

Review: Rona Green's work is cool and quirky, but also contagious in its complexity

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Canberratimes.com.au June 23 2022



Rona Green, Vory - framed mixed media assemblage

Rona Green: Every time you walk on by I gotta sigh. Beaver Galleries. Closes July 9. Tuesday - Saturday 10am-5pm. beavergalleries.com.au

I first encountered the work of Rona Green in 1997 at her first solo exhibition at the Australian Print Workshop in Melbourne. It was raw, quirky and memorable with masks and faces that seemed to range from Halloween festivities to street theatre and the comedy of the absurd.

Fast-forward 25 years, add another 34 solo exhibitions and over 200 group shows all around the world, we arrive at her latest exhibition at the Beaver Galleries.



Rona Green, M-M-Michel

What is so seductive about the work of Rona Green is its deceptive simplicity - it has a direct, in-your-face, almost cartoon-like simplification - that develops a labyrinthine complexity the more time you spend with it. It has the honesty and "street cred" of graffiti, yet the sophistication and intellectual rigour of academic art.

Her imagery primarily consists of slightly weird anthropomorphic creatures. "M-M-Michel" is large (over a metre high) hand-coloured linocut where a strange creature with reindeer horns is posed frontally against a green background eyeballing the viewer.

Around its neck, almost like a necklace, is the tattooed inscription "*tout me fait rire*" (everything makes me laugh) - a popular French prisoner tattoo. The body of this creature is covered with body ink, like a diary of its passage through life, with many of the images encoded and appearing harmless to some, while to those with insider knowledge, a possible checklist of criminal codes.



Rona Green, Troye

What are the possible meanings of a fly, a ghetto blaster, a tiger or an antlered female naked except for a pair of hot shorts and fancy shoes and holding effortlessly a set of dumbbells? This is not to mention the enigmatic figure "86" tattooed on her face or the flying bat. Green has made an extensive study of criminal gang tattoos and encodes them into her art.

"M-M-Michel" may appear as slightly menacing, even confronting, but also somewhat marginalised and vulnerable. She wears her bravado literally as a facade behind which she can hide and gain protection. Green adores formal simplicity with a complete transparency of means that conceals a catalogue of concerns.

She is reluctant to leave us with a literary gloss to help us decipher possible meanings, but there is an abundance of clues that the viewer is invited to engage with and through which they can construct a personal meaning. For me, it is this delicious mix between defiance and vulnerability that is a hallmark of this artist's work.

Although the hand-coloured linocuts are Green's most recognisable work, this exhibition brings to the fore the full richness of her output. The imagery is similar throughout the show and spreads to painted acrylic canvases, painted glazed earthenware tiles, small brilliantly painted figurines and funky installations of "finger puppets" with the image printed digitally on fabric that is then stuffed, sewn and presented boxed within their own painted environment.

Throughout it is a cast of similar characters who seem to have emerged from the criminal underworld and stand exposed in the full light of day.

To some, the imagery may appear as cute, wacky and even humorous and to a certain extent this may be the case, but there is also a certain dark shadow cast by the work that appears probing, challenging and questioning.

Much of her art deals with the construction of identity and exploring the social roles allotted to gender and certain types of people. She creates her own unique cast of social misfits and after visiting one of her exhibitions the people I meet in the street often remind me of some of her characters. Warning - Rona Green's art is contagious!