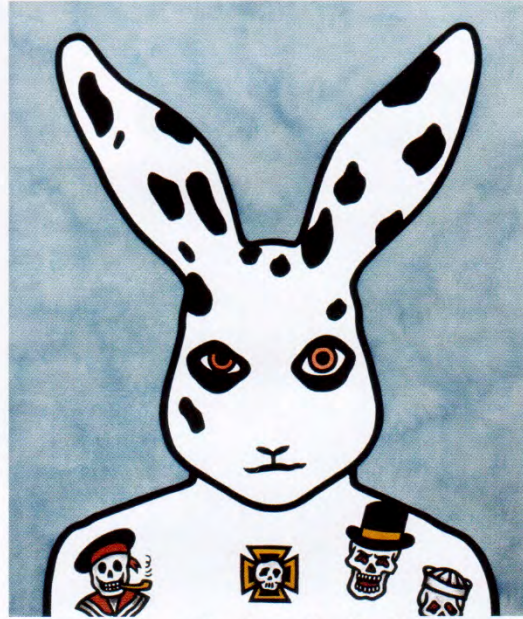


*'Dutch', 2009, linocut, ink and watercolour, 45 x 38 cm. Edition 13*



*'Vernon', 2009, linocut, ink and watercolour, 45 x 38 cm. Edition 13*

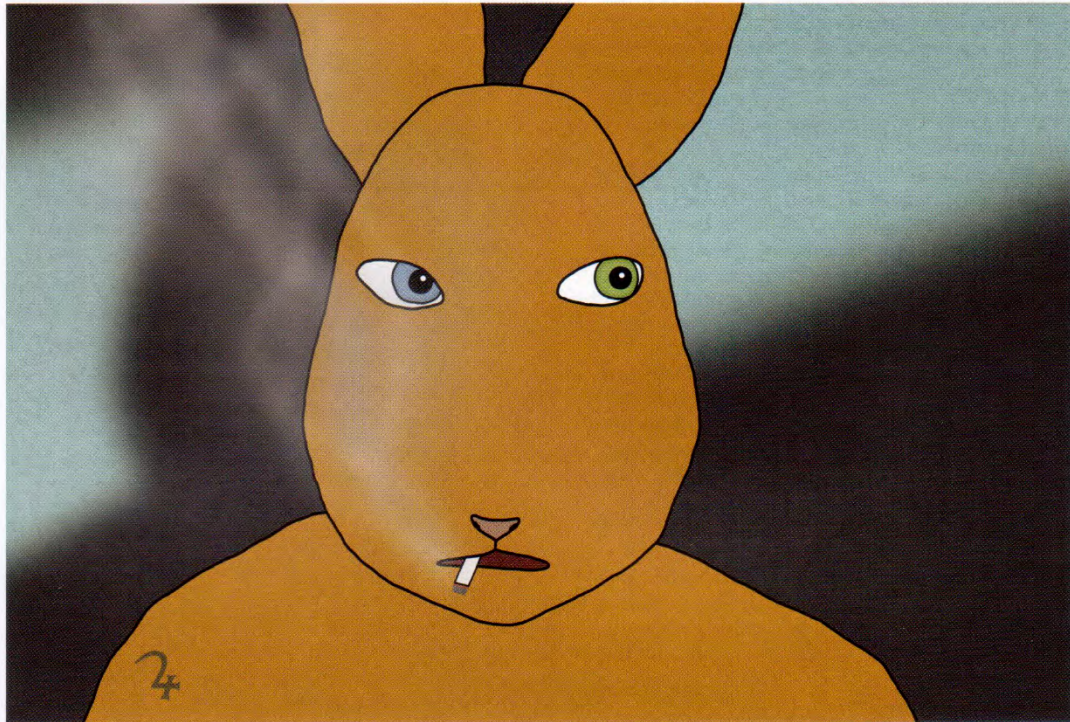
## Profiles in Print – RONA GREEN

Despite the flippancy, humour and whimsicality in the work of Rona Green, her prints hint at a secondary role as social commentary with a generous dose of satire and the absurd. Text by Professor Sasha Grishin.

**R**ONA Green tells the story that when she was two and her sister Jillian was born, she experienced the not uncommon emotional insecurity of the first born when facing a rival, so her parents as compensation bought her a cat. The cat was called Figaro and she was a lovable black, grey and white tabby, who went on to live to a grand old age. The artist's emotional

bond with animals was to remain constant throughout her life.

