

Rona Green
Obliquity

Saving our skins

I remember one of my grandfather's tattoos. Engraved in Egypt en route to Gallipoli, it was a rosy-cheeked Clara Bow sweetheart type in a cowboy hat and bandana. Below it was the text 'Dolly', the pet name of his wife of sixty years. As a child I had been taught by my parents to regard tattooed people with suspicion, but the faded tattoos on his crepe-like skin were exempt, part of someone I loved and respected and a chronicle of his rich experience and his part in history.

Since then tattoos have become a middle-class adornment, and street and prison culture has been subsumed into the mainstream market. I think it was Robert Hughes at the beginning of this process who once accused galleried graffiti artists of allowing their upmarket audience to suck the beat of the street – but through a clean straw.

Rona Green is safe from such jibes because while her work samples street and outsider cultures it satirises our post-Kerouac fantasies about being street toughs and philosopher-drifters. Simultaneously (and paradoxically) it honours the type of deep but wounded experience that they represented. Although Rona Green is a native of Geelong, this imagery is right at home in Melbourne, a city that, like Chicago and Liverpool, has long been a crossroads of storytelling cultures. In a place that consistently nurtures the best figurative painters, cartoonists, bands and stand-up comedians in Australia, Green's mix of identity politics, gothic/calvinist precision and black humour finds fertile ground.

Transformation is a recurrent theme on all levels of Green's work. Her anthropomorphic wild-animal figures seem to embody the shamanistic shape-shifting abilities attributed to trickster-artist-healers throughout history. At the same time there is an affectionate account of our long kinship with domestic animals in the vulnerability and humanness of these critters.

Gender is also transformed – Green's characters are most at home in masculine trappings. There is a clear enjoyment of the artist in trialling a prodigal range of alter egos. The eyes become tunnels in and out of these sheddable skins in constant metanarratives about seeing. Green's cast of misfits do not passively submit to our gaze – they look back confidently but impassively so that we must scan the script of their skins for cues. Eye injuries, eye defects, masks and monocles abound to bring our attention to the primacy of looking and being looked at as the first step of relationship and identification.

Another transformation that is enacted in these images is one of healing and redemption. Like the retablo paintings of Mexican culture or the straw men of the ancient Celts, they seem to be ready surrogates able to take on our sins, dark emotions and wounds.

Rona Green's votives celebrate and debate the very things I instinctively loved on my grandfather's skin – the tracks of his deep knowledge of who he was and where he belonged, his richness of experience and his resilience. She interrogates our skin – our hide (interestingly a synonym for our 'life') where the marks of our experience - scars, stretch marks, sutures, moles, self-harms, acne, age spots, burns, freckles, wrinkles, cancers, blushes, bruises, veins, inoculations, rashes, initiation marks, war wounds, track marks, insect bites – and yes, tattoos, recite the story of our glancing collisions with life.

Rodney Forbes, Churchill 2009

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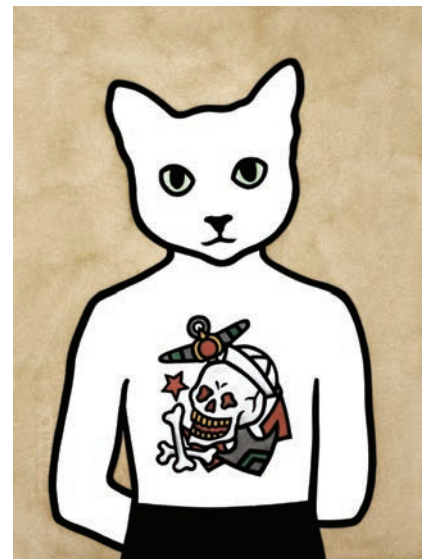


top to bottom: *Liminyi, Knyazhna, Bogatyr & Pajari* 2008, screenprints, 38 cm x 57 cm each, edition 23 printed by Rebecca Mayo



top row left to right: *Dally-boy & Cutter*, 2006, hand coloured linocuts, 69 cm x 54 cm each, edition 23

bottom row left to right: *Goo Goo Man & White Rajni*, 2006, hand coloured linocuts, 54.5 cm x 38 cm each, edition 23



top row left to right: *Theodor, Crazy Daisy & The Duke*, 2008, hand coloured linocuts, 76 cm x 56 cm each, edition 13

bottom row left to right: *Greasy Rhys*, 2008, *Rusty Steel & Topsy Turner*, 2009, hand coloured linocuts, 38 cm x 28 cm each, edition 13

front cover left to right: *Sergey & Leonid*, 2008, linocuts and intaglio, 76 cm x 57 cm each, edition 30
 printed by Kylie White and Yuho Imura, Port Jackson Press Australia

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