

# JHANA MILLERS

## **Claudia Kogachi**

### ***SWEET, SWEET, FANTASY BABY***

Claudia Kogachi is an artist based in Tāmaki Makaurau, whose paintings and textile works unite the otherworldly and the autobiographical. The earnestness of her craft, cartoon aesthetics and play with pattern and shape belie nuanced explorations of interpersonal dynamics, pop culture and post-internet themes.

In *SWEET, SWEET FANTASY BABY* (a title pulled directly from Mariah Carey's *Daydream* tracklist), the artist goes all-in on the make-believe. The exhibition of new rugs and paintings—on view for the first time as part of the Aotearoa Art Fair—offers unbridled access into the artist's high camp interdimensional fantasy realms.

The series is replete with an unrestrained celebration of sensory delight. In *Headless horse rider*, an Andalusian horse wades through a pond of fragrant lilies, guided by an anonymous rider. The composition crops the equestrian's upper body from view, such that the singular focus becomes two taut buttocks pressed firmly in a leather saddle. The mare's ambiguous expression adds another layer of intrigue to the scene; her long lashes and coyly arched brow lending a distinctively anthropomorphic touch. In another rug work, a doe-eyed brown goat nibbles on truss tomatoes, invoking the sensory pleasure of ASMR and the taste of sweet sun-ripened fruit. *Dolphins in love* depicts a pair of dolphins cavorting in divine symmetry against the backdrop of a churning sea and setting sun—inspired by time spent on Minjerribah, Stradbroke Island, in the spring of 2022. These works, with their playful motifs, offer a glimpse into the artist's explorations of the interplay between sensuality and the natural world.

A series of rugs that indulge in more overtly mystical matter were inspired by the dark, atmospheric winter of Aotearoa's West Coast. *Beluga whales swimming in the air* is quietly uncanny. In *Werewolves* high-fiving two monsters frolic upon a verdant meadow, their twisted forms reminiscent of medieval marginalia. *Spooky castle*, with its Tim Burtonesque curlicues teases the viewer with a sense of déjà vu. Celestial bodies, like the smug blood-red crescent moon who hovers above the haunted towers, are recurrent characters throughout the series.

According to Claudia, these animistic suns and moons—bearing expressions that range from benevolent to mocking—were iconographic devices implanted as a reminder “not to take the work too seriously, and to have fun with the process”. The artist's keen sense of play extends to the experience of the rugs themselves, which were designed with an appreciation for touch and interactivity. Claudia is interested to see whether viewers will cross the threshold of restraint and art world etiquette and run their hands over the tufted surfaces.

Each rug and painting features a bespoke walnut timber frame crafted by Claudia's partner Josephine Jelicich, a graduate of the esteemed Centre for Fine Woodworking in Nelson. The frames are sculptures in their own right, created in synergy with Claudia's distinctive handling of shape, line and pattern. Some carved examples, with their sawtooth edges, recall cartoon speech balloons, thus lending a pop art sensibility. Josephine's contributions elaborate upon collaborative experiments first undertaken

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during the couples' Eden Arts Trust residency at Karekare House in the winter of 2022. Of their working relationship, Claudia explains that "it's not just a drop off and pick up once the job is done scenario — we are very much involved in each other's process and that's what works so well."

The relationship surfaces within subject matter, too. In a prior body of work, *Heaven must be missing an angel* (2022), Claudia and Josephine assumed the guises of various iconic on-screen duos in a choose-your-own-adventure exploration of their budding romance. Together they crossed swords as Uma Thurman and Lucy Liu in *Kill Bill: Volume I*; caressed clay as Demi Moore and Patrick Swayze in *Ghost*; and embodied the perpetually loaded roles of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie in *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*. In *SWEET, SWEET FANTASY BABY*, avatars are abandoned but aspiration and fantasy persist. Since her Mitsubishi Mirage was stolen in July, Claudia states that "I've been craving taking my girlfriend around town for a while now." A diptych captures the artist and her girlfriend positioned on either side of her dream car, buffing its hot-pink bonnet in unison. Josephine, meanwhile, dreams of owning her own motorbike. As a gesture of faith in their future adventures Claudia pictures them riding into the sunset. As described by the artist, "these scenes at the moment live in a fantasy world, however, they aren't impossible, and I hope one day they will come to life."

*SWEET, SWEET FANTASY BABY*, with its heady mix of nostalgia, romance, and unfettered imagination, feels like a sweet liberation, enticing us to explore our own desires and to believe in the possibility of a brighter, more vibrant future.

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