiality, I camouflage the confronting content of my work, and it therefore transcends the grotesque by means of its aesthetic appeal.

Chapter 3.1 The Rise & Effect of Soviet Kitsch

If kitsch is cheap and anti-intellectual, it can also be fun, and fun is the truly revolutionary quality.

–Susan Sontag¹⁵

In this chapter I develop my interpretation of kitsch and how “Soviet kitsch” in particular came to prominence in twentieth century Russia. According to Clement Greenberg, ‘kitsch’ was the very antithesis of real art (Greenberg, 1965), while Sontag describes kitsch as being liberated from “modern relevance” (Lazare, 2013). My research in this chapter will be guided by Sontag’s writings and insights on kitsch, as she and I both celebrate it as an aesthetic form. The word itself has its origin in German, in which it is defined as "an object of questionable taste." In English, kitsch is defined as "artistic or literary material held to be of low quality, often produced to appeal to popular taste, and marked especially by sentimentalism, sensationalism and slickness (Oxford Languages, 2021)." Milan Kundera, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, defines kitsch in the following manner:

In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme. The feeling induced by kitsch must be a kind the multitudes can share. Kitsch may not, therefore, depend on an unusual situation; it must derive from the basic images people have engraved in their memories (Kundera, 1984: 251).

In other words, kitsch is manufactured sentimentality. Saul Friedlander's simple definition of kitsch incorporates all these elements:

¹⁵ Sontag, S. *Notes on Camp*. (Penguin Classics, 2018; 1964)

Kitsch is at least something where there is a congruence between content and form, a simplistic message, and the means to stimulate in large numbers of people an unreflective response (Friedlander, 1990: 362).

This notion speaks to my own intent, as one of my primary artistic goals has been to transform the subject of cancer with flamboyant and inviting aesthetics in order to mitigate the stigmatised perception cancer holds. The sentimentality that inheres in my work can be referred back to my cultural heritage and its motifs and symbolism. Additionally, kitsch as a representation of sentimentality, cheesiness, and saccharine sensitivities, is somehow more at the forefront of what is associated as female culture. The feminine value of kitsch is visible in C.E. Emmer's witty study "Kitsch Against Modernity" (1998), where he points out how much more operative the concept becomes when we criticise or dismiss feminine mass culture (Emmer, 1998). Pink and gold, small objects rather than big ones, and porcelain rather than bronze – the set of associative tropes gives us an insight into kitsch's social mediation.

This type of thinking was famously leveraged by pop artist Jeff Koons (Figures 27, 28, and 29). During the late 1980's and 90s, Jeff Koons was one of the biggest names in contemporary art globally.¹⁶ The main works for this period were pieces that featured pastel colours, pink and gold, and works which were made of porcelain or glass. This notion reiterates the kitsch value of colours, which are precisely the ones that take precedence in my body of work, namely pink, and gold, since the colours make reference to both breast cancer and my Russian cultural heritage, respectively.

¹⁶ Although not a case study, he is a notable mention for this particular area of my research.



Figure 27: *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, Porcelain (Jeff Koons, 1988)



Figure 28: *Pink Panther*, Porcelain (Jeff Koons, 1988) and Figure 29: *Balloon Dog*, Stainless steel (Jeff Koons, 1994 - 2000)

Although the theorists' opinions of kitsch differ, they generally agree that the concept is perceived as a low form of art. The underlying conceptual dichotomy of high art / low art in reference to my research is the paradox of pairing what is perceived to be fine art (high) with what can be defined as handmade, or craft (low) art (Fisher, 2013). According to Pierre Bourdieu, one key feature of low culture art forms is that the

[primary] goal is entertainment: If a popular artwork's main goal is entertainment, to provide diversion and easy pleasure not involving any significant intellectual or perceptual demands, then it is not autonomous and its paramount focus does not involve the aesthetic and content goals ascribed to high art [...] Another important feature tending to lower artistic status involves the prominent bodily effects popular arts often intend to have on their audience: A primary aim is to cause basic bodily responses: This would be such as dancing, singing along, screaming and laughing, in short, a physical engagement (Bourdieu, 1984: 175-6)

By contrast, a higher artistic status is conferred on an art form when it is "representational – morally serious, poetic truth, true to reality; emotional – genuine, authentic emotional experience, not shallow, conventional or sentimental" (Fisher, 2013). This definition, and the distinction between high and low art, informs much of my project. High and low art is presented in my work through the juxtaposition of content and form. The concepts that I explore and present in my work conform to Bourdieu's definition of high art, however these themes are often represented through a low art form. My choice in work materials specifically lines up with Bourdieu's definition of low art. I use kitsch aesthetics and craft with an unmistakably handmade quality in order to push through the otherwise confronting topics of disability and illness. The themes of kitsch, abjection and camouflage are explored in my next case study, the feature film *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (dir. Stuart, 1971). This film is a strong example of some of the seemingly paradoxical formulations encountered in Bourdieu and Fisher, and I will be discussing how it camouflages authentic and morally serious concepts within the constraints of a popular entertainment product, and how it thereby presents the push and pull of high art vs low art.

3.2 Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory Case Study

Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory was adapted for the screen by Roald Dahl himself and was directed by Mel Stuart before being released by Paramount Pictures in 1971. The film portrays complex themes and concepts with the intention of presenting their deeper substance to a younger target audience, and is thereby fuelled by a kind of creative insanity. Through audio-visual imagery and graphics, the film is a representation of hedonistic indulgences, and achieves a sense of surrealism, abjection, and a dreamlike wonderland of creepiness which I strive for in my practice. It is a successful representation of the dichotomy of content and form, since it appears on the surface as a morality tale in which good children are rewarded and bad children are punished. However, the film's material also includes a condemnation of things such as bad parenting, spoiling children, over-eating, self-indulgence, and unapologetically depicts terrible injustices and exploited labour through the Oompa Loompas. The themes of fear, danger, gluttony, greed, bullying, and injustice are masked with sweets, dreamlike fantasies, music and colour, and reaffirms the idea that if a confronting issue is represented in a more frivolous and alluring manner it can be more easily digested by the audience.

The film is a clear example of the interplay of high and low art. It presents content that despite being morally serious is nonetheless confined to a warped, psychedelic, and entertaining reality. It camouflages confronting content in a more palatable and alluring form in order to grasp the audience's attention (Figures 30 and 31). The audience are acutely distracted by the violence that is continually occurring to the five children because it is all disguised and camouflaged by the excitement of sweets and hypnotising colours and music.



Figure 30: Image of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* 1971 film set



Figure 31: Image of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* 1971 film set

The film in its entirety is an inspiring reference for my research and art making due to its aesthetics and the atmosphere it exudes. In particular, the production and set design is notable. The work of cinematographer Arthur Ibbetson, whose subsequent work includes the 1973 TV series *Frankenstein: The True Story*, and production director Harper Goff, provide a wondrous and fantastical array of visuals which aid in camouflaging the underlying themes of the Roald Dahl's story.¹⁷ The camp colour palette, exaggerated scale of imagery, and the kitsch ambience strongly reflects how I perceive my own practice. However, the tunnel boat ride or the "tunnel of terror" scene in the film particularly stands out for me (Figure 32).



