



EMMA JENKINS
FOURTH YEAR. BACHELOR OF FINE ARTS

Emma Jenkins: The Art and Act of Crafting

by Ali Cayetano

When viewing the artwork of Emma Jenkins, fourth-year BFA student, it is apparent that she has an interest in unconventional mediums. Her work includes fantastical household items, such as resin coasters full of sewing pins and cigarettes, a cigarette-laden resin ashtray, and gravity-defying sculpted candles. Their appeal is immediate: the contrast between these mundane objects and their delicate compositions is almost dreamlike, a quality which spurred my interest in her work in the first place. It appears to me that Jenkins has perfected the art of juxtaposing the mundane with the beautiful, so it surprised me to find that she hasn't always worked with sculpture. She reveals that she used to make abstract paintings, citing Jackson Pollock and Damien Hirst as early inspirations. Their respective "splatter" and "spin" techniques no doubt influenced her experimental approach; however, Jenkins informs me that she is now "moving away from the male genius." As we discuss her practice, it is evident that she has a growing interest in feminist theory. Her more recent muses include sculptors Polina Miliou and Eva Hesse, as well as the painter Camilla Engstrom.

It is clear how Miliou and Hesse may have inspired Jenkins; Miliou's whimsical, paper-pulp-coated furniture and Hesse's

experimental latex sculptures no doubt had an impact on her strange take on household items. Similarly, one can relate Engstrom's richly coloured, sculpted-looking landscapes to the wax forms of Jenkins's candles. Jenkins's recent inspirations are not solely attributed to contemporary artists; her research into the history of feminist art, as well as her desire to make art that is practical, affordable, and accessible to her peers, have also spurred her interest in the notion of "arts and crafts." Arts and crafts are considered a form of low art; however, the divide between high and low art, Jenkins tells me, is shrinking. It is not only the idea of low art that inspires her, but also the forms it takes. Arts and crafts typically include activities such as clothes making, embroidery, pottery, and the creation of household objects—all of which are traditionally associated with women.

Jenkins's fascination with arts and crafts is partly inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement of the nineteenth century, a global reaction to the poor perception of decorative arts, and the adverse effects of industrialization. She states that "women are criticized for these art forms, yet encouraged to participate within the boundaries of materials and subject matter," an idea that she credits to activist Silvia Federici's short book *Wages Against Housework* (1975). She

has also taken a recent interest in *Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s* (1980), a book by writer and activist Lucy Lippard. Drawing from Lippard's writings, Jenkins explains that women-made art was (and is) highly constrained. Objects made by women were crafted within a domestic setting, and then were subsequently controlled and critiqued by the outside world. It is within this sphere that Jenkins operates: her work focuses on reclaiming the idea of arts and crafts from within the constraints of traditional womanhood, while also increasing the accessibility of art through the creation of practical household objects. Jenkins implements these themes in *Women's Work* (2020) by suspending household objects within household objects, encapsulating colourful, candylike sewing pins inside clear resin coasters. These sewing pins pose an ineffectual danger, one that is literally and metaphorically confined by the shape of domesticity.

Despite the running themes of domesticity and feminist art in her practice, her choice in medium is mostly experimental. Deviating slightly from *Women's Work* (2020), *Ashtray* (2020) and *Ashcoaster* (2020) are daily wares made from clear resin and spent cigarettes; though clear, their boundaries are delineated through the layering of black cigarette ash and scorched butts. While inspired by fashion photographer Irving Penn, whose photos dramatize, catalogue, and beautify the burnt, crumpled nubs of cigarettes, Jenkins clarifies that she was more interested in the uncertain outcome than the theory. Indeed, formal instruction in fine art emphasizes the importance of expressing a deeper meaning, suggesting the need for a visual end goal, yet Jenkins appears to be comfortable in her cycles of trial and error. Her projects don't always go to plan—in fact in *Ashtray* and *Ashcoaster*, part of the layering effect was due to her dissatisfaction with her work. We discover in her artist

statement: "I ended up pouring more resin in the bottom of the ashtray before placing more butts on top. Creating the illusion of time being suspended and the present of an 'other.'" Though this sense of "suspension" and "other" was intentional, her technique was not; she is evidently comfortable with allowing her mediums to shape the creative direction of her work.

