

Freshwater: A House Tour

By Khairani Barokka

This text was commissioned by 'a space' arts as part of our Critical Writing programme. The writer was invited to respond to the ideas and themes in the exhibition, Our Coffers Were Emptied to Pay for Your Pleasures

Swim with me.

I'm an old soul, with tiredness built into my veins, and unimpeachable fabulousness, as is painfully obvious. And I've just enough time for you, here in my pool of centuries accruing value and disengagement. Tread water here, see the bright red of my imprint on all of these objects—chronicling my displacement, the fervor surrounding my continuous capture as status symbol. Ah, how everything sloughs away.

I was a promise, my dear. Magic itself. A talisman for prosperity. I became the very crux of danger—became endangered, and thus even more of a rarity; a delicacy pet, a sign of one's obscene and uncharitable wealth. Our bodies bred for more, fried under a tanning lamp to bring out the perfect colour for them, cells mutilated by plastic surgeons, whose work on fish paid for more expensive dinners. Darling, I was That Girl.

Feel free to explore, I'm not fussed. Everything seems broken, but that just means it can't break more, ha! I'm really grateful I get to put all these pieces about me in my home, and show them off to lucky you. They really liven up the place, don't they. It's great to have housing in this economy, but I was taught to crave newness, you understand? And I already know every inch of this giganto-aquarium like the back of my—

Oh yes, they spliced my fins and tail to widen, to 'swim faster, like the propeller on a superyacht', according to one aspiring surgeon. You think I'd think of this myself? In captivity, of course, swimming only goes so far.

See the sails on these ships, all in my image. Miniature versions of what actual boatmakers once sculpted—ode to how I was framed, vessels sold as Special Editions, collectors' items (rare artefacts inspired by us, the definition of preciousness). You may think it is very difficult to frame the aquatic; we are slippery and spill out. Yet with the advent of pale shipmen on the shores of our archipelago, we have been so easily kidnapped away from our indigenous names, our indigenous waterways, our place in

local cosmologies. And you wouldn't believe how much we were made to be worth, to people who ignored the aching in our breasts for home.

Most of the British writers don't know much about those lands-and-waters, most of what they produce has remained untranslated into English. And perhaps that has aided the spirit of fugitivity, how many of my human-kin from Sumatra, Kalimantan, Singapore, and elsewhere put on one face for meneer and European state apparati, and another for the neverending efforts at liberation that were always there. Just as my yearning to return to them has always been there. Huh, yes, it has... still.

We were entered into so many frames by the newcomers. Aquariums galore. Groomed and entered into competitions, red-stickered with Euro, pounds, yen, dollars, living symbols of luck. You want value? I'm talking 200 million dollars a year—a whole industry built around my body.

I mean, have you ever been so wanted that humans—actual two-legged powermongers—steal for you? Kidnap other people for you? Develop an entire cosmetic veterinary career path? Ah, and I haven't even mentioned murder. You'd better believe they have literally killed for me and my gorgeous mug.

Once you get to those levels of prizedness, once they want you that much, you'll never see yourself the same. Sometimes I think about the young fish I was, and I feel it—how the waters have warped, and warped me. But of course, as you see, I keep stately surrounds, and the leaks here and there are often temporary.

As you perceive my form as digital collage on salvaged satin, collectibles imprinted with the gloss of my body, behold how my coat of scales is a salvaged satin of its own. Surfacing and resurfacing in shady places, all around the world. Haha! International fish of mystery.

Now as I allow you to traverse my deliciously haunted—fish ghosts are so entertaining, not bad company—and refreshingly wet mansion, think of how these fan-made sculptures right here, to the left, in velvet of me and my kin are objets d'art that are hauntings, in and of themselves. Meant to mimic historical Christian religious 'indulgences'—ornaments sold as remissions for sin by the church, equating the pure, the beautiful, with currency. I mean, I guess, at least that's what those arowana fanatics told me, hah!

We dragonfish, Asian bonytongues, we know the slippery slope of this equation all too well. The tassels on those sculptures, I mean... living baubles, we really were made to be. Oh, honey, the things I could tell you about glory. About sinking.

What's life like as a good luck charm? Hahahahaha, oh, sweetheart, excuse me. Hah! Good luck... Well, firstly, I'm a red arowana, and the gold arowanas, us and them are pretty much the best at bringing luck. I have no idea why green arowanas aren't seen the same. I mean, I do, different colours traditionally have different meanings. But they're such lovely creatures, the green ones. Have you met one? I once had a great friend I played cards with all the time, a greenie, I think her name was Daun. Yeah, like leaf, pretty on the nose, huh. Ah, owners. Some of them say they want you to hoard luck, and then they give you names that may be fantastic and may be the worst luck in the world to you.

Do you like me on the PJs? A superfan made them when I got my new fins... I can barely keep up with myself, but apparently they had a newsletter for near-constant updates. Listen, for me to get to the heights of capital's good graces, they made sure I was 'authenticated', with a birth certificate, microchip implant, the works. I was no fast fashion girlie. But some of us were bootleg, and both kinds, 'fake' and 'real', swirled around all of these strange, obsessed humans and their need, their everlasting need. Not everyone can be a star, hun. Goodness, these PJs are comfy, actually, but of course I prefer them on display.

