

BECK WHEELER



A CELEBRATION OF THE HANDMADE

Mother of all evils 2008
3150mm x 2470mm
Synthetic polymer paint on vinyl

Beginnings

Beck Wheeler was born in Germany, and raised in the small suburb of Beach Haven in Auckland, New Zealand. A 'quietly creative' family, Beck grew up in a house of handmade clothes and toys, with a basement gallery showing off the best of Beck and her sisters' work. After showing a keen interest in photography, art history, sculpture and painting in high school, Beck went on to study further aspects of jewellery, sculpture and painting at UNITEC in New Zealand, before moving to Australia in 2000. At the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE in Victoria she focused on graphic design and illustration, and the now Melbourne-based artist has combined her talents for painting, sculpture and toy-making in storytelling. She has recently written and illustrated her own children's book, *How Absurd!*

Hey, Hey, Which Way?

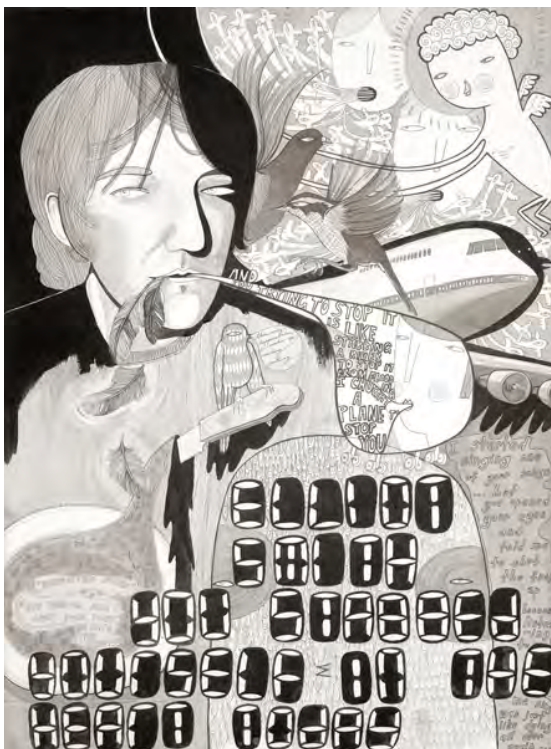
Her new exhibition *Hey, Hey, Which Way?* centres on darker themes of death and the afterlife, however, Beck's playful take on morality has had a very positive reception.

'People were laughing,' Beck observed on the opening night at the Uber Gallery. 'I guess my work in the show has taken a humorous look at the idea of death. I don't think people will think it is too dark. I have tried to make the artwork as light as possible,

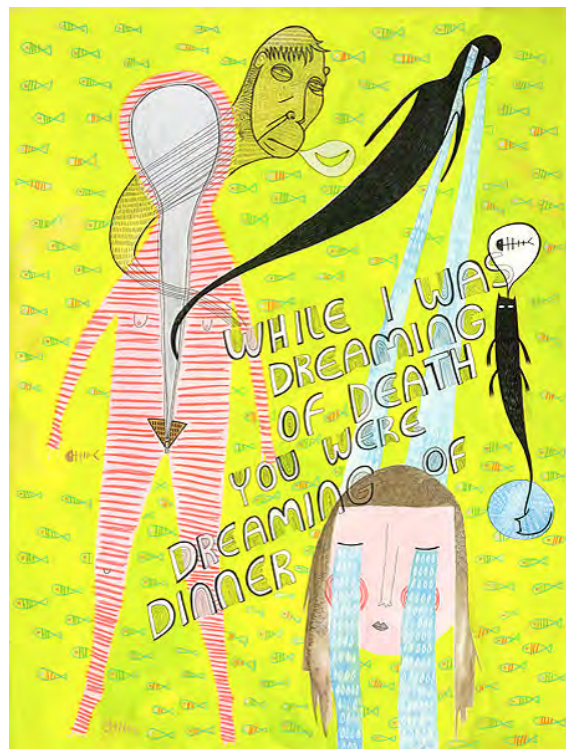
[it is] executed in fluoros and metallics so it's pretty cheery colourwise which helps counteract the darkness of the subject matter.'