Figure 32: Still Image of the Wonka boat ride, 1971

¹⁷ During World War II, by his own account, Goff was approached for advice about camouflage paint by the U.S. Army, because he had been "making paint and working on a do-it-yourself painter's kit" (Naversen 1989, 150). Assigned to a camouflage research facility at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, he developed a set of paint colours (which he compared to paint-by-number kits) that were used as "standard issue" hues for camouflage, as well as a camouflage pigment that was chemically impermanent, enabling its removal when it was no longer needed. Later in the war, he transferred to the U.S. Navy where (in his words) "I was working on confusing the silhouettes of ships" [not unlike dazzle camouflage]. Dazzle camouflage, also known as razzle dazzle (in the U.S.) or dazzle painting, was a family of ship camouflage used extensively in World War I, and to a lesser extent in World War II and afterwards. It consisted of complex patterns of geometric shapes in contrasting colours, interrupting and intersecting each other (Naversen, 1989).

The boat ride epitomises Kristeva's notion of abjection, since this jarring scene unfolds in what appears to be a sweet wonderland for children. The tunnel itself is the abject element within a 'world of pure imagination,' and Willy Wonka's serenity in this scene is a stark contrast to the ominous sense of foreboding that the tunnel conveys. The audience is exposed to increasingly disturbing imagery displayed within the tunnel: worms slithering on a corpse, flying cockroaches, and a chicken being decapitated (Figure 33). It is two minutes of fear inducing psychedelia. The memorable scene is filled with violence and terror, two things which one would not ordinarily associate with a children's phenomenon. This echoes the use of abjection in my practice, in which I strive for sumptuously beautiful surface appeal, while imbuing the works with a darker subject matter lurking underneath.



Figure 33: Still Image of the Wonka boat ride, 1971

3.3 Soviet Kitsch Continued

There are many parallels I have discovered between kitsch and my cultural heritage. At its core, Russian culture thrives on opulence and ostentatious tenacity. Two examples of “Soviet Kitsch” and opulence I will be focusing on in this chapter is Soviet architecture, and the famed Fabergé eggs. Russian grandeur is evident in their architecture, specifically during the Early Muscovite period (1230 - 1530), the Middle Muscovite period (1530 - 1630), and finally the Late Muscovite period (1630 - 1712). During these periods, the architecture built was exceedingly decorative and was influenced by Polish and Ukrainian Baroque (Figure 34). Baroque was the dominant style in art and architecture of the 17th Century, characterised by self-confidence, dynamism and a realistic approach to depiction. The key factors of the Baroque period are exuberance and grandeur – elements which are prevalent in my work.

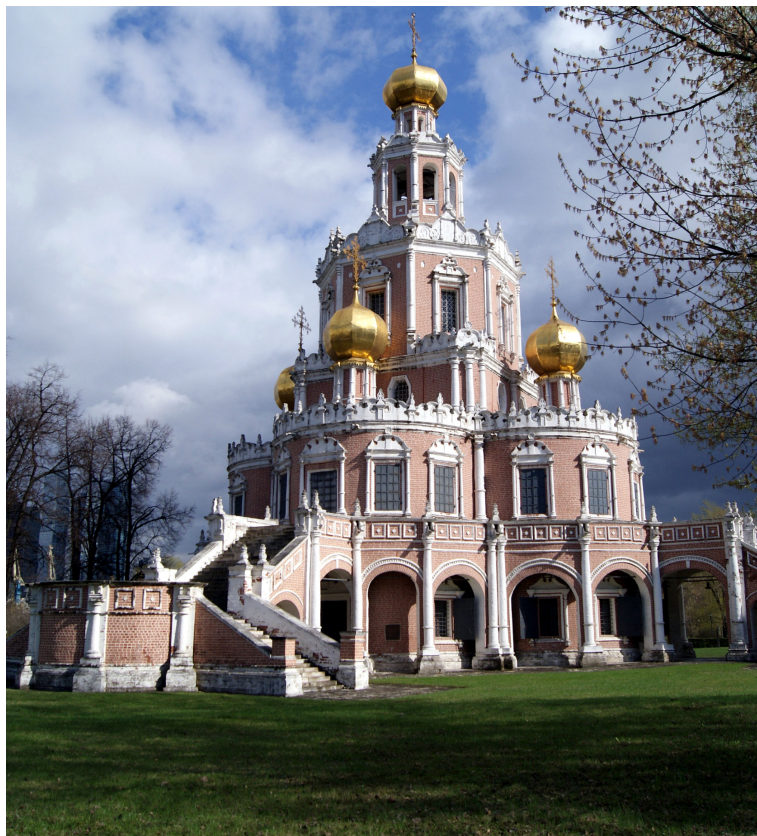


Figure 34: Church of the Intercession at Fili, 1689

Moscow in particular was known for its flamboyant and imposing architectural style during the 17th Century. An early example of this is the Cathedral on Red Square (1633 - 36) (Figure 35). The Baroque and flamboyant-style decoration is often so profuse that the church seems to be the work of a jeweller rather than a mason.

