



homegrown

NATALIE POPOVSKI'S CERAMIC SCULPTURES ARE BOLD REIMAGININGS OF EVERYDAY OBJECTS AND ICONIC AUSTRALIAN BRANDS.

WORDS RACHEL WHITE

ARTIST NATALIE POPOVSKI NEVER SET OUT to work with ceramics. “For years I was doing this body of work, as a painter, where I would go into the homes of strangers and paint their insignificant corners of mess,” says Natalie, 32. “They were still life paintings, but they were also indirect portraits of people.” During a solo show of her still lifes at the Margaret Olley Art Centre in 2022 at Tweed Regional Gallery in Murwillumbah, Natalie was inspired to create a more immersive experience for her audience. “I wanted to be able to pull out some of the items from the paintings, but I had no idea how to do that,” she says. “Then someone recommended slip casting, so I YouTubed it and taught myself.”

She chose the name Austin Flowers because the play on ‘Austin Powers’ made her laugh; Natalie finds working with ceramics more freeing than painting. “I take painting a bit more seriously; it feels more personal to me,” she says reflectively. “Whereas with ceramics, I feel I can be more fun and playful.” Growing up in the small Murray River town of Echuca, Vic, on the traditional lands of the Yorta Yorta Nation, Natalie brings a unique perspective on branding to her “lovingly squished” ceramic vases. “My dad owned River Port [a soft-drink manufacturer known for their portello, double sarsaparilla and creamy soda], so I’ve always thought a lot about brands and products,” she says. “I like the idea of taking something very mundane and squishing it into something new. It feels like warping reality a bit.”

Fittingly, Natalie’s first ceramic creation was inspired by another fixture from her childhood. “My baba, who has lived in Shepparton, Vic, since she came out from Macedonia in the ’60s, had a bottle of Saxa Salt on her kitchen bench for as

long as I can remember,” says Natalie. “It was just always there. I couldn’t *not* paint it!” So, naturally, when Natalie started creating slip cast ceramics based on her still life paintings, the Saxa Salt bottle was her first subject (and is still her bestselling product four years later).

Although she describes herself as the “weird art girl” at school, it took Natalie a while to translate her childhood ambitions into an adult career. “When I was figuring out uni, people kept telling me, ‘You can’t make money from the creative fields,’” she recalls. “Everyone said, ‘Do coding or be a lawyer,’ so I studied international relations, which, lo and behold, is not a viable option at all.” After graduating from Bond University in Queensland (“Where I felt very out of place!”), Natalie moved back to Echuca to work in the family business for a few years, but that was never her long-term plan. She started painting again in her mid-20s and has made art her full-time job since starting Austin Flowers in 2022. A full circle trajectory, she adds, “Now, with things like AI, I think my job is the most secure of anyone’s!”

On the back of her success to date, Natalie is exploring offline retail for the first time with a small, but growing, physical presence. “Last year I did more markets because they’re such a good way to meet people in person,” she says. “It’s a viable option going forward... I think!” Her other priority in the coming months is to make time for the thing that started it all: “I have to admit I haven’t been able to find time to paint since I started Austin Flowers. That’s something I’d really like to rectify this year.” *Ch*
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