Beck's upbringing by parents who followed teachings that merged Sufi, Buddhist and Hindu traditions, combined with a Catholic school education, seems to have had a profound effect on her outlook on life, and in the case of her current exhibition, what happens afterwards. Each piece in themselves is a meditation on death, the afterlife, and the meanings and beliefs that are held by everyday people. One of the pieces in *Hey, Hey, Which Way?* entitled 'if nothing else you've made good fertiliser' taps into the cynical and nihilistic views, as one figure refuses to consider that there may be more to it than dying, getting buried and 'that's it.'

In another piece, 'i dreamt i knew the secret to life and death', one figure describes to another how her father imagined death to be like a return to the womb, where everything seems as if it is underwater. The pieces form a discourse on life and death, where the figures ask the questions that their viewers have often asked themselves. However, the morbidity of the subject matter is easier to digest due to Beck's playful approach, but also to the handmade and personal quality of her work.



'Dear Elliot' 2008. 780mm x 980mm. ink on watercolour paper. Based on poem by Sean Whelan



'while i was dreaming of death, you were dreaming of dinner' 2007. 780mm x 980mm. ink, goauche and mixed media on watercolour paper

Mother of all evils

The exhibition is dominated by her new piece 'mother of all evils'. Taking over a month to complete, it stands 1.6 metres tall, 3m x 2.3 and is the biggest 'toy' that Beck has designed so far. She has constructed a giant squid-like creature in black and white hand-painted vinyl, with smaller creatures at the end of each 'tentacle'. Each tentacle appears to be crawling out from the centre of 'all evils', giving the effect of a slow-motion invasion of the world. This toy, like her many others, is instantly recognisable as Beck's work; indeed, they all appear to have walked out of one of her illustrations. This is a fitting observation as Beck herself sees her toy making as 'an extension to my illustrative work. Working in 3D was a natural progression from drawing characters.'

The appeal of handmade toys

One of Beck's first toys was an attempt to bring to life the characters of a comic strip. 'I wrote a little story about two superheroes, and made one out of a pair of socks and the other was knitted out of bright yellow wool. I didn't have any sewing skills at the time so the eyes were glued on, and the rest was held together with a combination of glue and hand stitching.' It took a few years before Beck learnt how to sew on her own sewing machine. However, she is still able to maintain her handmade look of her work, even when working with the same materials as mass produced toys.

Trends in contemporary toy design

Beck counts cartoonists and illustrators Chris Ware, Edward Gorey, Maurice Sendak and Winsor McCay among her many influences on her own illustrations. However, for her toys she points out that she doesn't take much of her inspiration from contemporary toy designers, although she can understand the recent surge in popularity of

'mutant' and 'quirky' vinyl toys.

'Most of my influences are from illustration and 2D character design. I think the current trend for handmade mutant-like toys comes as a rebellion to the super-cute, mass-made toys that come out of sweatshops. It used to be all you could buy for kids till people started to get excited again about making their own toys. I have been involved in a few books that teach people how to make their own quirky toys out of socks and recycled fabrics.'

This trend reflects the new interest in the design community, particularly those of the younger generation, in relation to self-publishing and producing, as well as a keen awareness of the environment and sustainability.

'I think that our society is starting to become more aware of reusing our resources and rediscovering handmade is part of that,' Beck observes. 'I think it is a natural cycle to come back to the handmade look. Handmade and patterning seems to be everywhere at the moment. I think it is a backlash from the crisp geometric forms that were popular a while back. I also think the fact we are embracing sustainability in the design industry plays a part. People want to see the presence of a maker in the product they purchase.'

www.beckwheeler.com

Kate McCurdy

How Absurd! written and illustrated by Beck Wheeler is available now from her website.

Beck Wheeler
Hey, Hey, Which Way?

4 - 30 March 2008

Über Gallery

52 Fitzroy Street St Kilda, Victoria Australia



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