'FEARLESS SIMPLETON'
NICHOLAS ALOISIO-SHEARER

24 May - 23 June
Opening Thursday 1 June,6pm-8pm

"What are robbers? What are belongings? I am afraid of nothing."

—the young fool in "The Fearless Simpleton", a folk tale retold by Italo Calvino.[1]

Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer borrows the title "Fearless Simpleton" from an Italian folk tale. In this story, a man attempts to instill useful fear into a simple boy, but the young man's inability to appreciate nuance ends in murder. The tale, demonstrating the unaffected fool's capacity for ill deeds, poetically sums up the dangers of literalism. It's rather relevant to our contemporary moment, caught as it is in a media scape buffered by propagandistic reductivism.[2] An implied rejection of literalism underlies Aloisio-Shearer's oeuvre, in which a cacophony of reference points—taken from Western art history, biblical stories, mythology, and Internet subcultures among other sources—come together, revealing the amorphous nature of art and aesthetics and their prostration to ideological tides.

The series of tapestries and sculptural works featured in *Fearless Simpleton* draw specifically on Aloisio-Shearer's family history. The artist's grandparents migrated to Australia from their hometown of Poggioreale in rural Sicily in 1950 and 1961. Scattered with indirect references and aligned iconographic ephemera, the works consider the impact of intergenerational trauma, an investigation sparked by mandatory workplace cultural competency training. Aloisio-Shearer picks at the irreconcilable tensions of cultural inheritance—tensions which cannot be neatly resolved by neoliberal therapeutic methods or symbolic gestures of representational reparation.

1. Italo Calvino, "The Fearless Simpleton", in Italian Folktales, trans. George Martin (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 294.
2. In this mediascape, art is defined as a social project, or a vehicle for political sloganeering in the name of "real life", while creativity is stifled by binary thinking and a divisive erasure of history.
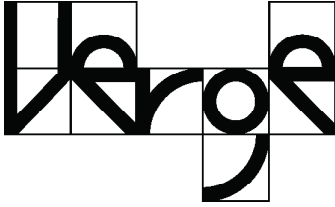
Throughout Fearless Simpleton, goblin-like cherubic figures appear. They are loosely based on those populating mosaics from the Cathedral of Cefalù in Sicily. Like a chaotic, post Internet Hieronymus Bosch, each artwork is a pastiche of debased, poor images (to use Hito Steyerl's term).3 In their construction, Aloisio-Shearer employed various outsourcing techniques, including AI software and Internet repositories.

The Count's Beard (2023) features a 3D rendering of a Seraphim from the Cefalù Cathedral—angels considered God's servants on Earth. The figure, which sits in a walnut, is also loosely based on the artist's Nonna, sitting beside it, a Sicilian antique figurine of a clown the artist 3D printed from an online scan. A hand (that of God?) holds a can of Coca-Cola to the left of the angel. To the right, another hand offers a horseshoe. The walnut and horseshoe reference the Italian folk tale "The Count's Beard". In this tale, a boy is made hearty and wise by bathing in wine inside a chestnut shell heated with a burning horseshoe. The Coke can references Aloisio-Shearer's family's immigration to Australia and their lifelong work in a Coca-Cola factory in Sydney. The implication seems to be that bubbling Coca-cola, heated by the post-war economic boom, bolstered the family. It's a witty conflation of folklore and family history that speaks to the often downplayed role of global capitalism in forging (and perpetuating) uplifting narratives of the migrant experience.

The chaos of the mise en scène in *The Count's Beard* is heightened by the backdrop: a dilapidated domestic interior based on Aloisio-Shearer's grandparent's home in Poggioreale. *Misfortune* (2023), populated by scattered, donkey-like AI generated demons, takes from another family anecdote. The artist's Nonno (whose semblance is vaguely recalled in an ogre featured in the background) was a shepherd. For a period, an aggressive donkey terrorised him until, eventually, he gained some mastery over the ungainly beast. For his family, the story is retold as a tale of overcoming adversity. It strikes as a humble anecdote, shrouded with a Chekhovian bleakness. Along with donkey-shaped mountains, *Misfortune* also features an Italian car. Coupled with the various references to the figures of Cefalù, Aloisio-Shearer points to the slightly perplexing proximity between great religious art and iconic cultural innovations and, conversely, a very minor and specific (perhaps even banal) story that has come to mean so much to his family.

