



Trent mango tree all the colours of the rainbow Trent, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 76 x 101.5 cm



Magical Putt Putt, 2022. PHOTOGRAPHY Jessica Maurer

## LOVE, AT FIRST SIGHT

The girl with kaleidoscope eyes. Victoria Atkinson proves sincerity is always in.

WORDS Jasmine Pirovic

Victoria Atkinson is looking for love. The multidisciplinary artist is someone who wears her heart on her sleeve and the pursuit leaves its own technicoloured trace, of course. Painting is a way for Atkinson to keep score of her passions. As for right now? She's manifesting the woman of her dreams. "This year I'm excited to meet someone new."

As a person who is prone to cycles of intense cynicism – a consequence of being chronically online – the sincerity of Victoria Atkinson's art cuts through the noise in my head like ocean spray. Colour shocks you back into your body. Vivid chunks of indigo and apple green are

herded into shape by thick linework. I'm convinced these are the subtle markings of a Virgo (my suspicions are confirmed when Atkinson reveals her birthday is September 12). There's no obfuscation; that's a mango tree, a cat and, yes – *The Bachelorette* mansion. It's art that refuses to let its wall label do the talking. Less waffle, all feeling.

Victoria Atkinson is a founding member of Studio A, a supported studio for professional artists living with intellectual disability that operates out of a community centre in Crows Nest. It's the only one of its kind in NSW, which is startling, given that more than half a million Australians

are living with an intellectual disability according to a 2021 report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Atkinson's studio days are Tuesdays and Wednesdays and when I turn up one Tuesday afternoon, I'm immediately welcomed into the bustling space. Enthusiastic introductions are made. Fellow artist, Catherine McGuinness walks me through the studio. Thom Roberts is quick off the mark and christens me with a nickname. I am now Astro Boy, in case you were wondering, and part of the furniture already. And I'm not alone. Gabrielle Mordy, the CEO and Artistic Director of

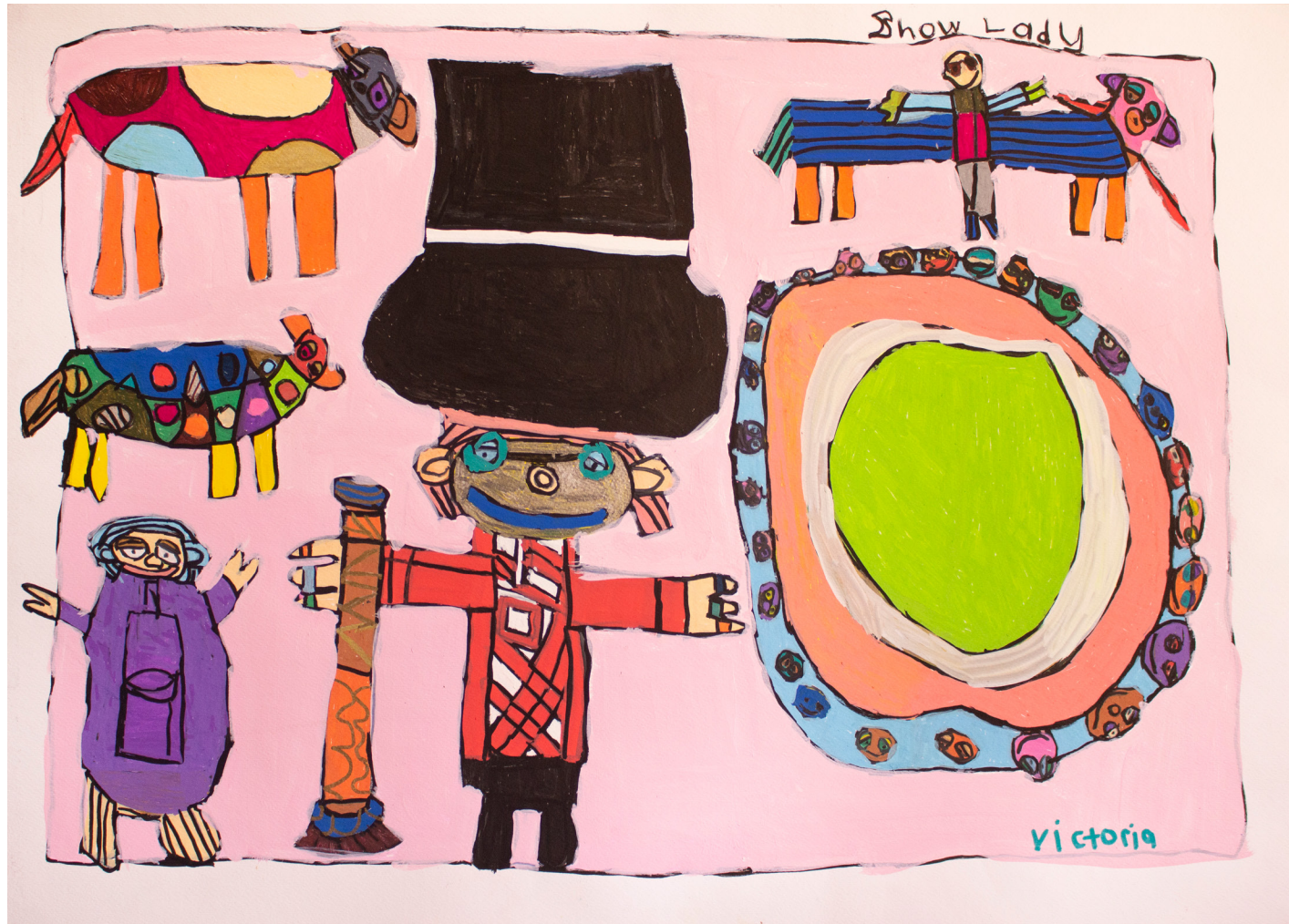
*If love is the thread that unifies Atkinson's artworks, colour serves as their blood-thumping pulse.*

Studio A, goes by Kylie Panther and every person who crosses its threshold gets an alter ego.

