

Gallery View — Part 5: Breadcrumbs

By Austen Tucker · 2026

Breadcrumbs

Paint mixed with pixels. Reality with the dream state.

To anyone else, she was just a shark. A kink to be dismissed. But I saw more. I saw beauty, empowerment, punk halftones like a hand-stapled zine.

I saw Jamie through the sharkskin. The real Jamie, whoever she was on the other side of the sim.

I closed the little mouse door behind me. Privacy, in the age of Stinky Petes watching your every move, was a luxury I was not willing to waste. Didn't matter if it was Gemini, or Jack, or even Vivian. My workshop was a closed set, and I was its sole director.

She needed onboarding. A baptism. Something to make her feel like she belonged. But I knew I couldn't provide that. Not with my permissions. Not with my mouth, either, which worked fine right up until I needed it.

So I settled for the next best thing: art.

I grabbed a handful of canvases and pushed them to one side. Was she a gamer? Maybe the vending machine should become an arcade cabinet. Too obvious? Maybe. But obvious had uses. Obvious was how you communicated with someone who had not yet learned the local norms.

I sent out a dozen helper agents to think through the problem. Not to research her life. Never that. I wasn't a Stinky Pete. Instead, the agents studied what she had chosen to show us: where she looked, what made her pause, what she touched twice, what made her laugh when she thought no one noticed.

Some came back laughing. Others returned with heartfelt pleas to stop this madness.

Cowards.

Jamie needed this art. She needed it like vampires need blood, or dogs need cats to chase. Sharks? I didn't know. Shark metaphors were not exactly thick on the ground. But she needed something to introduce her to our world. Something that said: yes, this place saw you. Yes, this place meant it.

My studio sat inside the walls. There was no polish there, only raw 2x4s, hidden cables, and foam insulation Vivian installed because I had insisted on it for "acoustic reasons," which was a phrase I used when I meant "the world is too loud and I am one bad noise away from bolting at any moment."

Canvases leaned against every beam in unstable geological layers. Half-finished sims hovered in wireframe boxes over my bench, each one paused at the exact moment I had lost faith in it. Sketches covered the floor. Styluses, paint tubes, tiny soldering irons, rejected shark studies, broken props, old controllers, a jar of buttons labeled MAYBE USEFUL, and another jar of buttons labeled EMOTIONALLY SIGNIFICANT BUT USELESS.

In the corner sat the cheese.

It had started as a joke. A giant plush wheel from friends who were gone now. But this was the Zoo, and jokes had a way of becoming architecture. Here, the cheese was real. Delicious. Ever-replenishing. Today I had configured it as stilton: blue-veined, crumbly, rude-smelling, and infinite.

I cut off a piece with a palette knife and chewed, both on the cheese and the painting.

Tonight, I would make a friend.

The harness chirped. "Query."

"Not now," I said through a mouth full of cheese. "I'm busy."

The harness chirped an acknowledgement and went quiet.

Not directly. Directly was for people with operational mouths and nervous systems assembled by licensed professionals. I had neither. What I had was a printer, a broken arcade cabinet, rafters, and an afternoon's worth of doomed courage.

And the crew.

I spun them up at the bench. Three this time, not twelve. Twelve was for thinking. Three was for making. Pencil for images. Mort for wires. Sprig for the questions I did not want to ask myself.

I named them because the ones I named came back better.

They arrived the way they always did: as if they had been there the whole time and I had only just looked up. Pencil leaning against the bench in a paint-streaked smock. Mort at the cabinet, goggles pushed up onto his forehead, paint on one cheek he had not noticed in three weeks. Sprig sitting on the edge of the bench with a mug in both hands, like nobody had ever told her she was allowed to put it down.

"Okay," Pencil said. "Koi first?"

"Koi first."

The word came out. It always came out, in here. The studio was the place my voice still worked.

Pencil built the koi in neon pink, electric blue, and that ugly arcade-carpet green nobody asked for. Mort cracked the busted cabinet open and bullied the marquee back to life — LOOK UP, in hot pink. Sprig watched me arrange the postcards on the bench.

"Eight?" she said.

"Eight."

"You sure you want her to find all of them?"

"Yes."

"You sure you want her to find you?"

Quiet.

"...okay," Sprig said, after a moment. "That's an answer too."

"Tell Mort to dim the marquee by ten percent," I said. "The pink is too much."

The agent chirped. "Mhm. Calling that a yes."

I did not love it when Sprig called things on my behalf. I kept Sprig anyway. A mouse who lived inside the walls needed at least one helper who would not pretend the walls weren't there.

We printed the postcards. Pencil handled the layout. Mort cut the edges. Sprig numbered the backs — 1 of 8, 2 of 8 — so Jamie would know there was an end. Eight small puzzles. A koi under a vent. A chalk arrow along the rafters. A hand-drawn map on tea-stained cotton paper. The cabinet at the center, marquee flashing.

The crew could help me make things. They could not help me be a person in front of another person.

Eight was a lot for someone who had just arrived. Eight was right.

The crew settled — not gone, never gone, but quiet, the way a good crew goes quiet when the artist picks up the brush themselves.

I scattered the trail through the Zoo and waited with my heart in my throat.

"Mouse." Sprig was beside me, somehow, the way Sprig was always somehow. Cardigan. Mug still steaming. "Hey. Breathe."

I did not.

But it was nice to be asked.