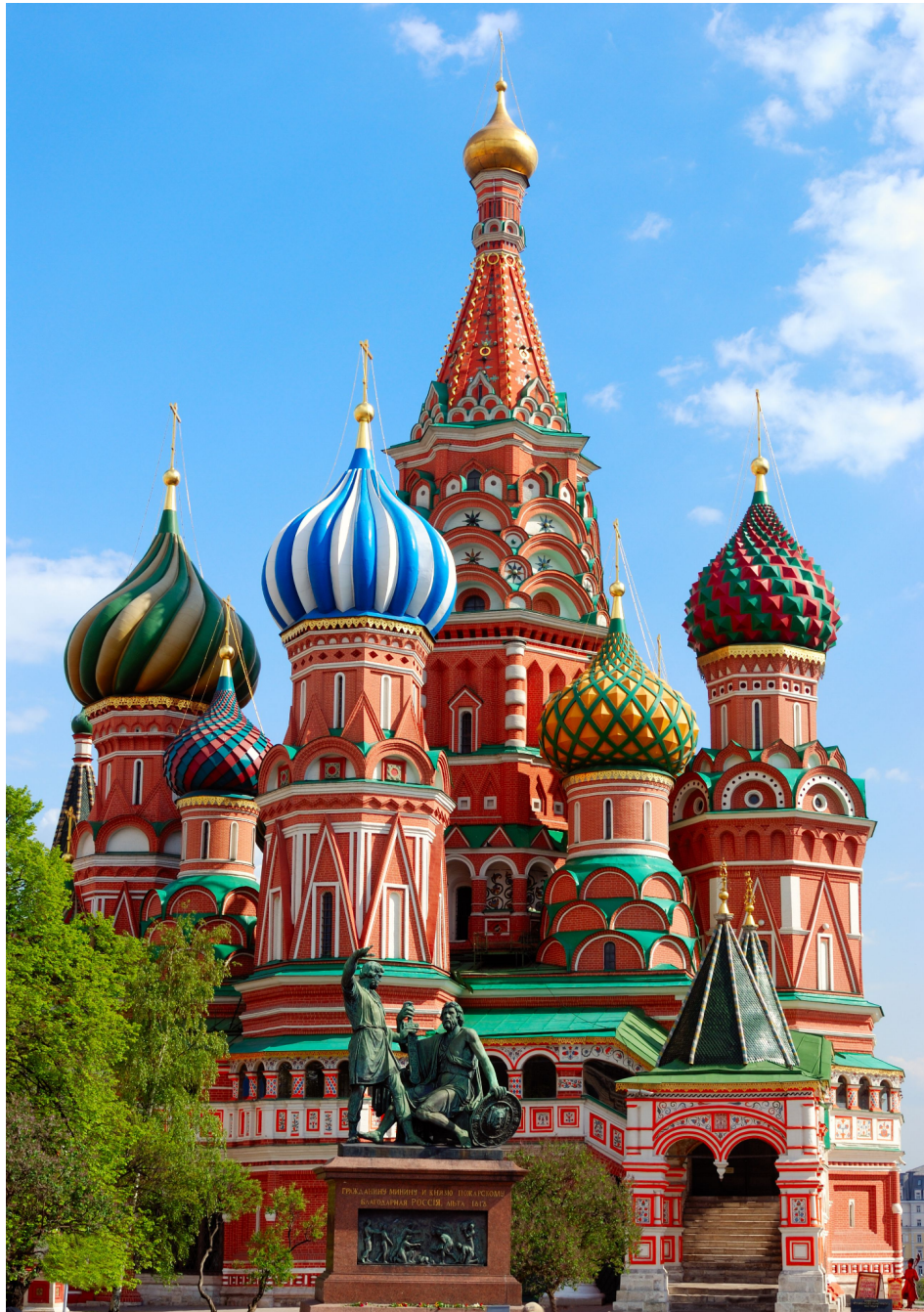


Figure 35: St. Basil's Cathedral, Red Square, Moscow, 1561

The kitsch aesthetic and delicate craftsmanship of Soviet architecture mirrors that of the Fabergé eggs. Fabergé eggs have acquired a cult status in the art world as well as popular culture; they feature in exhibitions, films and TV series, documentaries, cartoons, publications, and the news; after over a century they continue to intrigue. They have become emblematic of the splendour, power and wealth of the Romanov dynasty and the Russian Empire – priceless treasures (Figure 36).



Figure 36: *Lilies of the Valley Egg*, House of Fabergé, 1898

A Fabergé egg is a bejewelled egg created by the House of Fabergé, in St. Petersburg, Imperial Russia. Possibly as many as 69 were created, of which 57 survive today. Virtually all were manufactured under the supervision of Peter Carl Fabergé between 1885 and 1917, the most famous being the 52 "Imperial"

eggs, 46 of which survive, made for the Russian Tsars Alexander III and Nicholas II as Easter gifts for their wives and mothers (Astrasheuskaya, 2011). These creations are inextricably linked to the glory and tragic fate of the last Romanov family. The eggs were each entirely unique and made from a range of materials – from three-coloured gold to rock crystal – and always beset with precious stones and gems, like emeralds, pearls, and diamonds. Aesthetics and material considerations were of great importance. Like with my own work, the Fabergé eggs are yet another example of flamboyance and ornamentality. The delicacy of their design and their lavish beauty is a strong influence for my own work, insofar as I rely on a veil of beauty that camouflages taboo content.

I have drawn from my cultural heritage in order to make sense of my practical iterations. The flamboyant, decorative representation in Russian symbolism, seen here in the context of architecture and Fabergé eggs, are key factors for my art making. These examples focus on pattern, repetitive designs, and delicacy. The simplification of form imposes control in the final outcome of the work, which is a strong reflection of what I am aiming to achieve with my own images, that is, to impose control within the bounded chaos of my work.

This brings me to discuss the influence both *Willy Wonka* and Fabergé eggs have with the sculptural components. My sculptural pieces – ‘Fabergé Cells,’ if you will – are my playful iterations exploring the combination of cancer and my culture. My intention was to use Russian culture as an inspiration to create a seductive and tactile manifestation of cancer, and then overlay it with kitsch aesthetics by treating them as precious objects. I used a range of materials, including edible icing for the smaller pieces (in order to express their collaborative and personal nature), and flexible polyurethane foam, which reflected the uncontrollable growth of cancer, since the materiality and growth of the foam is generally unwieldy and only manipulable to a very limited extent (Figure 37). The addition of the jewels and gems enhanced their kitsch value, while referring back to both cancer and the iconic Fabergé eggs. This also served as a reminder of the element of camouflage my work possesses.



Figure 37: *Bubblegum*, Polyurethane foam, artificial jewels, pigment, mixed metals (Litvan, 2021)



Figure 38: Selection of Fabergé Eggs



Figure 39: Install image of the Vitrine at Airspace Projects (Litvan, 2021)

What elevated my pieces even more, and made the reference to the iconic eggs (Figure 38) even stronger, was the addition of the vitrine (Figure 39). Encasing them inside a vitrine emphasised their precious value and importance. This mode of display also provides a sense of exclusivity and naturally puts them at the focal point. The Fabergé cells also spoke to the history of medical exhibiting, as the visual of them locked in the vitrine reintroduces cancer back into my work. Putting the objects in a closed case positions the viewer behind a quasi-scientific lens; the vitrine acts as a false barrier that contains the specimens (sculptures).

Considering Fabergé eggs are an example of flamboyance and kitsch in Russian culture, my research led me to Soviet and Totalitarian Kitsch theories. “Soviet Kitsch” was a revolutionary movement for Stalin, and his regime’s use of kitsch aesthetics impacted Russian culture. Much of the debate about kitsch in the Western world began with an analysis of the political uses (and abuses) of kitsch – particularly its mobilisation by the Nazis. Kitsch becomes totalitarian kitsch when it is a state policy, an approved and administered way of understanding reality – dangerous not to admire it, more dangerous still to view it with irony. In his assessment of the use of "uplifting kitsch" (meaning mass-produced sentimentality that reinforces the symbols of the regime), Saul Friedlander notes:

Such kitsch has a clear mobilising function, probably for the following general reasons: first, what it expresses is easily understood and accessible to the great majority of people; secondly, it calls for an unreflective emotional response; thirdly it handles the core values of a political regime or ideological system as a closed, harmonious entity which has to be endowed with "beauty" to be made more effective... Finally, this peculiar linkage of "truth" and "beauty" leads to a stylization which tends to capture obvious mythical patterns; political myths and religious myths fuse (Friedlander, 1990: 376).

Kitsch played an instrumental propaganda role by providing the masses with a mythology – a shared image of the leaders, the goals, the desired self. In Russian, the word propaganda bears no negative connotations; it is simply equivalent to the capitalist term marketing. It is these images of "manufactured sentimentality" that are the essence of what Kundera and Friedlander recognize as totalitarian kitsch. Totalitarian kitsch permeated the Soviet psyche, and is one of the foundational causes for my family's perception of illness. The symbols of Communism persist in contemporary Russia. Many of these emblems remain simply as artefacts of a collapsed empire. Not all such emblems are kitsch; some are real works of art, created to glorify an empire. Many vestigial kitsch elements from the Stalinist era remain as artefacts of a collapsed empire; yet many of these kitsch symbols are deliberately used to this day in advertising, campaigning, and contemporary art and music. Communist kitsch has found a solid niche in Russian popular culture. As Kundera insists, "Kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all political parties and movements" (Kundera, 1984: 91).