Rona was born in Geelong in 1972, her name was of Old Norse origins which in Celtic usage meant "rough island" and was selected by her father, Mervyn Green, whose family were Welsh and who had arrived with his parents in Australia when he was 10 years old as one



*'The Krolik Boys: Niki', 2004, lightjet print, 44 x 66 cm. Edition 13*



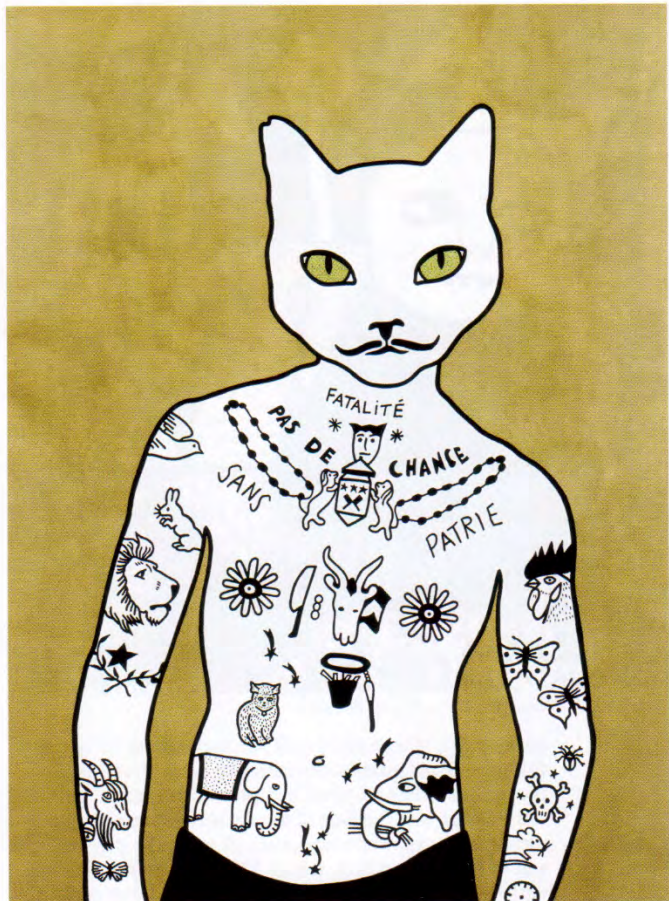
of the “10 pound poms”. Rona’s mother, Wendy née Morrison, was born in Broken Hill, where the family was involved in mining. She shifted to Geelong when she was about eight and here Rona’s parents met and married. They lived on the housing estate in the southern suburb of Whittington, where Rona went to the local primary school. During her teens, the family moved to the more affluent suburb of Newtown in the “heights” of Geelong where Rona attended the Sacred Heart College. She describes her childhood in Geelong as ‘beach, fish and chips, bike riding and roller skates and swimming’, with plenty of exhausting socialising and with a growing passion for collecting things, including swap cards. However this image of the carefree tomboy and larrikin is tempered with a less well known image of the young Rona, that of a quiet and introverted girl who was often buried in books, reading at an early age Albert Camus, Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. She was also fascinated by photography and cherished visits to her father’s great uncle, Leslie Waite, an amateur photographer who had a great collection of old art books with tipped in plates. In these books she would find refuge.

It was in her second last year at school, that the newly arrived and enthusiastic art teacher, James Watt, fostered in Rona Green a passion for art and planted the idea that perhaps she could choose art as a career. On leaving school in 1989, she enrolled at the now defunct Australian College of Photography, Art and Communication (ACPAC) in Melbourne, but found the course too structured and limiting and dropped out in her second year. She neither wanted to be a commercial photographer nor a purely art photographer, but the ACPAC offered her few alternatives.

