

Emily Hartley-Skudder:
Vanity Factory



In Emily Hartley-Skudder's painting *Flying Vee* (2021–22), liquid pink soap oozes languidly from a glass jar into a pristine sink. Like an ad ripped out of a vintage women's magazine, this is an artfully composed, ladylike mess. Not a drop out of place, nor a hint of slimy sink gunk to be seen. Next to the soap sits a length of tubing from a vintage douche or enema kit—a nod, perhaps, to the compulsion to cleanse and control those more 'undesirable' feminine fluids.

Flying Vee belongs to Hartley-Skudder's most recent exhibition *Vanity Factory*, a series of nine artworks which read like an ode to the arcane feminine rituals that take place in front of the bathroom vanity. Each painting is framed by a vintage faux-marble sink top made from poured resin—the wrong kind of retro that has never quite come back into style. In garish billows of purple, butterscotch and turquoise, Hartley-Skudder meticulously mirrors the fake marble surfaces of the sinks, emphasising the fleshiness of the pattern. Like swirls of fat in processed meat, the marbled vanities conjure an unsettling comparison between our beauty rituals and the act of curing ham.

The oil paintings are bright and vibrant, yet some of the real sink tops have begun to fade and yellow with age. In each sink, she arranges a selection of plastic knick-knacks and vintage beauty devices—apparatuses that promise to delay or disguise the body's physical decay. The compositions conjure up a vision of the aging woman who might have once chosen this décor. The fake marble sinks and plastic cosmetic containers will long outlast her mortal body. *Vanity meets vanitas.*

The objects chosen by Hartley-Skudder also frequently suggest the presence of bodily fluids—the baby bottle nipple standing for breast milk (*Tête-à-Tête*, 2021–22) for instance, or the turkey baster as a DIY method of artificial insemination (*Butterscotch Baster*, 2022). The dripping blue liquid in *Sophia's Serum* (2022) is reminiscent of old TV commercials for menstrual products, which used blue fluids to demonstrate their absorbency because it was less confronting than blood red. In *Dessert Duck* (2022), a bottle of toilet cleaner is paired with a jelly mould, whipped cream, and a drizzle of syrup as if cleaning up after

a bulimic purge. The scenes feel scrubbed clean and sanitized, with pleasing puddles of coloured soaps and serums that embody our deeply ingrained discomfort with female bodily functions.

The title of this series—*Vanity Factory*—is borrowed from an Elvis Costello lyric describing the Elizabeth Arden cosmetics factory where he worked in the 1970s. And, indeed, these works capture a sense of cheaply-manufactured glamour and imitation luxury, like polyester lingerie or Italian-roast instant coffee granules. Yet, Hartley-Skudder's paintings do not give the impression of belittling the pursuit of affordable glamour. Rather, the target of her critique is the sense of body shame that comes as a freebie with each purchase. She transforms the decorative sink tops into windows that invite you to peer into the dark psychology of vanity—the manufactured compulsion to scrub away the messy, drippy parts of ourselves and rinse them down the fucking bathroom sink.

p.28 Emily Hartley-Skudder, *Dessert Duck* (detail), 2022, oil on linen on aluminium composite panel, cast resin, 92.1 x 50.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Bartley & Company Art

p.29 Installation view, Emily Hartley-Skudder, *Vanity Factory*, Bartley & Company Art, April 2022

