

Cartoon-like figures are remarkable

Art review

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RONA Green: *You remind me of somebody I used to know*. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until November 3.

Rona Green is an artist who a number of years ago created a peculiar tribe of anthropomorphised animal characters with whom she has populated her art. Her "teddies with attitude", dogs, cats and birds usually carry a fair amount of body ink and bear the scars of their passage through life.

The curator Glenn Barkley, writing on Green's art a number of years ago, observed, "I swear I saw two of the characters from your pictures inside the medical centre in Crown St in Wollongong."

This quality of *déjà vu* is one that I frequently experience on viewing Green's remarkable figures - they are highly stylised with a cartoon-like simplicity. At the same time, they allude to archetypal forms that may relate to types of "people" whom most of us have encountered in our daily travels.

This may explain the somewhat enigmatic title to the exhibition: *You remind me of somebody I used to know*.

Green's favourite technique is a linocut, with crisp, clearly articulated edges, which has been coloured in by hand, frequently with

gradated backgrounds betraying the human touch. *Ice cream days* is fairly typical of her prints. Generally, the figures are shown either frontally or in strict profile with lines simplified and eyes bulging and expressive.

In this print, the dog is shown as a head and shoulders profile portrait wearing a striped zip-up jacket. It is a hot punk dog with a safety pin pierced in its snout and

gambling and crime gang insignia tattooed all over its head.

In the early 2000s Green discovered Danzig Baldaev's profusely illustrated *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia*. Baldaev had worked in the Soviet prison system and over about half a century assembled an archive of 3600 photographs and drawings of prisoners and their tattoos.

He argued in his three-volume publication that these tattoos were a mirror of everything that the country had been through and that frequently the tattoos on a criminal presented their entire biography - their "criminal service record".

Green was immediately attracted by the idea that these body decorations could be read like a diary, a CV or a patchwork of coded

information, by different people on different levels like a secret text.

The dog in *Ice cream days* through his tattoos is identified as a member of the ice cream gang that deals with gambling; the cobweb and the number six also have meanings that those in the underworld would recognise.

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Sniffy, in this gang, is a relatively small-time player, perhaps a thug and a small-time enforcer.



Rona Green, *Ice cream days* in *You remind me of somebody I used to know* at Beaver Galleries. Picture: Supplied

player, perhaps a thug and a small-time enforcer. I think I saw him in Civic a couple of nights ago. *Wylie and Kev*, on the other hand, with their clown faces on their T-shirts, are a much more benevolent pair, keeping their own secrets and busily preparing for Halloween.

Green has been making animal finger puppets at least since 2002, but this is the first time that they have made an outing to Beaver Galleries. Pieces like *In a B movie* become like little animated tableaux where some peculiar drama is being re-enacted with all of the seriousness of a Punch and Judy pantomime.

In the 25 years that Rona Green has been exhibiting, her unique and memorable cast of characters has had a very recognisable presence in the Australian art scene. At first glance, they may be cute and loveable, but they have spent some time walking on the wild side.