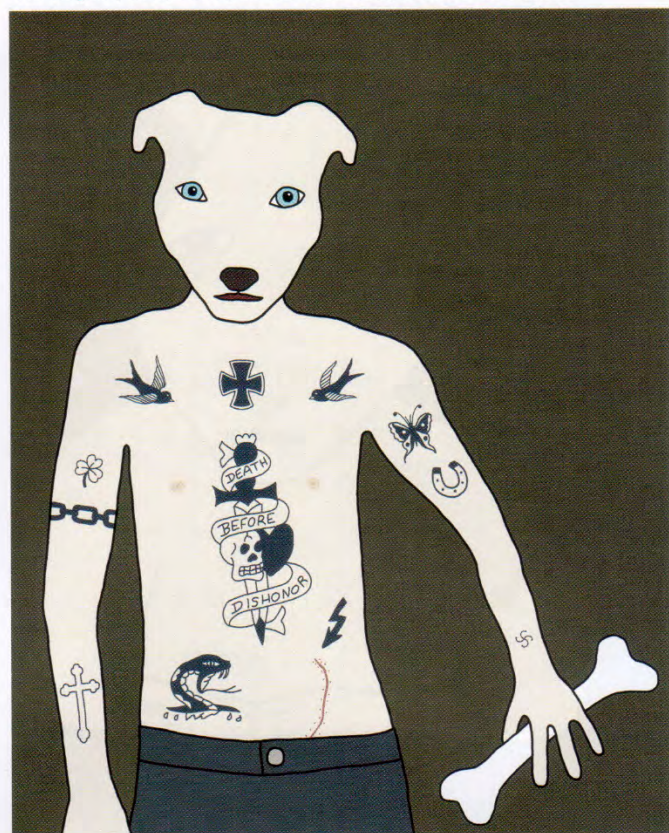
While still at secondary school she had made a drypoint, her first excursion into printmaking, and found the process attractive and playing with paper surfaces absorbing. In 1991, Denise Rogers, who was studying printmaking at the University of Ballarat, introduced her to the technique of the reduction linocut and that of the single block relief print. Afterwards she took a course in screenprinting at the Gordon Technical College in Geelong to add to her repertoire of printmaking techniques. By the end of the year she had decided that she definitely wanted to go to art school and applied to several and was accepted by the arts school in Bendigo, part of the La Trobe University. Here she completed a BA (Fine Arts) in 1995, majoring in printmaking, under the supportive mentorship of Peter Jacobs and that of the wonderful printmaker, the late John Robinson.

In Bendigo a new cat appeared in her life, Googie, who went on to live for 17 years, and she became increasingly drawn to the ideas and work of the French artist Jean Dubuffet and his concept of art brut. For Rona Green, art needed to have an expressive force and truth to her personal experience; it required a narrative, an emotional pitch – yet it also demanded a certain playfulness and humorous element. She felt uncomfortable with the artificiality of “high art” of the art establishment that denied the existence of street art, folk art and popular culture. Jean Dubuffet once famously wrote: ‘Our culture is like a garment that does not fit us, or in any case no longer fits us. This culture is like a dead language that no longer has anything in common with the language of the street. It is increasingly alien to our lives.’

Since childhood Rona Green had been fascinated with dolls and puppets and with the idea that by changing clothes or other attributes the whole essence of the figure would change, and that they could be employed to tell a different sort of story. She observed, ‘I’ve always been interested in strong, bold things, as in Egyptian art and



*'The Surgeon', 2010, linocut, ink and watercolour, 108 x 76 cm. Edition 17*



*'Junkyard Dog', 2005, inkjet print, 50 x 40 cm. Edition 13*





'Girl', 1997, lithograph, 22.5 x 21 cm. Edition 4

African art, where you could see the essence of being of things and not simply observations seen from nature.' Again this echoes Dubuffet's pronouncement: 'I do not see in what way the face of a man should be a less interesting landscape than any other. A man, the physical person of a man, is a little world, like any other, a country with its towns, and suburbs ... As a rule what is needed in a portrait is a great deal of the general, and very little of the particular.' It was these general characterisations of

humanity that were to become a feature of her art.

On shifting to Melbourne in 1995, now accompanied by her partner, Aaron McLoughlin whom she had met in Bendigo, Rona Green started to exhibit her strange early lithographs, with their dislocated alienated figures and tortured existential screaming heads. Although the figures are clearly distressed, they seem to be involved in some exotic ritual which we are witnessing, but in which we cannot participate. Some of her earliest prints were shown at the Convent Gallery in Daylesford and also at a group show at the Australian Print Workshop (APW), followed by her first solo show at the APW in 1997. Her monotypes of about the same period, with their whimsical lines and graffiti-like characteristics, were an attempt to incorporate the art of the street into her imagery. In 1998 she completed her Graduate Diploma at the Victorian College of the Arts and the following year she started work as a printing technician at the APW.

