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'MY MOTHER TAUGHT ME TO STEAL IN THE INDUSTRIAL ZONES'



Rona Green *Dally-boy* 2006, linocut and watercolour (ed. 23), 69 x 54 cm

These evocative words are commonly tattooed on inmates in Russian prisons. They allude to mother Russia and a lack of social services. Russian criminal tattoos are a complex, consistent, and a very well documented system of tattoo placement and iconology. The *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia* runs to two weighty, pastel covered volumes.¹

Rona Green's project is to interpret human nature by depicting the duplicitous characters of loners, misfits and outcasts with shifting identities. Her journey has taken her from her back yard to the forests of Borneo and the prisons of Russia. The artist is emblazoning her new 'pets' *Leonid* and *Sergei* (2008) with tattoos depicting Russian underworld rank, years incarcerated, and gruesome isolation. The suit of clubs or spades, and the cat are symbols of thieves. Spiders may represent a continuing criminal career or someone looking to get out of the game, depending upon placement.

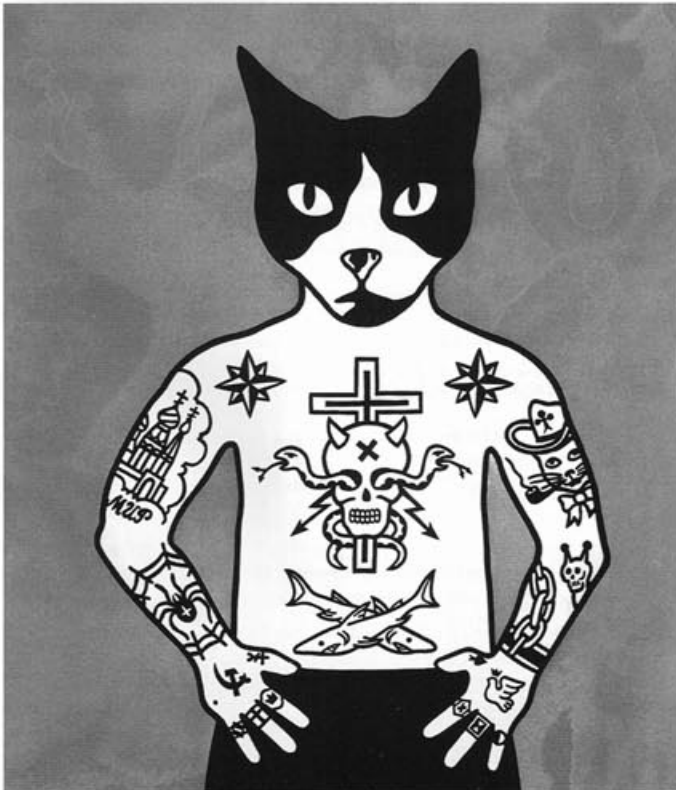
Leonid and *Sergei* are based on particular animals — artist Sophia Szilagyi's cat, Leonard, and Green's sister's one-eyed cat, Sweeney. Green states 'Leonid is the captain and Sergei is his muscle'. Humour and popular culture references are infused in all Green's work. Leonid Antonov, a bizarre character in the online role-playing game *Dirty Life*,

corresponds with the name of one of Green's new cats. The character in the game is both a highly tattooed life inmate of a Siberian prison and an angel.

