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# Dream Weaver

Wagner's surreal critters come alive this month at CAM | By Nancy Wozny | Portrait by Phoebe Rourke-Gabriel |

"I guess I am a little bit anti-human," assesses H-Town multi-media artist Wendy Wagner, who forgoes human form for fantasy subjects in her psychologically dense yet unapologetically cheery works. "People sometimes drain me, while my dog never does. I love animals and creatures, especially when they are from another galaxy."

Wagner's surreal-meets-folk-art aesthetic and celestial species are striking chords with the terrestrial art troupe right here in Houston. Her painting "I Hope I'm Dreaming"—which features a tyrannosaurus rex, with talons painted in a bubblegum-pink hue, hovering over a miniature Maltese resting sweetly on a blue cloud—took top honors at the Hunting Art Prize earlier this year. And this month Wagner is busy creating fresh batches of painting, sculpture and animation for a solo show at New Gallery in January, and upcoming exhibits at the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft and Gallery Trinity in Japan.

Wagner, 41, and her graphic-designer hubby Kenneth Finch are also debuting a line of super soft and weirdly cuddly art dolls, dubbed Qwerkys, at the Contemporary Arts Museum shop on Dec. 4. Each cartoon-like creature comes with its own bizarrely unique biography and, *ahem*, quirky physical characteristics. Sprouting a wing from one side and an elephant's trunk from another, one doll is named "Mr. Look at Me;" a little cutie called "Miss Pretty" is half human and half octopus and sports a colorful bow. "All of the dolls have my own traits, and those of people and animals who are very close to me," says the artist, noting that Miss Pretty

has a penchant for nail polish (even though she's allergic to it), and that Mr. Look at Me loves to ice skate. The "bios" that come with the dolls cover these points.

Austin-born Wagner, who studied at the Art Institute of Houston and the Glassell School, says her foray into touchable art makes perfect sense in the context of a medium-shifting career. She hop-scotches between painting, sculpture and ceramics. "I continually need to reinvent my imagery into new forms."

She also knows her way around computer animation. "I am a techie at heart," she says, "so switching from paint to a computer was a fluid transition for me." Wagner's splendidly absurd short, "The Eternity of a Second," in which characters not unlike her dolls make their way through a Wagner-sphere contemplating the nature of reality, proved the hit of Flicker Fusion, an animation show at DiverseWorks last year. "Her paintings have always possessed a playful energy that translates perfectly to animation," says Diane Barber, curator and co-executive director of DiverseWorks. "I see it to be a logical extension of what she's been doing with her paintings for quite some time."

And while Wagner's works seem rife with sweetly enchanting subjects and settings, the artist says there is a slightly menacing undercurrent in her world. It's not all sugar and spice. "Weird, demented stuff goes on in my head, as well as the fun stuff," she says. "I guess I just want everything to come alive." ■



HELLO DOLLY Above, Wagner's animation stills and a painting, and below, the artist with her 'Qwerkys'

