



**Xspace
Cultural
Centre**

2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6
www.xspace.info

Erin Rei

Soft Armour

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Erin Rei is an illustrator living and working in Toronto whose lush creations express intimate narratives through an array of media. As a graduate of the OCADU illustration program, she has held several active roles within local self-publishing and art making. While much of her practice involves the production of small-scale zines, comics, paintings and homemade objects, the exhibition *Soft Armour* typifies a momentum she is pursuing towards the production of sculptures and installation work. *Soft Armour* presents Rei's application of her visual language into a larger, immersive environmental form, a translation process partly-inspired by local artist Ness Lee's practice of repeated self-representation.¹ Similar to Lee, Rei's illustrations link to a deeply personal set of motifs, symbols and elements that are articulated in variations, displaying a subtle range of meaning. In *Soft Armour*, a larger than life character has grown off the pages of Rei's sketchbooks and filled Xspace's window gallery.

The organic, plantlike sculpture presents a three-dimensional actualization of a motif woven through Rei's illustrative works. In pursuit of this theme, this window installation continues her depiction of characters with large plant-like growths sprouting from their bodies. The foregrounded sculpture nestles within an environmental backdrop where the vegetal and the non-vegetal aspects of the mandrake-like figure embrace ambiguously. Their connection is folded away from public scrutiny, but point to a symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationship. The liveliness of the leaf-like shapes sprouting around the face of the character is highlighted by the installation's gentle motions, which have been programmed to react in corre-

¹ Erin Rei, conversation with artist, December 4th, 2017.

spondence with the time of day through micro-computing components. This was inspired by the biological activity cycles of plants and Rei's sculpture is similarly receptive to its surroundings. Accordingly, it can be viewed in a more active state during the day, or during a more dormant period after sunset.

The leaves stand as the newest articulation in the visual language of Rei's illustration work. Within her self-referencing visual language, the current plant-based characters have diverged from a past preference for the symbol of a mask. These masks can be seen dotting past work in forms, simplified as a generalized shadow falling across a character's face. While over time this motif has faded from the artist's use, the symbolic similarities they hold with Rei's organic forms offer the leaves as a new link in an iconographical chain. In covering the figure, the leaves evoke the simple comfort that can come with the increased anonymity some may recognize as being offered by long hair or a winter scarf. But Rei's organic forms do not merely block her characters off from the world and hide them from view. A move has been made towards a soft armour wherein her characters are supplied with insulation in a modality less concerned with obfuscation, and more capable of a responsive adaptability.

Soft armour is a concept made necessary by a context of the artist's pursuit of interaction rooted in empathy. According to the artist, soft armour asserts that "being open, receptive, actively empathetic and performing emotional labour are acts of strength."² Importantly, the concept hinges on an understanding that being openly empathetic is a choice. It accepts vulnerability as a potentially powerful act, even if existing in this way can leave the practitioner open to harm from those existing in other modalities. There is also the danger that using 'armour' within interactions can close off potential connections. Rei's stylized characters exist in a middle space, with their soft armour exemplifying an act of balance between these pitfalls.

This is a deeply personal source of inspiration

² Erin Rei, Project Proposal, 2017.

n for the artist, but it is also one with wide implications. Practicing a highly empathic approach to living can allow us to resist experiences of alienation inherent to late capitalist existence. It follows that rather than being celebrated, softness is popularly ridiculed in the society that we inhabit. One of capitalism's self-perpetuating strengths exists in its ability to isolate members of society by limiting our vision - it becomes second nature to approach all through the lens of capital, including our emotions and interpersonal relationships. The revolutionary potential of leaving this line of intimacy open rests in resisting the temptation to reduce and objectify those around you to commodities to be consumed. Under these circumstances, acting within a high register of empathy ultimately produces a revitalizing tension.

Rei's installation displays the notion of soft armour as a platonic approach to navigating under these terms. Notably, the responsivity of the character as represented by the plant-based iconography is understandable as a sustainable state of being thanks to the acceptance of fluidity and variation in its behaviour. In this way, Rei's installation allows us to recall the great potential in nurturing our vulnerability, while maintaining an advocacy for each of our rights to place our own mutable boundary lines within the world. *Soft Armour* asks us to consider the complex choices we make, the borders we put up and how we prioritize comfort, while reminding us continually of the ethical responsibility necessitated by the feedback between ourselves, our environments and the people they hold.

-Rowan Lynch