

Our Coffers Were Emptied to Pay for Your Pleasures by Josie Turnbull

Friday 15th August - Sunday 5th October

"If luxury is what is produced in excess of an object's capacity to be used, then anything can be luxury—if you just make it useless." — Joanna Walsh

Commissioned by 'a space' arts, *Our Coffers Were Emptied to Pay for Your Pleasures* by Josie Turnbull is an installation exploring cycles of desirability, extraction and obsolescence through the 'factual fable' of the Asian Arowana – a critically endangered fish turned luxury commodity. Artificial scarcity and selective breeding practices have transformed the fish into a status symbol and, despite a waning market, a multi-million-pound Arowana trade persists through networks of breeders, collectors, international championships and 'groomers', who perform cosmetic surgeries on the fish. Informed by a research trip to Singapore and Malaysia in 2024, this exhibition visualises the fancied fate of an anthropomorphised Arowana – a former champion cast aside.

The Main Gallery has been reimagined as the Arowana's boudoir, littered with the ephemera of success - costumes, certificates and branded merchandise. These individual works repurpose pound shop tat, broken toys and fast fashion garments – the detritus of overproduction. Championship trophies are shaped like cornucopias or 'horns of plenty' and collaged with photographs taken from 1970s bodybuilding magazines. Reworked model ships are hand printed with invented heraldic symbols based on Southampton's coat of arms. These shrunken relics of imperialism reference the city's maritime history and the post-war hubris of the British Empire.

Below, in the Barker-Mill Project Space, a number of light boxes emit a radiant glow, reminiscent of Arowana aquariums and showrooms. They display posters and promotional materials from our protagonist's heyday. Inspired by actual advertisements for Arowana surgical tools, nutritional supplements and tanning lamps, these works also reference movie posters from the Golden Age of Hollywood. The ruthless star-making machine evoked in films like *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) echoes the lineage of British colonial extractive industries in Malaysia, the Golden Arowana's place of origin.

Weaving throughout the exhibition is a soundscape made by Josie in collaboration with Wesley Gonzalez. This first-person, melodic memoir tells the story of the Arowana and her tragic rise and fall in a stream of consciousness. It blends the artist's field research with fictional references from literature and film.

By framing the Arowana trade as a contemporary tale of overreach, exploitation and spectacle, *Our Coffers Were Emptied to Pay for Your Pleasures* reflects on a familiar matrix of frictions; global trade, conspicuous consumption and ecological and moral decay.