A stack of drawings rest on the desk in front of us and Victoria takes me through her artworks. Next to them is a pool of printed Instagram photos of Atkinson's career highlights.

At 52, Victoria Atkinson has enjoyed a





*Showman*, 2018, acrylic and chrome pen on paper, 70.4cm x 50.0cm

prolific career in Australia's art scene. Her résumé is brimming with murals, group exhibitions, commissions, collaborations and mentorships. In 2021, she was a finalist for the prestigious Archibald Prize with her portrait of former Liberal MP for North Sydney Trent Zimmerman – which includes a kennel for his dog, Simba – entitled *Trent mango tree all the colours of the rainbow Trent*. “He’s like me,” Victoria says, referring to their shared queerness.

A year later, Atkinson would also be selected as a finalist for the Sulman Prize, this time for an acrylic painting of her mother, Noel Humphrey, who passed away in 2021. Atkinson began drawing from the age of four and Humphrey was a relentless champion of her daughter's art career. Victoria tells me she still visits her in her dreams. In the portrait, *Angel Mum, Noel Humphrey*, Atkinson memorialises her mother with great earthy wings and a firefly torso. A strip of lilac LED lights illuminates its silhouette, giving the painting an ethereal quality.

Atkinson hands me an editorial plucked from a home magazine next. It's an image of a timber kitchen with honeycomb panels and high archways. This is the

stimulus for a drawing she's working on today. Somehow, she's managed to jazz up what is otherwise a drab living space using only Posca markers and her harlequin eye.

If love is the thread that unifies Atkinson's artworks, colour serves as their blood-thumping pulse. Florence Aranigo, an Artist Facilitator at Studio A who provides support to the artists, both in-person and via the enterprise's online program, asks Atkinson how the colours make her feel. “Happy,” she replies.

There's a folder that contains WWE portraits – another passion of Atkinson's. Wrestlers Kane and Sin Cara get the Victoria Atkinson treatment, as does American commentator Michael Cole. Everything from their costumes to body language is dialled up in a way that would make Booker T blush.

Elsewhere, a graduation gown that was commissioned by the University of New South Wales as part of its *Trophy Dreams* exhibit hangs from a clothing rack. Chunky silver shoulder pads add a Sgt. Pepper quality to the garment; its flamingo pink and soft gold tassels shimmer as Aranigo picks it up to offer me a closer look. Beside it sits a flamboyant bust,

studded with dress pins and holographic shell-shaped sequins. “It's called *Queen Victoria*”, Atkinson laughs.

She reaches for a box filled with dinky hand-embroidered animals. They form part of a textile project of Atkinson's during lockdown for Red Room Poetry, and when she returned to the studio, she fashioned them into brooches. Victoria hands me one shaped like a turtle, which incidentally is both her favourite animal and colour. It's a motif that appears on everything from t-shirts to puppets to her kaleidoscopic drawings, and stems from a memory of seeing baby turtles as a child.

A more recent obsession is *Moulin Rouge! The Musical* at Sydney's Capitol Theatre. “She went twice,” Aranigo admits. Heart shapes, Lady Marmalade and naturally, the women, drew Atkinson back, and at her last birthday party everyone dressed up in black and red outfits as a nod to the musical.

As we submerge further into Atkinson's archive, I come across an installation she created for Sub Base Platypus in 2019. A mammoth structure raised above the ground and modelled from *The Bachelorette* is



*Bachelorette*, 2019, acrylic on paper, 29.5cm x 30.5cm

*There's no obfuscation; that's a mango tree, a cat, and yes – the Bachelorette mansion. It's art that refuses to let its wall label do the talking. Less waffle, all feeling.*

Atkinson's favourite kind of art – “That's high art,” one of the other artist facilitators quips. Like most things, it's what's on the inside that counts, and by popping your head underneath the densely textured hovering house I'm told the audience is immersed in an intimate serenade between Atkinson and a lover, which she animated into film where red roses are exchanged.

With so many professional milestones under Atkinson's spangly belt, it seems finding her soul mate is the final frontier. And while we know unequivocally there is no recipe for love, the closest thing would be the law of attraction. What is Atkinson's artwork if not that theory in practice? We're told love is in the air, that it's all around us, in our fingers, our toes. Which may be true, but one look at the multidisciplinary artist's work unveils a new source. Look around Victoria, it circles you with abundance. And all of your own volition. ✨



From top: PHOTOGRAPHY Jessica Maurer, Victoria Atkinson at work at Studio A.



*Angel Mum, Noel Humphrey*, acrylic and LED lights on ply, 113 x 77cm