

Production Line

Cici Liu

*Born in all different shapes and sizes,
all forced into the same boxes.
We are all society's products.
You and I,
lined up,
squashed,
canned.
Like sardine fish.*

The cover illustration of Sally Rooney's 'Normal People' initiated the concept for my paintings. The couple, sleeping in a sardine can made me think that human beings are like sardine fish. We stick together with the crowd, trying to fit in, afraid to be alone because it seems dangerous. Sardines represent human nature, our longing to belong, and fear of not being accepted. The combination of human and fish characteristics emphasize conformity.

Human + fish = mermaid, an obvious outcome of this equation, obvious, but no fun. Hence: the reversed mermaids.

The expressive aesthetic is influenced by Keith Haring and Jean-Michael Basquiat. While Haring's work is characterized by simple stylized forms defined by bold outlines, these qualities have been modified by the combination with Basquiat's raw street art aesthetic. Brushwork, pastel pastel drawing. My entire creating process was an experiment, of techniques, aesthetics, and sensations.

Painting 1 (right canvas), the figures of the fish people were initially depicted in full bodies. However, for the purpose of highlighting their individual characteristics, I decided to separate their bodies. Their poses and the expressive paint background suggest movement and emphasize their unique attributes.

The underlying concept for Painting 2 (left canvas), explores individual identity and the realization that conforming to societal norms often leads to a sense of safety. The depiction of canned fish people symbolizes the idea that through this conformity, we tend to lose our distinctiveness and become products of society. While the aesthetic appears spontaneous, each layer was planned.

Layer 1 employs numerous layers of paint to achieve an expressive aesthetic. It is symbolic of internal turmoil experienced while searching for identity and our place within society.

In Layer 2, an assortment of languages including English, Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, Hindu, Yiddish, Russian, Ukrainian, Finnish, Danish, Swedish, Dutch, and my own invented language

have been incorporated into the artwork. The words 'Humanity', 'Homo Sapien' and 'Society' are repeatedly featured in various media and text formats, serving as a representation of collective human existence. While the text played a significant role in the creative process, few discernible words are evident in the resolved paintings.

Lastly, in Layer 3, the fish people drawn with Posca pens intentionally reference Basquiat's distinctive raw aesthetic. The gilded tin cans, adorned with gold leaf, symbolize the metaphorical cages in which individuals find themselves due to societal expectations imposed upon them because of life circumstances.