



Silk Robes and **Big Hats**

BY SARAH NATALIE WEBSTER

Sam Duckor-Jones lives in a bright pink church called Gloria in a small seaside suburb of Greymouth, on the West Coast of Te Waipounamu. The church wasn't always pink, and it wasn't always called Gloria. When Sam bought the building in 2020, it was a sad colour, a sickly grey like a forgotten sock.

The grey church was also nameless, although it used to be called Andrew (more accurately, Saint Andrew's) before it was deconsecrated in 2018. After losing its name and official church status, the old building stood empty – unvisited and unloved – until the Wellington artist came along. Sam bought the building, and like a queer fairy godmother, he slowly turned it pink (although he used a paintbrush instead of a wand).

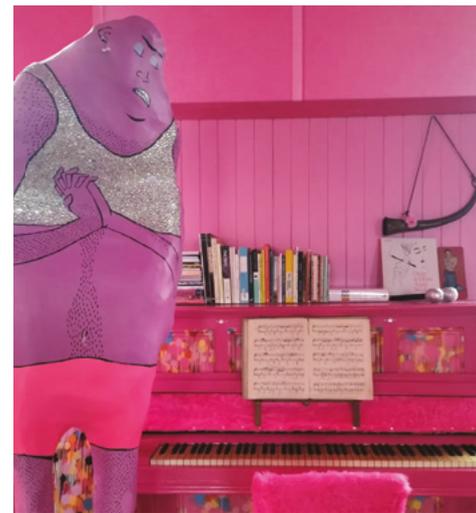
So the old place became Gloria, a kind of architectural Cinderella story. Now people come from all over to see the fabulous pink church, which is also Sam's home and his biggest artwork to date.



Pink and proud

Anyone who visits Gloria can see Sam loves pink. The walls are pink. The ceiling is pink. His bedspread and rug are pink. The altar is adorned with pink curtains and pink beads and pink flowers. Above all this, Gloria's name shines pinkly in neon letters. There's even a hot-pink piano with a matching furry chair.

Pink has appeared a lot in Sam's art over the years. He says it's an important colour for him. On the one hand, pink is often used to represent queerness and gay liberation. But pink can take on many different meanings, depending on the shade, from romance to flowers to babies to kitsch to fantasy. "I like pink because it's still kind of shocking," Sam says, "even though it's cool now too." While Sam avoids assigning meaning to his own work, it's undeniable that painting a former church bright pink is a powerful statement of pride. And Gloria makes this serious point with as much silliness and joy as possible.



The 1990s

Sam always knew he wanted to be an artist. "I didn't enjoy school much because I wasn't able to make things all the time." He remembers his desk being filled with twigs, bark chips, rocks, feathers, flax. Sam squirreled away any kind of material he could get his hands on; it all had potential. Making stuff was a form of escape for a lonely, anxious boy who felt different from his classmates. He found "the politics" of the playground stressful.

Sam went to school in the 1990s. There was a lot of homophobia, and kids who identified as LGBTQI+ didn't feel included. By the age of twelve, Sam knew he was gay but felt the need to disguise it. He was afraid he wouldn't be understood or accepted. But if making things was a refuge, it also helped him to connect. Sam used drawing as a way to find people who were going through the same things.



Sculptures: Indoorsy types

As an artist, Sam is known for his sculptures. He likes to make larger-than-life men, often naked or in teeny shorts. Sam sculpts these men from clay or papier mâché and paints them in bright colours – pink, of course, but also purple, yellow, and gold. Some of his men are covered in multi-coloured dots. Sam is participating in a long artistic tradition that dates back to ancient Greece and Rome. Yet his men are nothing like the famous sculptures from antiquity – heroes in heroic poses, marble muscles flexed, proudly displaying their chiselled abs.