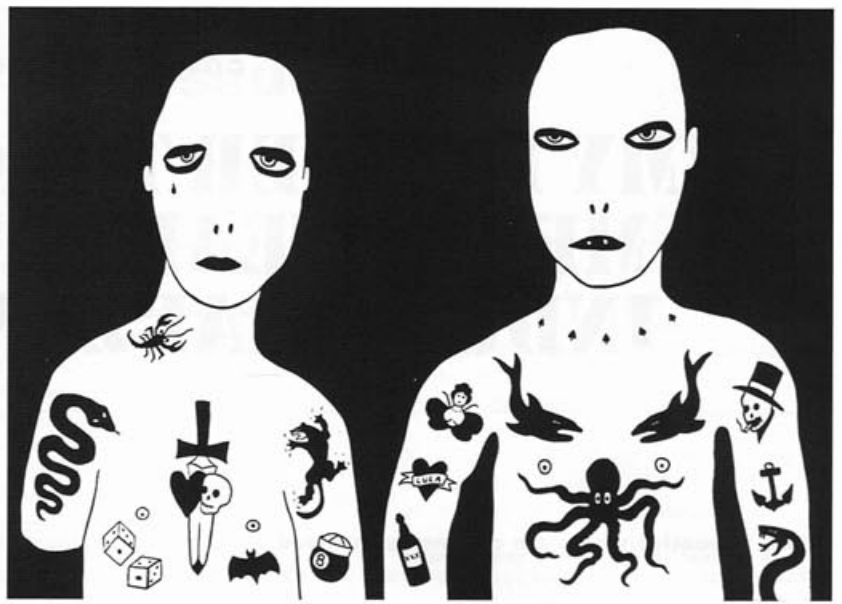
Green is likely to accept the *Dirty Life* reference if it enhances the character and power of the graphic image, embeds it in current popular culture, or may help to personalise a viewing experience: 'The artist generally wishes her intentions to remain mysterious, so the viewer can decide what is transpiring'². Her work encompasses a diverse collection of references. They include snake-handling pastors from America's south, ancient Egyptian gods, cat mummies, crap television, ultimate fighting, to possibly personal references to rude girls or boys in early works, and pop songs.

The works connect with the public on many levels. They can link with the viewer's personal baggage or experience of the freak, tattooed man, loved ones or pets. Common preconceptions as to subcultures, gangs and cultural diversity are explored through insightful images of 'the outsider' or 'other'. At a recent Canberra exhibition, a tattooed man exclaimed to the artist that one of her 'pets' was his and proceeded to strip off his shirt to show the artist his colourful back. I almost cried when I first saw *white Byrd* (2005), because at the time my son had just been born. The work repeats an image of a dog on a small scale inside a larger replica, the smaller with a heart tattoo, and the larger with a teardrop. On reflection, the Euan Macleod white ground print *Volcano* (2007) is on the same subject of paternal love. The Macleod exudes an existentialist foreboding, a grey comment on the cycle of life, with a focus on our limited time. Conversely Green's uplifting and comical depiction visualises a loving paternal relationship simply by placing one similar shape inside another and endowing them with an iconic mark.

Green's many double portraits and paired images inform the viewer of relationships within the sitters' world and tackle historical problems of traditional composition. Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), and David Hockney and John Brack's interest in double portraits, demonstrate a continuing history of the form. Double figurative images are used for social and scientific identification or classification, particularly for criminals, Indigenous cultures, and disease. A frontal and profile portrait is generally used for classification. The frontal nature of most of Green's works links them to this visual discourse, and in *Discotheque Nasties* (2004) a side and frontal portrait is evident. The linocut *Class and Taste* (2000) exemplifies the dual nature of much of her figurative imagery. Gaze, tattoo placement, and an unbalanced amputation lead the eye from one figure and their identifying marks to another. The two pairs of



Rona Green *Leonid* 2008, linocut and intaglio (ed. 30), 76 x 56 cm
Printed by Kylie White and Yuho Imura, Port Jackson Press



left Rona Green *white Byrd* 2005, sugarlift, aquatint and white ground (ed. 40), 38 x 28 cm
Printed by Belinda Fox, Trent Walter and Pia Murphy, Port Jackson Press

above Rona Green *Class and Taste* 2000, linocut (ed. 13), 70 x 100 cm

Borneoids: the dogs, *Cutter* and *Dally-boy*, and cats, *Goo Goo Man* and *White Rajni* (2006), embody submissive and dominant roles, which in turn construct possible sex relationships. Size is important in these relationships, the dogs being bigger, and the hang of such works can also change meaning.