Kitsch aesthetics were used to mask the reality of Stalinism and Communism. This technique was central to the propaganda output and became fundamental to its success. The lightness of Kitsch aesthetics enabled Stalin to convince the Soviet community to believe Communism was the only way. Stalin's regime then made use of cultural kitsch in cinema and art to sell the narrative of "Soviet Kitsch" to the masses. Kitsch is undeniably grounded in deception, something writer Modris Eksteins' has described as "the beautiful lie... a form of make-believe, a form of deception" (Eksteins, 1989: 304). In the Soviet context it was enacted from above by a totalitarian regime and diffused within society by the willingness of others to conform to the "beautiful lie."

Through the construction of political and cultural kitsch – "the beautiful lie" – a totalitarian ruler gains control over government and society. The masses, too, come to accept the beautiful lie and join the ruler in acting it out; they become complicit in building and performing kitsch. Kitsch is a falsehood because it is artificial in nature; it is deliberately constructed to support a regime. Applying this research and statement, my work fits into the category of propaganda as I'm consciously disguising the reality of

cancer and presenting it to the audience through kitsch and inviting aesthetics in an attempt to open a dialogue and change the perception that disability and breast cancer have within my cultural heritage. My work is motivated by Ekstein's perception of kitsch because I see the idea of "the beautiful lie" a variation on my notion of camouflage; the "lie" is present in my utilising kitsch and "deceptive" aesthetics to present the subject of cancer and illness to the audience.

Chapter 4.1 The Bodily Glitch

The language used to describe cancer evokes a different economic catastrophe: that of unregulated, abnormal, incoherent growth. The tumour has energy, not the patient, 'it' is out of control. Cancer cells, according to the textbook account, are cells that have the mechanism which 'restrains' growth. (The growth of normal cells is 'self-limiting', due to a mechanism called 'contact inhibition'.) Cells without inhibitions, cancer cells will continue to grow and extend over each other in a 'chaotic' fashion, destroying the body's normal cells, architecture, and functions.

–Susan Sontag¹⁸

Glitch theory has been invaluable for my research, and my ongoing use of it as a medical analogy has been a binding element in my practice. The emergence of glitch in the artworld is expertly described by *Postdigital Aesthetics* historians Christiane Paul and Malcom Levy. As they explain:

The term ‘glitch’ in the broadest sense refers to images that have been tampered with; their creation relates to the core of the media apparatuses used to store, produce and relay information. These corrupted images can be created by adjusting or manipulating the normal physical or virtual composition of the machine or software itself, or by using machines or digital tools in methods different from their normative modalities (Berry, Dieter, 2015)

Glitch procedures engage and reflect technical failures in digital systems. A glitch can be described as “courting disaster,” since the results of these processes verge on, or point to, a complete systemic and structural failing (Betancourt, 2017).

Dr. Justine Alford explains how any cell in the body has the potential to turn cancerous. A cell that is capable of growing uncontrollably collects mistakes in its DNA code, which cause a gene or set of genes to go awry. If the cell also loses certain safety mechanisms it can be at risk of becoming cancerous. The

¹⁸Sontag, S., *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 64.

steps a cell needs to take in order for it to turn cancerous includes: the ability to divide, if it builds up mistakes in certain genes; and if these faults cause it to grow out of control. Accumulating DNA damage is the most fundamental part (Alford, 2018). Each time a cell divides, an error can develop. These errors are called mutations. Applying this explanation and theory, cancer too courts disaster and is an iteration of a glitch inside the body. This is the direction my work possesses. Through the context of my practice-led research, I am referencing glitch as a positive malfunction. My research has led me to the medical analogy of representing cancer as a bodily glitch. This subject is visually presented through my experimental video *Down The Rabbit Hole* (2021).

This audiovisual work was the main component of my solo exhibition at Airspace Projects, and was to become the focus for my later research.¹⁹ The video projection was the most experimental of all the works in the exhibition. At over six minutes long, the video was the result of the still image outputs from the *Glitch Lab* app transformed into a stop-frame animation (Figure 40). By screening it in an enclosed physical space (the gallery room) I was able to create the kind of ambient environment and immersive viewing experience for the audience that my work requires in order to “camouflage” some of its more difficult or taboo content. My intention was for the video to have very slow, dynamic, and hypnotising visuals that were overlaid with disruptive and disturbing audio. The overall effect I was seeking was one of combined intrigue and disquiet.

These intentions echo my reference to the boat ride in *Willy Wonka*. My attempt at creating alluring and wondrous visuals that reimagine cancer (qua content or subject matter) reiterate the bizarre atmosphere of Wonka’s boat ride, as well as Ekstein’s perception of kitsch as “the beautiful lie.” Camouflaging the cancerous context of my work with kitsch aesthetics captivates the audience and draws them in further without the nature of the content to which they are exposed being immediately clear.

¹⁹ Titled *La La Land (Get Out!)*, May 2021



Figure 40: Video still from *Down the Rabbit Hole* (Litvan, 2021)



Figure 41: Install image of *Down the Rabbit Hole* Projected at Airspace Projects, 2021

A pleasant discovery – which only presented itself once the video was projected in a physical gallery space – was the prominent shadows that the projection created (Figure 41). Having shadows present themselves in the space spoke to the collaborative element the audience had with this work. Their shadows, and in turn their own selves became part of the work. This is a reflection of the work becoming more personal, incorporating the viewers' bodies and thus creating a more intimate atmosphere.

The inclusion of audio completely transformed the video and proved to be a crucial component. The audio is an edited conversation I had with my mother, where she emotionally describes her process of being diagnosed with breast cancer in 2007. Her voice is audible, but mostly unclear, as I had the volume quite low and in the back corner of the space. Along with this conversation, I included parts of a speech given by Joseph Stalin in 1945. The audio begins with what sounds like static, however this is the sound of applause, which at the time of the event was forced on the crowd through fear and intimidation. His

speech, only audible in short bursting moments over my mother's voice, discusses his Communist goals for Russia as a nation.

Having the volume at a low level obscured its content and forced the audience to enter the space without being directly confronted by the explicit content of my work. I edited the audio for there to be a crackling, almost metallic effect; it was delayed, but the delay was random and merely repeated words in a manner that was largely out of my control. While my mother's voice is heard speaking, I wanted the audio to have a more medical component, however subtle. To achieve this, I included audio of an MRI machine running, which resurfaces at random. The result of this addition created an irksome medical effect. The vibration and pounding of my mother's delayed voice combined with the MRI made for a vexing and frustrating audio to listen to. The addition of a loop in the video and audio was a simple way of indicating an unyielding process, much like cancer itself. Cancer is a never-ending cell – it cannot die (Alford, 2018).