Jenkins's *Candle Series* (2020) continues this thread of experimentation. Her candles come in rich colours and tantalizing shapes: they flaunt gravity-defying drippings, cloud-like masses, folded sheets, and undulating columns, all made from candle wax. I note that the documentation of her candles is almost as artistic as the candles themselves, transforming them into figural shapes—to which Jenkins explains that was not her intention from the beginning. Truthfully, Jenkins had had difficulty capturing the soft, delicate details of folded, dripped, and manipulated wax as it appeared in person. It took the help of a friend to stage the photographs in a way that truly revealed their dreaminess. Light, staging, and the intimate presence of a hand gasping the glass candleholder created images that Jenkins describes as "scrumptious"—a word that is hardly misplaced.

As we delve into the details of the *Candle Series*, it becomes increasingly clear that Jenkins's artistic process involves the physical. She is extremely hands-on with her materials. She recounts that when she used to make paintings, she would create large, abstract compositions with handfuls of paint, cutting out the "middleman" of the paintbrush. Casting resin, too, requires a degree of physicality. The layering of resin and ash, the deliberate placement of cigarettes in *Ashcoaster* and *Ashtray*, and even the scattering of sewing pins in *Women's Work* all require careful (or careless) manipulation. It strikes me that the *Candles Series* pushes the boundaries of her kinetic

process. Much of the project involved standing over the stovetop and kitchen sink for hours, echoing the long history of domesticity in women-made arts and crafts. Within her home, Jenkins dripped, bent, folded, and flicked wax, allowing water and gravity to dictate the shape of her materials. While her hands-on approach is undoubtedly fun, she also informs me that her physicality helps her to connect with and understand her materials. In *Candle Series*, this is apparent in her near-scientific experimentation: she recounts adapting to various drying speeds, ensuring the candle could stand within its candleholder, and preventing the candle from buckling above the heat of the stove.

It is not only the physical that drives her work. It is her desire to be hands-on, coupled with spontaneity, that leads her to such diverse projects. The reason why she uses many different materials, Jenkins admits, is because she is easily inspired, and with that inspiration comes the immediate need to bring her ideas to fruition. However, despite her intense forward momentum, she confesses that art helps her find solace from her racing thoughts—her practice is as therapeutic as it is enjoyable, a trait she takes special interest in as an aspiring art therapist. While her early work dealt with body dysmorphia, her more recent projects became an avenue for meditation. It is both interesting and fitting that this meditation happens in the same location: her candles, which are crafted within her home, are also burned within her home. Her arts and crafts begin and end within the domestic sphere—not fated to be critiqued and controlled by outside forces. Burning the candles from *Candle Series* within her home seems like an act of reclamation, as much as it is one of meditation, though she explains the process of burning with wonderful detail. Jenkins places the candles on her windowsill, watching them melt from beginning to end, and finds great satisfaction in hearing the

sculpted wax pieces break off beneath the heat of the flame. It is a difficult sensation to put into words. I relate it to the psychological concept of flow, or “being in the zone,” where performing a certain activity immerses a person in utter focus, total enjoyment, and an altered experience of time.

