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FEATURE

Wendy Wagner

Deconstructing Dreams

By Nancy Wozny

Wendy Wagner's art operates via a persuasive sense of color, subversive humor and an unruly imagination. She has created a recognizable vocabulary of invented species that hop between paintings, ceramics, animation and now, soft sculpture. Known for her post-surreal work, the artist now finds herself rather obsessed with creatures that actually exist. The stars of her newest batch of paintings sport no wings or extra limbs. Her two Maltese canines, Roberto and the late BamBam, make numerous appearances in her upcoming show at New Gallery. They travel the galaxy decked in space suits with their glistening eyes staring out at us. "Well, BamBam is really traveling the universe now," quips Wagner. "I love animals and creatures, especially when they are from another galaxy." Fantastical narrative, whether in visual representation or written form, is often an element in her work. She can spin a tall tale about any of her paintings, all of which can function as a single page in a storybook. It's simply hard to resist fable making when it comes to Wagner's work. There's an urge to connect the disparate and fanciful dots.

Wagner's work engages the eye as much as the mind. Symbolically dense and unapologetically cute, her paintings entertain and befuddle the viewer. Her acrylic, oil and pencil canvases contain various degrees of resolution. Swatches of bold patterns anchor us in the familiar. Her creatures have a cartoon lineage while her highly treated grounds keep the end result unstable. Her carefully worked backgrounds, bordered in black, allow a visual tension that never quite lets Wagner's pooches rest. The canine twins are rendered in breathtaking realism, complete with twinkling eyes, while the deflated disco ball they rest upon appears to be disappearing, unfinished, not entirely realized. "Scrubbing, editing, erasing are all big parts of

my process," says the artist. Shapes appear to drip, ooze, sprout, melt and float, creating a turbulent and volatile surface. Her creatures look caught in the act, which gives them their visceral punch. Even though it's frankly hard to tell if these images are coming in or out of focus, there's a palpable sense of deconstruction. Her environments are as fragile as they are surreal, and it's exactly this quality that transcends whimsy into an unsettling zone.

Her animation ventures into more sinister territory. Wagner's *The Eternity in a Second*, included in *DiverseWorks' Flicker Fusion* animation show last year, contains a menacing undertone amidst a forced cheeriness. Animation gave her flock of invented beings a chance to come to life. Bright saturated colors, techno music and hyper-cute creatures lure the viewer into a world with its own set of oddball rules. "I want everything to come alive, plus, I am a bit of a techie," boasts Wagner, who uses *Toon Boom Studio* software. "So switching from paint to a computer came easily for me. I also love the camera element in animation."

For the New Gallery show, Wagner returns to works on paper, utilizing acrylic paint, colored pencil and ceramic pieces. Unlike her paintings, the works on paper take a more minimalist approach. A while back, someone suggested she combine ceramics with painting. "I held up a small ceramic to a painting for reference and liked the contrast. I thought about that idea, and it didn't really work, so I played around with it on paper," says Wagner. "When I put it on the opaque paper, it seemed to make better sense. Of course, the white space is treated as an element in itself." As with all of Wagner's work, there's a lot of attention to the interplay between materials.



Wagner grew up drawing non-stop in Austin. She moved to Houston to study graphic art at the Art Institute of Houston while continuing to draw and paint. She studied with Pablo Babbio and Ebsen Ispada, and at the Glassell with Terrell James and Brian Portman. Eventually, she left the graphic art world to work full-time as an artist. The switch paid off; last spring, Wagner won the Hunting Prize with her epic painting *I Hope I am Dreaming*, which reveals a floating dinosaur hovering over a sweetly resting Maltese. "I had no expectation of winning at all, especially when I saw the company I was in with the other finalists," says Wagner. "I was hyperventilating when they announced my name."

Wagner possesses a kind of open-door policy when it comes to her influences and inspiration. Her paint scrapings created a mosaic that landed on the spaceship for BamBam. Wagner got an inkling that soft sculpture might provide a new path after making the gigantic snout pillows for the Flicker Fusion show. She began collecting stuffed animals, studying their operation, form and construction, which resulted in her art doll collection aptly titled, *Qwerkys*. Other than making a skirt that never fit right, Wagner claims no sewing chops whatsoever. She launched the dolls with her husband, Kenneth Finch, a graphic designer, as a way to interest young people in the arts. Crafted from microfiber and felt, the dolls are hand sewn with large visible stitches. *Qwerkys* function much the way her paintings do, with just enough strangeness to arouse one's interest, but there's also the sense of restraint. Each doll comes with its own half-story. Like most of her work, information is fragmented and left unresolved. Froggee, a boy, wears makeup but doesn't get it right. Miss Pretty, part octopus part human hand, wears nail polish, even though she's allergic to it. "There's elements of people I know in the *Qwerkys*," says Wagner. "Mr. Look at Me is Kenneth." Bits and pieces of Wagner's personal history make their way into her work, but without a confessional tone. Clearly, leaving things out is part of her strategy.

Wagner's vocabulary of images transfers easily between media. A paint drip finds its way on to a *Querky*, while Mr. Look at Me has traveled from the canvas to clay to *Qwerkyl*and. And Froggee and Miss Pretty made appearances in *The Eternity of a Second*. Her ceramic work takes her hose-nosed creatures into a hand-held scale, lending an intimacy to this body of work. "I am very versatile when it comes to scale, everything accommodates to the new medium," she says. "I started with ceramics because I wanted my characters to become 3-D. I also liked the glossy, shiny finish and how they are precious looking and delicate," says Wagner. "The cutting of patterns to hand-build the ceramics led me to thinking about patterns for sewing." Redundancy is a theme in her ceramic work as exemplified by the circus-inspired *Mr. Look of Me Parade*. "I do like repetition; I did that on the snout swarm also," says Wagner, about her wall piece that features a tightly clustered gathering of snouts. "The snouts are always in pairs at the least, like birds or a pack of creatures."

In addition to her New Gallery show, Wagner is also preparing for exhibits at Gallery Trinity in Japan and Houston Center for Contemporary Craft. Motivated by a spirit of restlessness, Wagner remains in a state of open attention as to what will come next. Just like her work, she's most comfortable with flux. "I have no trouble letting go of things," she says. Wagner's next

project may very well come from the detritus of previous works. Gathering a cluster of colored felt *Qerky* scraps in her hand, she adds, "I might do something with these."



Beam Me Up
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www.newgallery.net