Sam's men are more indoorsy types: soft-bellied, long-fingered, and shy. Their heads tend to be too small for their bodies. They stand around awkwardly, staring at their hands as if unsure of the space they're taking up. "I like my sculptures to be a little bit vulnerable and also a little bit silly," Sam says. "Art is so serious, isn't it? It's nice to have a giggle." But Sam's skinny-armed men carry a serious message too, especially in a sports-mad country like New Zealand.



Safe haven

Sam found a safe haven in being creative. For him, it was an act of joy and discovery. "Art isn't just for the arty kids. It's for anyone who's having a hard time," he says. "Art is about not knowing, being surprised, working things out, brushing up against beauty – and there's a lot of comfort in that."

For Sam, art is a verb. It's about the process of *creating* things, not the finished product. Sam believes it's this compulsion that made him an artist. "I just want to make stuff. Make stories. Make drawings. Make sculptures. Just make – and it doesn't always have to be good."

In the art world, Sam is described as a multi-disciplinary artist. He likes to switch between forms – sculpture, drawing, and poetry – so he doesn't get bored. Taking a break from one thing, such as sculpture, allows him to return refreshed. Sam says another benefit of working across multiple forms is that when he gets stuck on one project, he can always sink into another. "And artists always get stuck," he adds.



Poems: Loneliness and longing

Sam also writes poems and stories. He sees this as another kind of making, only with words instead of clay. Words allow Sam to create characters like his sculptures, although these characters can talk and be part of a story.

Sam has written two books of poetry. His debut collection is called *People from the Pit Stand Up*. One of the main characters in the book is a sculptor (the reader suspects it's Sam). The sculptor tells us about living alone in a small rural town – about loneliness and longing and never mowing the lawns. The poems describe the process of making men out of clay: “begin with the feet” and “wield a slab of clay the size of a short piece of two-by-four, hold it like the butcher with his fresh young cut firmly in two hands”. Even Sam-the-poet can't resist writing about making things.

Another poem describes the night the sculptor's bike was stolen:

*It's good to live in a house full of golems
In the summer when my bike was nicked
Me asleep down the hall
Hot night
All the doors flung open
I hope those thieves poked their noses in
& lit up the room with their phones
Eyes peeled for iPads & laptops
Illuminating instead the terrible faces of nudes who loom ...*

The sculptor-narrator concludes that the thieves probably scrambled pretty quickly after that!

How Gloria of Greymouth rose again

Most people think of poetry as an art form that's quiet and contemplative. But it can also be a form of protest. One morning, Sam woke to find that Gloria had been covered in homophobic and anti-Semitic graffiti. A rainbow flag, left on the front lawn, had been burnt to ash. Sam would write about the vandalism, and the poem (“How Gloria of Greymouth rose again”) would be published online.

*Word spread then & folks showed
up in droves. With flowers & cards & hugs & tears & support & outrage
Gloria's pink icing flanks were restored by noon
We sat on her paint spattered floor. We ate sandwiches
We caught each other's eyes & crinkled a bit & looked away
We checked our phones & said so & so & so & so & so & so & so just heard ...*

Sam also talks about the drag-queen show due to be performed on Gloria's stage that night. He and his friends refused to be demoralised by the act of hate. Instead, Sam says, they put on their highest heels and “glitteriest” jackets and sang and laughed and twirled.

*We did the same thing the next night & the night after that
We continued to be vividly outraged &
We continued to be queerly defiant &
We put on our silk robes & our big hats & our gumboots &
We watched the sun go down & the glorious coast was lit up as pink as a lullaby &
We twirled.*



A pinker world

Sam's poem – "How Gloria of Greymouth rose again" – was a protest against hatefulness and bigotry as much as it was about pride. It's the same message you'll find in all of his creations: from his tall sculptures of shy men to Gloria, who also stands tall in her small town.

Sam's work asks us to imagine a pinker, joyful, more inclusive world – one where we're all free to put on silk robes and big hats and be absolutely, unapologetically ourselves.



Silk Robes and Big Hats

by Sarah Natalie Webster

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