Although the underlying context of my work isn't always obvious, I wanted one of the components in the exhibition to take a more literal and personal approach. Having this work comprise a conversation I had with my mother about her diagnosis is highly intimate, and using her actual voice brings back the very personal connection I have to my research. The inclusion of this audio additionally relates back to *Willy Wonka's* boat ride in a very particular way. While the boat made its way through the tunnel, and the disturbing images were projected along the walls, Wonka recited a poem, starting off silent but slowly rising in pitch and amplitude until he is eventually shrieking. The change in tenor and tone add to the atmospheric sense of unease the boat ride creates in the film. This moment was particularly inspiring, as the change in volume I had with the audio throughout the video (including prolonged silent gaps) allows the audience to be drawn in, before they are then disturbed by the jarring elements they can hear. The audio in this scene lulls you into a false sense of security and serenity, which is an effect I have strived to reproduce within my own video work. Hearing my mother talk about her process of being diagnosed forces the audience to view the video, and ultimately the rest of the show, through a more medicalised

lens. They are now visualising each work through the eyes of the breast cancer patient, that is, from my mother's perspective.

This is a way of reinscribing compassion, empathy, and humanity into the viewing experience. Having her discussing her process reinforces the ownership she has over her experience. Moreover, the inclusion of Stalin's speech, paired with the intimate conversation about cancer, and elements of the MRI scan explore key aspects of my research. Juxtaposing Stalin's fear-inducing speech about propaganda and Communism with an emotional and raw mother-daughter conversation about breast cancer was a way of reiterating the stigma imposed on people with any serious ailment (Bown, 1991; Conquest, 1990; Miller, 2010; Sontag, 1978). This is further highlighted in the use of audio sampled from my mother's description of the difficulty she had engaging with her family on the subject of illness.

4.2 Refik Anadol Case Study

My video work *Down the Rabbit Hole* functions similarly to some of the AI generated video works of Refik Anadol. Specifically, his use of movement within the imagery is an effective technique to entrance the viewer. Anadol's body of work is particularly influential to me due largely to his expert and extensive use of immersive techniques. His desire to encourage audience interaction is also a goal at the forefront of my own work. Anadol has therefore been a key component to my research, as he is concerned with the themes of science fiction, the influence of Artificial Intelligence, and is exploring the confluence of science, technology and art.

As a media artist, designer and spatial thinker, Anadol is intrigued by the ways in which the transformation of the subject of contemporary culture requires a rethinking of aesthetics, techniques and perceptions of space. He builds his works using data and machine intelligence, and plays with the viewer's reactions and interactions with unconventional spatial orientations. By embedding media arts into architecture, he probes at the possibility of a post-digital architectural future in which there are no more non-digital realities, and invites the viewers to visualise alternative realities. Anadol's work suggests that all spaces and facades have the potential to be utilised as the media artists' canvases. Working in the fields of site-specific public art with a parametric data sculpture approach, as well as live audio-visual performance with immersive installation, his works explore the space among digital and physical entities by creating a hybrid relationship between architecture and media arts using machine intelligence.

Anadol collides virtual and physical worlds, and combines (media) art with science. This concept is comparable to my own, since I am also exploring the confluence between medicalised and artistic representations of cancer, respectively. His work invites the audience to become a part of a spectacular aesthetic experience in a living urban space. His imagery is therefore transformed into sensory knowledge which can be experienced collectively. As a media artist, Anadol consistently conceptually questions what it means to be an AI in the 21st Century. He uses collected data as a pigment and paints with a brush that

is assisted by AI, using architectural spaces as canvases and collaborating with machines to personify these spaces. His pervasive question when creating his data paintings is: If machines are constantly learning from our input and intelligence, do they have a subconscious – can they dream, think, form memories, or hallucinate? Although Anadol has a more scientific approach with his work, his visual and auditory techniques resonate strongly with me and have been instrumental in my own research. His works *Bosphorus*, *Melting Memories*, and *Quantum Memories* presents an aesthetically wondrous collection of images, drawing the viewer in with their smooth dynamism and calm movements, and ambient audio.

Melting Memories (Figure 42) is a data sculpture which visualises (and is inspired by) the movement of brain signals during the creation or retrieval of memories. This work was created by Anadol when he received tragic news of his uncle's diagnosis with Alzheimer's. His interpretation of memories and memory loss was the slow effervescent movement of them melting away. Pairing this movement with brain function and the parts of the brain that light up during an MRI was key to creating the movement and tension present in the work. The artwork generated by EEG data explored the materiality of remembering and stood as a tribute to what his uncle had lost.



Figure 42: *Melting Memories* video still, Data Pigments (Refik Anadol, 2018)

The movements and visual shapes that the data creates in this work are akin to topographical mapping, similar to that of a brain MRI or other medical scanning. The ambient and soothing audio paired with the slow data movements encourage the viewer to remain ensconced in the immersive space. Additionally, the calming audio paired with the entrancing visuals of the movement created by the data pigment epitomises the dichotomy of content and form. *Melting Memories* is also an example of Anadol camouflaging the reality of Alzheimer's with serene visuals, thereby concealing the aggressively degenerating effect that Alzheimer's has on the brain. Although *Melting Memories* is influenced by personal tragedy, Anadol's body of work is influenced by urban and scientific factors, whereas my body of work focuses on my mother's experience with disability, as well as the latter's mediation by family and culture.