3.   Hito Steyerl, "In Defence of the Poor Image", e-flux no. 10 (2009). URL: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/6136/
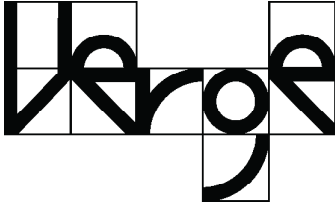
The central figure in *The Princess with the Horns* (2023), loosely based on the artist's Nonna, is drawn from the cherubim from the Cefalù Cathedral. Fossilised figures surround her, including the Egg of the King from the manga *Berserk* (a symbol of apocalypse), Dagoth Ur from the video game *The Elder Scrolls*, a comical Italian chef stereotype, and various Sicilian antiquities. These mismatched figures, jumbled ideologies and moral tales are not juxtaposed for the sake of mere iconoclastic fervour (though no doubt, that's part of it).

Aloisio-Shearer doesn't simply treat history as a dark and unenlightened abyss of moral rigidity and suffering, as many ideologues masquerading as artists do today (indeed, this seems to be the unacknowledged definition of the contemporary artist). And, importantly, he doesn't pose a binary pitting "the contemporary" against what's come before. The Internet and its iconographic repository is not treated as a site of utopic, liberatory potential, as it is by a deluge of culture-jamming, accelerationist adherents to cyberfeminist theory and cyberutopianism.

In the introduction to his Italian Folktales (1956), Italo Calvino explained his research process as follows:

"I was gradually possessed by ... an insatiable hunger for more and more versions and variants. Collating, categorising, comparing became a fever. I could feel myself succumbing to a passion akin to that of etymologists ... which rapidly degenerated into a mania."[4]

Aloisio-Shearer is similarly possessed. His calamitous constellations chart the irreverent terrain forged through—and against the grain of—a heavily surveilled, and accelerated image culture. Echoing the largely unchartable origins of the Italian folklore imprinted in his artworks, it is the community-driven, DIY-hacker corners of the Internet and its cultural debris that Aloisio-Shearer is drawn to and inspired by.[5] In this digital Gothic realm, the folkloric art and mythologies of the Internet age can be found.[6]

Tara Heffernan

4.   Italo Calvino, "Introduction", in Italian Folktales, trans. George Martin (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), xvii.
5.   It is partly a channelling of what Angela Nagle refers to as 'the libertarian ethos that infused computer cultures spanning from the early, back-to-the-land, frontier hacker culture of the sixties and seventies to the Californian rebel capitalism of the dotcom neoliberalism of the nineties.' Angela Nagle, "The New Man of 4chan", Baffler, no. 30 (2016). URL: https://thebaffler.com/salvos/new-man-4chan-nagle.
6.   The digital gothic describes the gothic literary echo in online storytelling. See Jessica Balanzategui, "Creepypasta, 'Candle Cove', and the Digital Gothic", Journal of Visual Culture 18, no.2 (2019), 187-208.
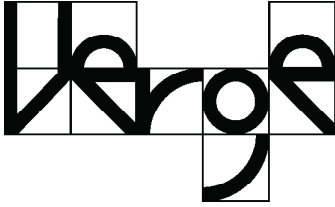
List of works
Clockwise

Demone Asino, 2023, 3D printed, PLA plastic, bronze, patina, perspex, approx 140 x 30 x 30cm.
$800

The Count's Beard, 2023, jacquard woven tapestry, 3d printed bronze-plated steel, 170 x 120cm.
$2000

Misfortune, 2023, jacquard woven tapestry, 3d printed bronze-plated steel, 170 x 120cm.
$2000

Donkey, Donkey, Money, Money, 2023, 3D printed, PLA plastic, bronze, patina, perspex, approx 140 x 30 x 30cm.
$800

The Princess with the Horns, 2023, jacquard woven tapestry, 3d printed bronze-plated steel, 170 x 120cm.
$2000

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