

CURATORIAL NOTE

As we emerge, blinking and uncertain, from an extended period of global anxiety, we find ourselves faced with ever-increasing stressors and worries. Many, if not all of us, attempt to deal with the pressures that face us through some sort of comfort; small treats, interminable procrastinations, or time spent with family or friends.

Some of these comforting actions are so small as to be almost instinctive, and we engage in them without even recognising our own behaviour; one-offs become habits, habits become ingrained, and we barely realise that we're reaching for a dose of sugar, social media, or whatever else might provide that hit of solace.

The body of work making up *Conditioned Comforts* is an exploration of this process of self-comfort; and an attempt to make sense of how we behave when we're under dis-ease. Through interviews held with friends and colleagues, Emma Fsadni has attempted to uncover both personal, individual and multiple understandings of the term 'conditioned comfort' which she herself has coined, in order to define what each person understands from it, and how each person feels they make use of their own, personal conditioned comforts. It has been a timely exercise, accompanied as it has been by lockdowns and has developed into a deep, visual exploration of the phrase, through her research and her artistic practice.

As we emerge, blinking and uncertain, from an extended period of global anxiety, Fsadni's interviewees spoke frankly about what they recognised to be self-comforting techniques – some benign, and some less so. These ranged from spending long periods alone, to compulsive use of social media, but also included some self-harm as well as less obvious activities, such as over-work, or regimented exercise. These are human, relatable survival strategies, that many of us will have engaged in at one time or another. Take *Hikikomori* – a Japanese term describing those who haven't left their homes or interacted with others for at least six months. A milder form in China has been dubbed *Tangping* or 'lying flat'; adopting a minimalist life without the pressures of a modern lifestyle.

Superficially opposite, but possibly drawn from the same fears, are over active pursuits. Perfectionists overwork in order to avoid having to think, or particularly to avoid the fear of engaging in something challenging; if you're too busy doing what you're told to do what you'd like to do, you avoid personal failure in some way or another. The distractions of everyday repetitive work or exercise occupy our minds, so that deeper, more frightening thoughts can't enter.

Most of Fsadni's interviewees were aware of their actions, and during the interview process, many appeared to become more conscious of the effect their actions had on their lives. Some withdrew from friends, some sabotaged potential careers, and others damaged their own bodies, but all seems able to eventually distance themselves from their negative tendencies. Twenty-first century self-awareness has given us a greater awareness of mental health and well-being in general.

VISUAL PROCESSES

Throughout the process, Fsadni has worked to create a formal abstract language that would serve as the basis of this body of work. Several forms recur throughout the works; in the same way that we return to comforting acts, so the eye here is soothed by repeated hook / 'U' shaped figures and soft triangular shapes. The development of these forms was both conscious – a deliberate linking of thought to form – and intuitive – allowing for a much freer act of creation of composition.

It would be simplistic to describe the development of Fsadni's compositions in terms of what each shape or colour represents. The work contains links to its subject-matter; clearly the colours, textures and forms chosen reflect a sense of fluidity, uncertainty, liminality that is expressed in her research. The visual compositions created in reaction to her generation's state of being, enveloped as it is, in twenty-first century soothing-tools.

The conversations that she had with her interviewees allowed her to explore this concept through a visual reinterpretation; sifting through thoughts and statements served to inform her form and colour palettes. A personal visual language was born, which was extended also into a series of installation and sound.

Fsadni's installation *Happy Medium* serves as a safe-haven, but also as a point of strength from which to begin anew; in a soft environment we can regain strength and confidence. It also confronts the subject matter of the exhibition, the juxtaposed meanings of the words; 'conditioned' and 'comfort'. Within the protective capsule we can feel safe, but viewed from outside, doubt emerges – is it too safe, is it too soothing?

The work *UN* – takes this contradiction a step further. A rocking chair serves as a vehicle in which control is lost; we are asked to relinquish control, to sit, tethered and blind-folded, allowing ourselves to rock back and forth. Trust is important here, how do we know what will happen while we're blindfolded? Balance, both physical and mental, is equally important; without internal equilibrium, we risk free-fall, as we do when our mental health is undermined.

EMPATHY

We are often told that in order to offer support to those struggling with mental health, we should be present and understanding, but we should not try to tell that person that we 'know how they feel'. Indeed, it is impossible for any one person to know precisely what it is like to be another; conscious experience may be shared only up to a point, beyond which we cannot know exactly what it is like to be someone else.

This doesn't preclude sensitivity. Fsadni's interview notes show a sensitivity to her collaborators' humanity, gently noticing contradictions, for example, between her interviewee's words and actions, or perceiving self-protection strategies in what is being said.

But really, knowing how each individual feels, is not the point. What Fsadni's work does is engage in a collective consciousness, to try to put down in colour and form, what, perhaps, can only be felt, and cannot easily be put into words. Her questions, gentle interviews, and the work that came out of them, explore what might otherwise remain hidden; the individual experience becomes infinitely less remote.

Words by Margerita Pulè