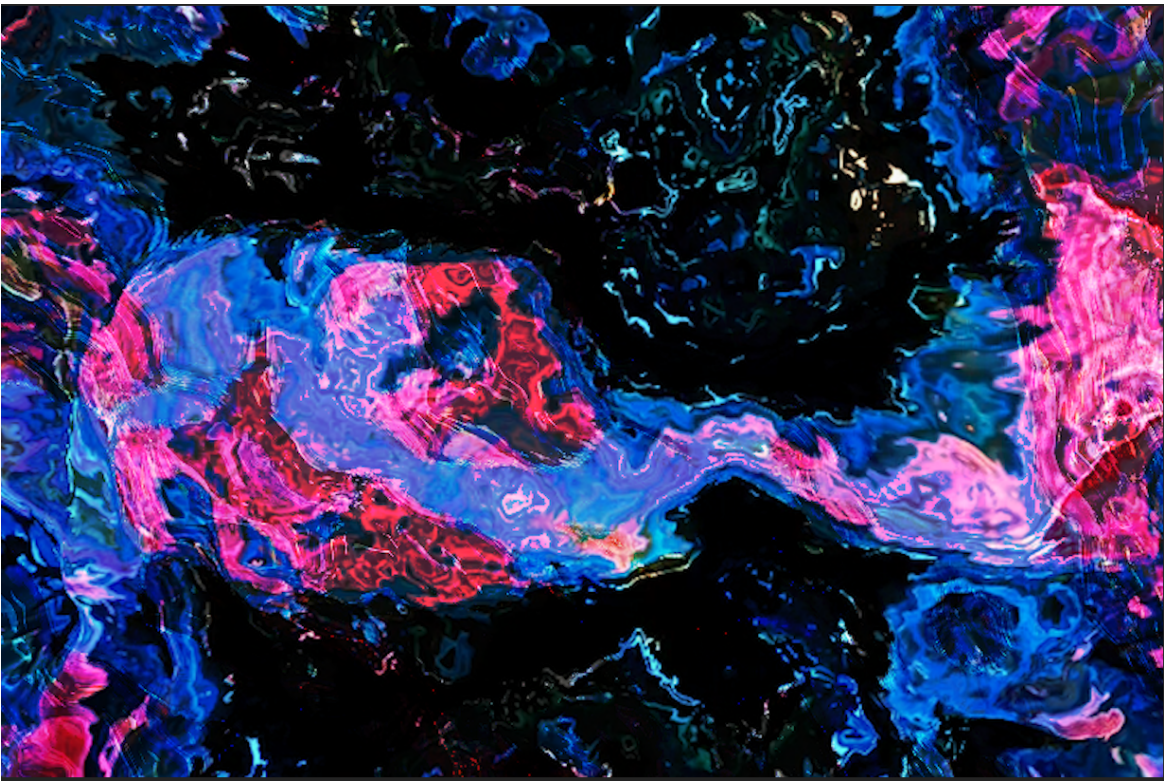
My work is visually similar in this case, as the use of movement in the imagery is a technique aimed at entrancing the viewer, and of veiling what is considered to be "taboo" content. The black voids which are a repetitive feature in my video evoke a sense of movement and the internal body, they give the impression that it will open further and allow the viewer to see inside the 'body' even more. Like my own work, his evokes a sense of topography (Figure 43). Though these worlds and landscapes are digitally imagined with data pigments, their structural presentation makes the audience question their authenticity (Anadol, 2020). The subject of topography is related again to the subject of cancer in Sontag's essay. She writes:

Metaphorically, cancer is not so much a disease of time as a disease or pathology of space. Its principal metaphors refer to topography (cancer 'spreads' or 'proliferates' or is 'diffused'; tumours are surgically 'excised'... (Sontag, 1978: 15)



Figure 43: *Melting Memories* video still, Data Pigment (Refik Anadol, 2018)

His distinctly large-scaled data pigments confront and overwhelm the viewer in a wholly immersive way. The use of scale is a particularly influential factor with my own research (Figures 44 and 45), as scale is a simple technique that can be used to distort or displace otherwise confronting content in an effective manner.



Figures 44 and 45: *Down the Rabbit Hole*, video stills (Litvan, 2021)

4.2 Harley Ives Case Study

Anadol's practice is possessed of visual and conceptual similarities to that of my final artist case study, Harley Ives, a Sydney based artist who predominantly works with the moving image. His video works play on the notion of traditional paintings and focus on the visual qualities of the image itself.

Transforming them into moving paintings breaks the conventional narrative a traditional painting has when presented on a wall in a gallery space. Ives' work is a clear representation of the glitch concept and of kitsch aesthetics, paralleling my own research and artmaking. These themes are presented in his work through composition, scale, and the use of the oversaturated colour palettes. Ives explores the conflicting relationship between the virtual and the physical, the material and the immaterial. His video works are intended to be presented on a gallery wall to mimic a traditional painting. The addition of the loop in the videos means that there is no concrete endpoint and they instead function as endless paintings which simply exist on the wall (Moulis, 2020).

Ives' selected video works in his show *Immaterial Ornament* is a collection of glitchy, hyper-saturated moving still-lives. Commenting on our contemporary digital-age society, the video works are inspired by the Western traditions of still-life paintings and flower arrangements. His specific inspiration was what emerged from 17th Century Dutch still-life painting – an impossible bouquet, depicting an arrangement of flowers which could not coexist due to their conflicting blooming seasons. Decay and degeneration are very much present in these works. As biological flowers drop petals and curl, Ives' flowers shed data and discolour. The flowers in these works also experience a kind of transit, moving between digital and analogue modalities, a process that imparts an oversaturated glitchy aesthetic that's specific to the technologies used (Figure 46). Movement is also introduced to these compositions, resulting in objects that melt, drip, crumble, pour and rotate. This resonates with my own research and making, as movement and saturated pigments in my work are used as a technique to entice the viewer and disguise the underlying content of my work.



Figure 46: *Immaterial Ornament 1*, still taken from a 2min. seamless video loop (Harley Ives, 2020)

Ives' animated paintings are created through a complex process that involve steps that bring together controllable and uncontrollable elements. This meticulousness mirrors the 1950s and 60s flower arrangement books collected by Ives – books created with middle-class housewives in mind, providing instruction on how to beautify their homes. There are different ways to perceive these books: with appreciation for their kitsch appeal; as guides and inspiration for expressing creativity; as manuals for decorating the cage that was the home for so many women. Ives presents the flowers as reminders of the

inevitability of death, while also having this infinitely deferred by fitting these still-lives with the endless loop that prevents the flowers from ever expiring.

Although conceptually our works do not align, the visual aesthetics present do. The use of the infinitum loop in Ives' works reflect the cyclical cancerous medical analogy my work possesses. The never ending life span a cancer cell has once it has invaded the body is simply reflected by adding loops into my video works to depict the cycle.

The glitch aesthetic is overtly present in Ives' moving still-lives. Although his work comprises a stronger depiction of glitch than it does kitsch, his work without a doubt bears a kitsch presentation due to the colour palette, composition, and content. Kitsch is present in his work through the inspiration of the flower bouquets and the ornamental vessels which hold them. Still lifes bristling with ornamentality depicting bouquets are considered cliché and thus kitsch. When describing one of Ives' works, Alex Moulis says:

Images considered lowbrow, or trash, are rendered abstract through a meticulous digital process that produces unique marks and aesthetic effects generated by glitches of the software. Unique forms of beauty result, seductive in their pixelated contours and movement (Moulis, 2019).