Weekend Buck taking kittens to Carrot Slide Park (2002) was the first of Green's works I encountered, followed by numerous digital prints, linocuts, and poppets³. I am still captured by the enchanting absurdity of the smoking, tattooed father rabbit and his children, romping in a dreary park. The animal is a device used for commenting on the confused and sometimes brutal affiliations structured by human nature. The disenfranchised figures have control over rather mundane life choices regarding tattoo placement, smoking, or outings. The animals are displayed as individuals by giving them human choices. They seem more intelligent, more unique, more like us.

Green's imposing linocuts with watercolour additions are in small editions. They are graphic, and credible as a possible T-shirt design. The works are similar to Inuit art in their stunningly bare, simplistic figuration and empathy with animals. Green's prints succeed as stark, frugal images without a background story, or further fuzzy referents or narratives. She acknowledges that she would like her work to have an impact from a distance, like the work of a tattooist friend. Possibly her early affinity with the iconic imagery of Jasper Johns has helped in the evolution of her own simplified imagery. John's cans and flags are readily recognisable; they are 'things the mind already knows'. Similarly Green's 'pets' are images that belong to an encyclopaedia of known forms that Green sabotages and renders provocative.

Green's art from childhood has been 'playing with shapes'. The shapes in the linocuts become the bodies of her creatures. The backgrounds or negative shapes in her works were commonly tantalising deep black beds of linocut print. These negative spaces are becoming more important in her work. Starting with the colour aquatints *Lagomorpha* and *white Byrd* (2005), and on to *Eloquent Earl* (2006), the detailed and complex backgrounds mirror some of Dubuffet's paintings, drawings and lithographs which combine a central figure and a textured background.

Historically, the silhouette is a cheap form of portraiture. Silhouettes can simply describe an individual presence. The form is culturally

inscribed and used in film and advertising: as the iconic beginning to Bond films, depicting the feminine, in Hitchcock's films to show the distinctive director's paunch, and recently in Apple 'iPod' advertisements to emphasis the white ear buds of the product. After the silhouette is formed, adding small details imbues the creature with life. Detail in the eyes is first, followed by a number of identifying marks. The figure's path is set after the eyes take shape.

Rona Green has organised and curated numerous print exchange portfolios and exhibitions including: *50, Altered States* and *by the light of the moon* (2007), *Beasties* (2006), *33* (2005), and so on. The first, in 2000, *minutia*, which she co-curated, was purchased in its entirety by the Charles Sturt University Art Collection. She completed a Bachelor of Art (Fine Art) at La Trobe University Bendigo in 1995 and a Graduate Diploma in Art at the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, in 1998. She worked as a printing technician at the Australian Print Workshop, Melbourne (1999-2001). Currently, she teaches at Box Hill Institute and at Royal Melbourne Institute of TAFE University. She won the 2005 Box Hill Institute Teacher of the Year award, the 2004 Swan Hill Print Acquisitive Award with *Discotheque Nasties* and the 2006 Silk Cut Grand Prize with *Dally Boy*.

Thomas A Middlemost, Art Curator, Charles Sturt University Art Collection. PhD candidate at ANU, studying monotypes in Australia.

Notes

1. Danzig Baldaev (Ed), *Russian Criminal Encyclopaedia Volume I*, 2004.
Danzig Baldaev (Ed), *Russian Criminal Encyclopaedia Volume II*, 2006. I mention the pastel covers because the colour seems dichotomous to the violence displayed within, and the colours were incorporated into some of Green's prints.
2. Aaron McLoughlin, Warrnambool Art Gallery, 'Rona Green "eye saw"', publicity, 2001.
3. 'Poppet' is the artist's word for diorama-styled, framed, unique stuffed textile toys incorporating digital image transfer on cotton fabric, toy stuffing, and thread.

Works on paper by Rona Green can be viewed at Port Jackson Press, Melbourne; Impressions on Paper Gallery, Canberra; and Adele Boag Gallery, Adelaide.

Rona Green's forthcoming solo exhibition *I love fish + chips* will be on show at the Port Jackson Press Centre for Australian Printmaking, 67 Cambridge Street, Collingwood (Vic) from 9 October – 1 November 2008.

For more information about the artist visit: www.ronagreen.com

Rona Green was a Print Council commissioned artist in 2000 and 2005.