It’s unsurprising that Jenkins is familiar with the concept of flow, especially as a driving force in her work. “I choose to see my artistic practice as a way for me to reflect upon the image I have of myself,” Jenkins writes in her artist statement, “while actively straying away from using my own image. My practice sometimes becomes a form of self-reflection—a therapeutic processual creative engagement with forms and materials.” Regarding her *Candles Series*, she tells me that there is only an illusion of control; sometimes she has a plan, but the candles never turn out the way she expects. Allowing melted wax to carve its own course takes the pressure off her shoulders. In speaking with Jenkins about arts and crafts—about her resin coasters, resin ashtrays, and sculpted candles—I become aware that it is the process of crafting, or letting things be crafted, that is significant. This process and all it entails, thoughts, feelings, and all, is much more important than the result itself. *



The

Candle

Series,

2020

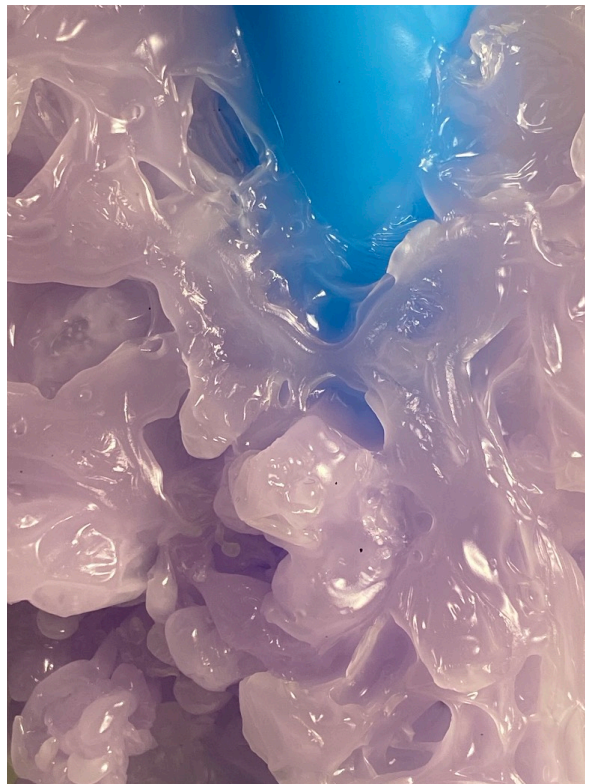
ARTIST PROFILES



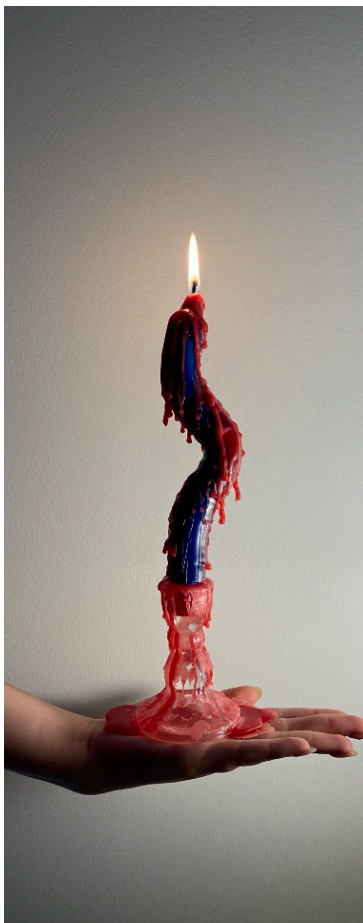
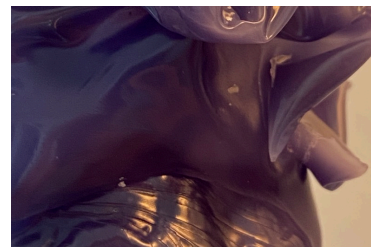
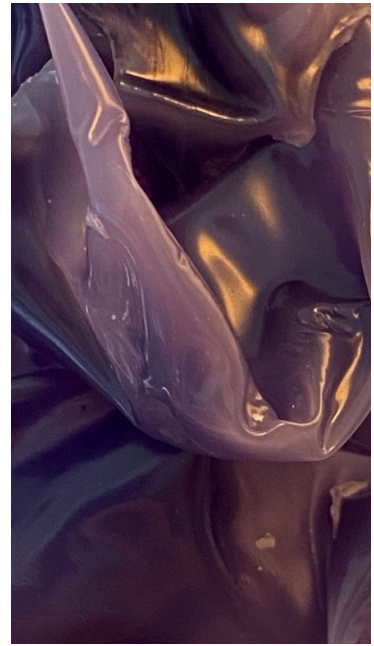
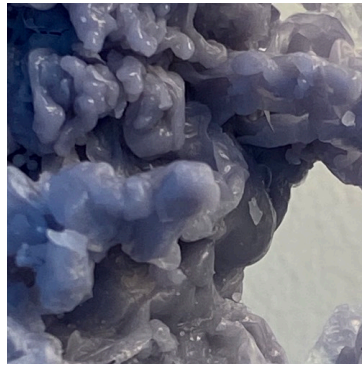
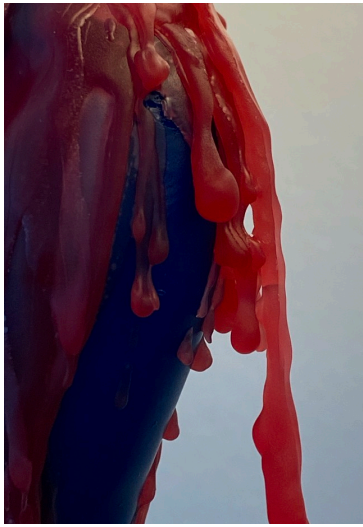
Untitled (navy&gray), 2020, wax.