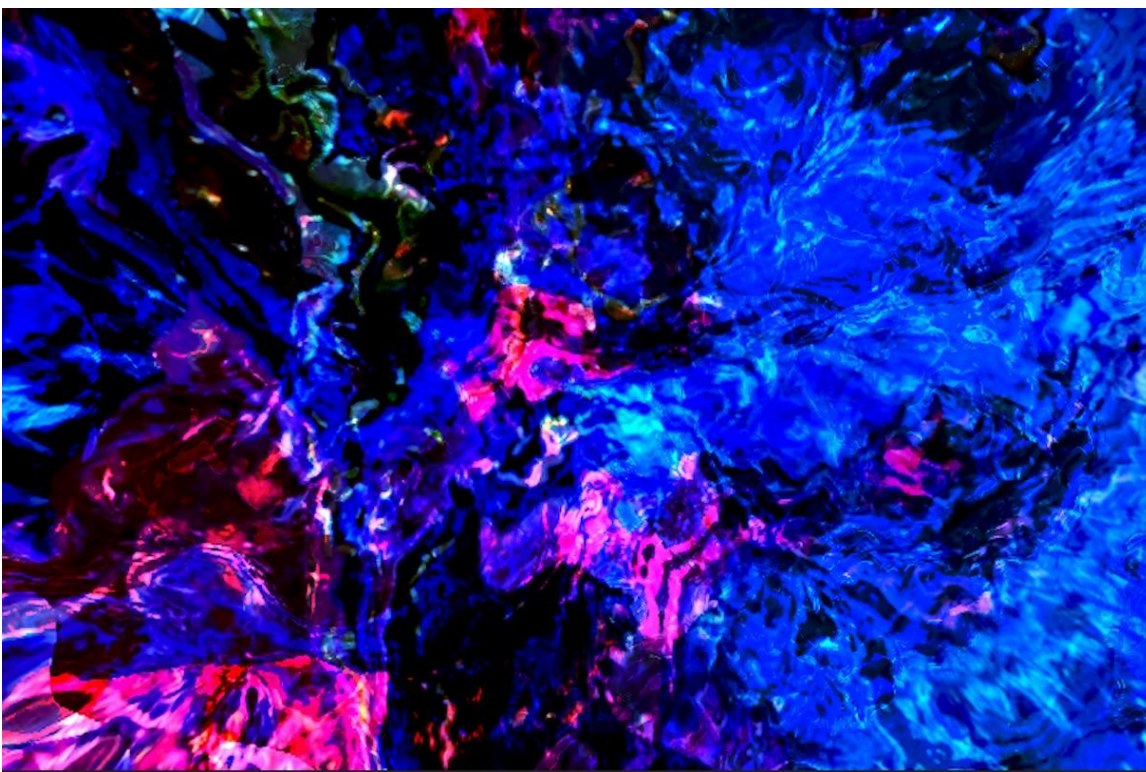
This particular detail in Ives' work mirrors my intent to embrace and lean into the glitch aspect of the *Glitch Lab* program which produces my still and moving images – intentionally choosing images which reaffirm the theme of kitsch aesthetics.

Like the other case studies which are important for my research, the scale and overly saturated colour choices Ives has within his work (Figure 47) has been influential on mine. There is an extensive overlap of saturated magenta, purple and gold hues. Particularly magenta and gold, which I choose to highlight in my own work due to their connection to “Soviet Kitsch” aesthetics, on account of their opulence and

grandiosity. The saturation in his moving images could not be achieved if it were a traditional painting. This is a key factor with my own work, in which I use an eccentrically camp colour palette to entice the viewers to look closely at the work (Figures 48, 49, 50).



Figure 47: *Immaterial Ornament 2*, still taken from a 2 min. seamless video loop (Harley Ives, 2020)



Figures 48 and 49: *Down the Rabbit Hole*, video stills (Litvan, 2021)

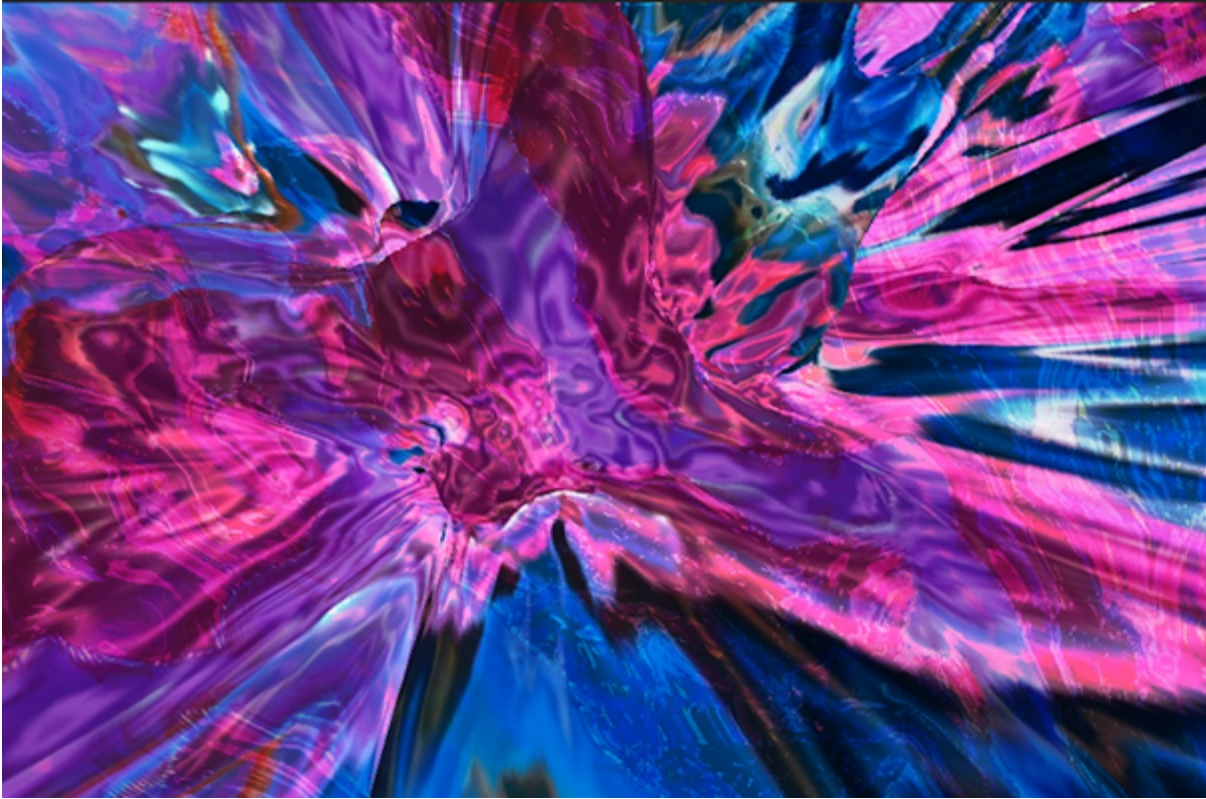


Figure 50: *Down the Rabbit Hole*, video still (Litvan, 2021)

Both Ives' and Anadol's works possess slow, calm movements which become hypnotising to the audience, pairing it with ambient and somewhat soothing audio. In some cases, saturated pigment and visuals are used, which reflect two dimensional paintings but are technologically generated. There are striking similarities between their work. Both artists rely on immersive environments which encourage the viewer to fully inhabit the worlds created. Their works explore the intersections of technology and art, with a focus on digital aesthetics and its relationship with human interactivity. Similar to the data pigments of Refik Anadol, the vibrant colours paired with the calming and slow movements in Harley Ives' videos entrance the viewer.

The use of audio elevates Ives' works, transforming and enhancing the glitch component of his moving images, with the slow hum and rumble adding a hypnotic layer to supplement the visual. Upon reflection, the audio component was a vital addition to my video work, as it provided the kind of ambience and

atmosphere to the space that I had been seeking. The idea of a “seductive toxicity” is present in my own work and in the works of each case study I have included in my research. Whether it be through the content of their work, or the overly saturated colour palette present. This element and finding is indispensable for my practice-based research, as the subject of cancer is seen as toxic and shameful to discuss within my family, and within the Russian community more generally.

