

## Picking up the hammer

By Zali Matthews

A long and heavy sledgehammer leans against the glass of Outer Space's Window Gallery. It has been placed upside down – inverted. Opposite it, a split digital screen displays a rotating rainbow spectrum and billowing, artificial flames. Between them, broken cinder blocks lie scattered across the space. This selection of objects – heavy, industrial and imposing – speak of righteous anger, destruction and revolution.

*Calm like a bomb* is the latest work by Meanjin-based protest artist Amy Sargeant. In her art, Sargeant expresses her disillusionment with the dysfunctions of the Australian political establishment. She also seeks to destabilise and critique motifs, symbols and icons from mainstream Australian culture in a method known as *détournement* (hijacking), popularised by a mid-century political organisation known as the Situationist International (SI). SI staunchly criticised advanced capitalism's dependence on commodities as being deeply damaging to the quality of human life.

This multimedia installation responds to Sargeant's need for urgent radical action in the face of rising violence and discrimination towards queer, trans and gender diverse people in Australia. Its title, which takes the form of an ironic simile, underscores the explosive anger felt towards these injustices.

The objects which make up this work – a sledgehammer, digital screen and broken cinder blocks – each engage with legacies of protest activism. The digital screen, for instance, with its diagonal split, directly references the bipartite red and black design of the anarchist flag – anarchism, as a political philosophy, calls for the abolition of government and reorganisation of society as a critique of institutional norms. Sargeant retains the composition of the anarchist flag but replaces its colours with digital animations, including a rotating rainbow spectrum which closely resembles the rainbow flag, a symbol of LGBTQI+ pride.

Flags occupy a core role in Sargeant's artistic practice. Past works have often featured Australian national flags, variously inverted or distorted in an act of *détournement* so as to criticise the nation it represents. In *Calm like a bomb*, Sargeant eschews *détournement*, instead altering the anarchist flag to redirect its ideals and values towards the fight for the rightful treatment of queer, trans and gender diverse people.

On the other side of the gallery, the presence of the sledgehammer promises to bring these desires to fruition. The sledgehammer is a common motif in Sargeant's practice, having been described by the artist as, "a motif historically associated with anarchism, revolution and worker's liberation."<sup>1</sup> Leaning casually against the window, as if it has just been put down after smashing apart the cinder blocks beside it, its potential as a tool for enacting anarchist values and practising justice becomes palpable.

In *Calm like a bomb*, Sargeant calls on allies to rethink their mode of allyship. She contends that passive support is idle and ineffective; instead, she calls for active and radical support – for us to pick up the hammer.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sargeant, Amy. "Semiotics of Disillusionment: Protesting and Reframing Australia's Political Spectacle Through *Détournement*." MPhil thesis., Queensland University of Technology, 2020.