Untitled (blue&violet), 2020, wax.



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Untitled (navy&red), 2020, wax.



Untitled (violet&purple), 2020, wax.



Untitled (pink&purple), 2020, wax.



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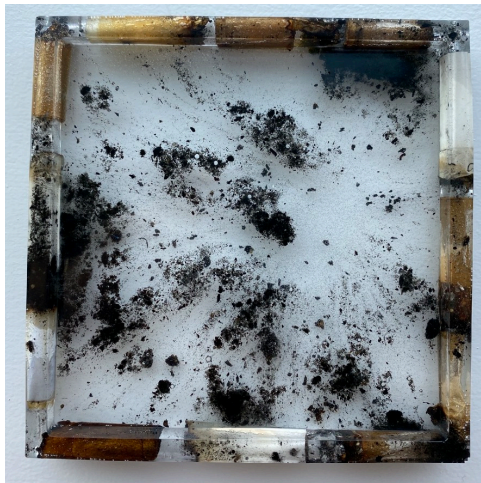
I'm A-Okay!, 2020, silkscreen print.

The Resin Series, 2020

ARTIST PROFILES



Women's work, 2020, resin and pins.



Ashcoaster, 2020, resin and butts.



Ashtray, 2020, resin and butts.



The cigarette piece was more about creative exploration. It stemmed from both my own ideas, Irving Penn's cigarette photography, and my brother's cigarette series; I see these butts and ash suspended in time. I originally made the ashtray and was not completely happy with how it turned out. I ended up pouring more resin in the bottom of the ashtray before placing more butts on top. Creating the illusion of time being suspended and the presence of an "other." For the sewing pin coasters, I thought a lot about the things said by Lucy Lippard in *Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s* (1980). She talks about the idea of how male modernist art is "superior" because it is "self-critical" but it is a narrow, highly mystified, and often egotistical monologue. It lacks dialogue altogether but women, on the other hand, create things often within the home, studio, or otherwise, only for them to be controlled and critiqued by those outside the home. Women/feminist artists are also criticized for using female "clichés" in their art-imagery (shells, fruit, etc.), materials (fabric, clay), emotions (motherly love, anger, sadness). Women's art includes things such as embroidery, clothes making, clothing design, pottery, and the general crafting of household objects; women artists are criticized for these art forms, yet encouraged to participate within these boundaries of materials and subject matter. This idea of crafting being something women are both shamed for and encouraged to do is also talked about in Silvia Federici's *Wages Against Housework* (1975) and some main driving points behind the Arts and Craft movement in the late nineteenth century. For me, making a household object such as coasters and filling it with sewing pins seems like an indirect way of talking about these ideas and issues. These same ideas hold true for my candle series as well. —EJ