Conclusion

My research has proven to be a vast and eclectic discovery. Within *The Kitsch Glitch*, I have found that my personal (second-hand) experience with breast cancer cannot be researched, nor can it be artistically portrayed without considering the impact my cultural heritage has, and its conflation with shame. The scope of my research thus far has given me insight that the subject and theories within this paper are ongoing. And, as explained in each of the chapters, my case studies foreground my view of the work I have made. The ongoing medical analogy of cancer being presented as a bodily glitch, along with the choice to present it with “Soviet Kitsch” inspired aesthetics have become intrinsic to my theoretical framework and art practice. By researching my cultural heritage and utilising a punk-luxe aesthetic I have been able to represent my mother’s experience with breast cancer in a way that challenges my family’s perception of the disease.

Chapter 1 showed that the outcome of researching and understanding my family’s cultural history and perception of illness proved to be the core motivator for my theoretical and practical research. I realised from learning this that the content of my work, which already had an eclectic sensibility, had to transform into something more immersive, playful, ostentatious and vibrant. This became my approach to contest the cultural attitudes and negative perceptions of illness I uncovered while researching this paper.

In Chapter 2 we saw how my practice became motivated by the widespread cultural stigma discussed throughout this paper. My case study of Louise Zhang presented her cultural background as a key inspiration for her otherworldly, bodily blobs. Using her practice as a comparative study allowed me to visualise and present my work through a more abject-conscious lens. Exploring the notion of the abject through Zhang’s practice is a reason why I consciously “beautified” images (and my interpretation) of cancer by adorning them with kitsch materials like gold, flowers, and fur – all of which served as an homage to my Russian cultural heritage.

The Third Chapter outlined how the film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) served as a reference point for my sculptural pieces. I discussed the overall playful and abject atmosphere the film exuded as a way for me to reiterate the contradictory nature inherent to my project, its pervasive juxtapositioning of content and form. I acknowledge my practice is vast, eclectic and is presented with a sense of chaos and uncertainty. The discovery of “Soviet Kitsch” became a core element and crucially redirected my practice towards the Faberge cancer cells. These were physical iterations combining multiple research topics – cancer, kitsch, Russian culture, the *Willy Wonka* case study.

Finally, in Chapter 4 I found that presenting cancer as a bodily glitch compelled me to research artists whose practices were digitally based, since I was now incorporating a digital component into my body of work. This inclusion was vital to my work, as it allowed me to fully realise the “glitch” concept in my showpiece work. Additionally, researching Refik Anadol and Harley Ives’ practices made me aware that my work has taken a more digital approach and something which I intend to explore further in future projects through the use of VR, immersive digital environments, and interactive physical spaces. This is resoundingly the direction I intend to take in my subsequent work.

I would not have imagined that the video work, *Down the Rabbit Hole*, in particular would have turned out the way it did, especially since it was an experimental piece at the beginning. Through audience interactions from the halfway show at Airspace Projects, I could see that this fully immersive experience is the culmination of my research and theoretical findings thus far. Though this insight also applies to the decorated prints and the Fabergé cells in the vitrine, as I was able to see how a physical audience interacted with the pieces, and watched their interest grow in real time.

Throughout the duration of this program, I have had the desire to explore the prospect of 3D printing, and transfer my video work into the world of Virtual Reality. However, due to unpredictable covid-related disruptions across the 2 years, I was unable to do so. These are now future opportunities, much like the barely-scratched surface of the fascinating intersection between art and medical science. From the results

of the exhibition at Airspace projects in particular, I have learnt that medical aesthetics can be incorporated into my practice in a range of fascinating and visually compelling ways, and is something I look forward to exploring more. This project is therefore very much an ongoing endeavour, and something which will (hopefully) continue into a PhD.

List of Figures

Figure 1: *Ten Years*, Photograph, Litvan, 2017

Figure 2: Experimental cancer stress balls, polyurethane foam, yarn, artificial flowers, Litvan, 2020

Figure 3: Ink Experiment, Litvan, 2020

Figure 4: Watercolour Experiment, Litvan, 2020

Figures 5-6: Glitch Lab experimental still, Litvan, 2020

Figure 7: Sculptural experiment, polyurethane foam, spray paint, artificial flowers, pearls, Litvan, 2020

Figures 8-10: Still from Glitch Lab, Litvan, 2020

Figure 11: Example of Rorschach ink-blot test

Figures 12-14: Symmetrical Glitch Lab Image still, Litvan, 2020

Figure 15: Example of a 17th C. Russian Kokoshnik

Figure 16: Traditional 18th C. Russian Dress

Figure 17: Install image of prints at Airspace Projects from exhibition *La La Land (Get Out!)*, Litvan, 2021

Figure 18: Examples of Russian ‘shuba’ (fur coats)

Figure 19: *Decadence*, Photographic print, resin, 24K Gold leaf, artificial flowers, royal edible icing, Litvan, 2021

Figure 20: *Funfetti*, Photographic print, artificial jewels, feather boa, resin, glitter, Litvan, 2021

Figure 21: *Zolata*, photographic print, artificial flowers, pearls, 24K Gold leaf spray paint, Litvan, 2021

Figure 22: *Razzle Dazzle*, Photographic print, artificial jewels, resin, feather boa, glitter, Litvan, 2021

Figure 23: *Mother of Pearl*, Photographic print, pearls, artificial jewels, resin, glitter, Litvan, 2021

Figure 24: *Pinky*, Polyurethane foam, enamel, glitter, resin, plastic and glass, Louise Zhang, 2015

Figure 25: *Feed you pink #5* (Series), Louise Zhang, 2018

Figure 26: Install shot from *Bury its young and all its demons* at Arterreal gallery, Louise Zhang, 2019

Figure 27: *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, Porcelain, Jeff Koons, 1988

Figure 28: *Pink Panther*, Porcelain, Jeff Koons, 1988

Figure 29: *Balloon Dog*, Stainless steel, Jeff Koons, 1994 - 2000

Figures 30-31: Image of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* 1971 film set

Figures 32-33: Still Image of the Wonka boat ride, 1971

Figure 34: Church of the Intercession at Fili, 1689

Figure 35: St. Basil's Cathedral, Red Square, Moscow, 1561

Figure 36: *Lilies of the Valley Egg*, House of Fabergé, 1898

Figure 37: *Bubblegum*, Polyurethane foam, artificial jewels, pigment, mixed metals, Litvan, 2021

Figure 38: Selection of Fabergé Eggs

Figure 39: Install image of the Vitrine at Airspace Projects, Litvan, 2021

Figure 40: Video still from *Down the Rabbit Hole*, Litvan, 2021

Figure 41: Install image of *Down the Rabbit Hole* Projected at Airspace Projects, 2021

Figures 42-43: *Melting Memories* video still, Data Pigments, Refik Anadol, 2018

Figure 44-45: *Down the Rabbit Hole*, video stills, Litvan, 2021

Figure 46: *Immaterial Ornament 1*, Harley Ives, 2020, Excerpt from a 2min. Seamless video loop

Figure 47: *Immaterial Ornament 2*, Harley Ives, 2020, Excerpt from a 2 min. Seamless video loop

Figures 48-50: *Down the Rabbit Hole*, video still, Litvan, 2021

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