Ooh, look at this one, speaking of displays! I just adore these trophies, I give them pride of place. So there used to be, believe it or not, a franchised award in my name given out at all of the biggest arowana competitions. Dog shows? Pah! Think again, poochie-poos. The arowana ladies and gents who lined up for this prize, all to be seen as a reflection of me. Remarkable, isn't it? Even the design of the thing is menjulang ke atas, so high, a skyscraper! You'd think I was a flying fish (though I hear those creatures are very uncouth).

Mmm, arowanas. It's a real thing, this 'thingness' they draped over us like a heavy, fur blanket. Fame is suffocating. And in a way, the fan art, the memorabilia made by admiring and clearly bored masses, it's turning that suffocation into felt objects. Memorials to this sordid past of ours. The garish truth of celebrity, the rich man's favourite shiny trinkets. The air is thinner at the top. I think, I hope, that some of my fans really saw that. Wouldn't it be nice to be seen clearer than most. It's nice to be noticed, better to be understood.

What they don't know is how I gave birth to my 50 baby eggs, and then those marbles were carried in my mate's mouth for two whole months, before he released them. I nearly found myself spilling that fact once during an interview, back in '91. I guess, well, what's the use of keeping anything to myself now... What's that? Well, of course I wonder about them. More than wonder, I carry them with me myself in my heart, those dozens of babies. I don't know where they are, if they're happy, if they've been operated on, how much they're valued at. The same goes, I suppose, for my old mate. An old owner may have let slip that he was shipped off to Russia. I hope he's warm enough, if he's still with us. He was a good one, my Adi, he adored those eggings.

I used to want my children to be famous. And now I just hope they're free.

They say they love us, the humans in charge of our aquatic enclosures. They say it all the time. But I mean, really... if you look at all this ephemera with my face on it, this... Keeping this around the house, I suppose it allows me to feel everything that comes along with that. I do know how much of us is thingified, painted in odd light. And I know we'll all fade, the price of infamy, of intimacy with many, many a port. I know more about fading than I thought I would...

You know, we can't survive in oceans. As we've been carried across so many of them, I wonder what effect traversing the oceanic has on how I want to gasp for breath. All the time. Hm? Oh, that's sweet of you to worry. I just say whatever comes to mind sometimes. Watch that lamp, dear, it's antique.

When we arowana are threatened, we may leap out from our watery homes, and into the sky. To return to swiftly to waters we wish changed, safe. I tried to escape so many times. They make sure those aquarium covers are oh-so-tightly sealed. And now, I patiently await my fate. Oh goodness, would you like something to drink? I have just been so, so parched.

About Khairani Barokka

Khairani Barokka is a writer and artist from Jakarta, based in London. Her work has been presented widely internationally, and centres disability justice as anticolonial praxis, environmental justice, and access as translation. Among her honours, she has been a UNFPA Indonesian Young Leader Driving Social Change, Emerging Writers Festival's Inaugural Writer-in-Residence, a Delfina Foundation Associate Artist, an *Artforum* Must-See, and the first non-British Associate Artist at the UK's National Centre for Writing. She was the first Poet-in-Residence at *Modern Poetry in Translation*, later co-edited their Body Issue, and became the magazine's first non-British Editor until 2023. In 2023, Okka was shortlisted for the Asian

Women of Achievement Award. She is the author of five books, most recently Barbellion Prize-shortlisted *Ultimatum Orangutan* (Nine Arches), Jhalak Prize-longlisted *amuk* (Nine Arches), and her new prose debut *Annah, Infinite* (Tilted Axis), based on a multi-year art and writing project of the same name.

About the Exhibition

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.

This installation at God's House Tower visualises the imagined fate of an anthropomorphised Arowana – a former champion cast aside. Artefacts, including costumes, trophies, and merchandise, build a memoir dramatising the Arowana's tragic 'rise and fall'. These individual works repurpose false nails, broken toys, and fast fashion garments – the detritus of overproduction.

The work traces a lineage of British colonial extractive industries in Malaysia, the Golden Arowana's place of origin, and draws parallels with the ruthless star-making machine of Golden Age Hollywood, as evoked in films like *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962). 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.

About Josie Turnbull

Josie is a multi-disciplinary artist and young people's artist educator currently based in London. She completed an MA in Fine Art and Science at Central Saint Martins in 2022, following a number of years living in Ho Chi Minh City. Recent public presentations include a sculpture and short film commission as part of a cross disciplinary collective within the AHRC funded 'Rethinking Fables' project (2025), a commission by Shape Arts for 'Open All Hours', 198 Gallery, London (2023) 'Open All Hours', 198 Gallery, London (2023) and 'Saline Shock!' (solo), Orleans House Gallery London (2023). Also in 2023, she was awarded an Arts Council England DYCP grant to fund her international research on the Arowana fish, and was shortlisted for the UAL Sculpture/Clifford Chance Award. Selected residencies include the 'Transcultural Collaboration – Shared Campus Semester' in Zurich, Singapore and Yogyakarta (2022) UAL's 'Making Waves Scientist in Residence Program' (2022), and was artist in residence at School360 Primary School (2021-2022).

In tandem with her personal studio practice, she has created moving image work for live music performances and music videos; for artists such as Rắn Cạp Đuôi, and Wesley Gonzalez.