She recently observed that, 'Even as a little girl, I liked to see how people communicated through body language – inside and outside – nothing is ever straight forward.' When visiting her mother's family in Broken Hill, she found their tattoos fascinating, which on their dry suntanned skin appeared as if engrained and part of a second skin. Body art and body decorations appeared as an extension of identity and the language of communication and by the late 1990s they started to play a significant role in her imagery. Her lovely crisp linocuts of 2000 were an early distillation of a visual language which has come to characterise her art. As a collector from childhood, now as an artist Rona Green was attracted by the weird and the strange and collected in her work unusual birthmarks, tattoos and other bodily peculiarities. 'I have a fetish for human oddity ... what I would love to be is a perpetual fly on the wall observing human behaviour.'

Animal hybrids, where there is a merging of animal and human elements to create human-animal chimeras or "parahumans", is a major characteristic in her art. She



'The Krolik Boys: Valentyn', 2004, lightjet print, 44 x 66 cm. Edition 13



isn't concerned with ethical issues around biotechnology that are central to the practice of some Australian artists like Patricia Piccinini; rather her creations are more like creatures out of Aesop's Fables, except that they are from our contemporary world, and are used to comment on human behaviour. While possibly born of the artist's own love for animals, her personifications hint at cruelty and at nature striking back. Perhaps some of these animals wish to say "toys aren't us".

Rona Green has created her own personalised bestiary which could be termed "teddies with attitude". Her beasties frequently bear tattoos, wear specific costumes and carry the scars of their rites of passage. She has codified an artistic language which draws on cartoons, street graffiti and stencils, but which has become exclusively her own. Expressive linocuts, such as *Thug*, 2003 and *Discotheque Nasties*, 2004, and the beautifully seductive etching *Pretty Boys*, 2005, all appear as distantly familiar characters. For many of us, her images ring true of our daily experiences and seem to echo our encounters with people on the street, at parties, in hospital waiting rooms and at supermarkets. They may be weird at first glance, but tap into a common psyche.

In 2003 the first volume of Danzig Baldaev's profusely illustrated *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia* was published. Baldaev worked in the Soviet prison system and over 50 years assembled an archive of 3,600 photographs and drawings of prisoners and their tattoos. He maintained that they were a mirror of everything that the country had endured and that frequently the tattoos on a criminal presented their entire biography – their "criminal service record". Volumes two and three were launched in 2006 and 2008 respectively. If not exactly a bible, these three volumes quickly became an indispensable source for Rona Green's work. She was immediately attracted by the idea that these body decorations could be read like a diary, a CV or a patchwork of coded information; also that they could be read on different levels like a secret text.

Many of her recent prints draw upon Baldaev's records, sometimes quite literally as in her stark and crisp linocuts such as *Leonid* and *Sergey*, both of 2008, and less directly in *Sergeant at Arms*, 2010, *The Surgeon*, 2010 and the evocative digital print, *Junkyard Dog*, 2005. Although there is a flippancy, humour and whimsicality in the work, her prints are incredibly seductive images; funky in their aesthetic, they are slightly menacing and confronting in their presence. Yet for all of their light heartedness, they do hint at a secondary role as social commentary with a generous dose of satire and the absurd. I suspect that each of us will bring to Rona Green's images our own emotional and cultural baggage.

In 2006 she was awarded the Silk Cut Award for linocut prints; she has had 18 solo exhibitions and over the past few years her works have been acquired by many public art collections, including the National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of South Australia and Chiang Mai Contemporary Art Museum, Thailand. Flirting with street art and popular culture, her prints occupy an uneasy middle ground. They are memorable and slightly disturbing and impress on us an urgency of their presence. They add a special spice to our being. As Jean Dubuffet famously observed: 'Man's need for art is absolutely primordial, as strong as, and perhaps stronger than, our need for bread. Without bread, we die of hunger, but without art we die of boredom.'

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*'Leonid'*, 2008, linocut and etching, 76 x 56 cm. Edition 30. Published by Port Jackson Press Australia



*'Cutter'*, 2006, linocut and watercolour, 69 x 54 cm. Edition 23



PHOTOGRAPHY: VIKI PETHERBRIDGE