

WENDY WAGNER

Look to the Left



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JANUARY 24 - MARCH 14, 2013

AUSTIN, TEXAS

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One of the most fundamental (and fundamentally refreshing) characteristics of Wendy Wagner's artwork is that it gives us permission to be playful. Rooted in childhood memories and rendered in candy-coated colors applied with an intentionally childlike sensibility, Wagner's art transports us into a fairytale world inhabited by strangely endearing creatures that giggle and fly and skate through this fantastical, other-worldly place she's created. To view this Austin-born, Houston-based artist's work is to step directly into her imagination – and what a vivid imagination it is.

Look to the Left, the most comprehensive collection of Wagner's work assembled for an exhibition to date, is at once whimsical and entertaining, poignant and revealing. The pieces in the exhibition, made between 2005 and 2013, provide insight into Wagner's evolution as an artist and draw attention to her changing technique and her experimentation with an impressively vast array of media. Seen together, the works give viewers an intimate glimpse into the psyche of the artist, reflecting realities and experiences that have shaped both her life and her creative output in profound ways. Nowhere is this more evident than in Wagner's most recent work: a large-scale triptych – which incidentally shares the same title as the exhibition, *Look to the Left*. This 18-foot, multi-panel painting anchors the exhibition and serves as a sort of portal into both the real and imaginary worlds Wagner inhabits. The painting has a physicality and rawness



Look to the Left. Room view, dimensions variable, 2013.

to it that is reminiscent of many of the works on paper also on view but stands in stark contrast to the slick animation stills, soft sculptures and glossy ceramic objects that fill much of the gallery. This contrast underscores the artist's extraordinary range. Adeptly moving from painting to sculpture, from sculpture to animation, from animation to installation, Wagner brings her imaginary world to life, allowing us to inhabit it with her alongside a tight-knit cast of characters that represent people, personalities, character traits, and emotional states both universal and personally specific.

The three panels of Wagner's monumental painting are filled with large swaths of pastel colors in bulbous shapes reminiscent of thought and word bubbles commonly used in comic strips. However, they don't function that way here. Instead, the shapes serve as repositories of memories that Wagner is revisiting during a pivotal point in her life. In early 2012, she was diagnosed with a brain tumor and subsequent surgeries and treatments have left her without left peripheral vision in both eyes. Knowing this, the title of both the exhibition and this painting

can be interpreted as a kind of self-actualizing command: one that instructs Wagner to be mindful of the things she no longer readily sees. In practical terms, as a visual artist, this change in the way she observes the world around her has radically altered her approach to art. The very composition of the three-panel painting reflects the void in Wagner's visual perception. This void is most apparent in the painting's center panel, which contains partial self-portraits of Wagner as a young girl – the most finished of which depicts her in her Brownie uniform, an image that can be found in some of her earlier work. The renderings are somewhat skewed, uneven and out of proportion, reflecting the realities of Wagner's medical condition. Yet there is a looseness, an ease of line in the painting that indicates the artist's full embrace of the visual challenges her condition has brought about as yet another manifestation of her ever-evolving technique. The scrawled mantra, "look to the left," within the panel shows a defiance and ferocity that defines Wagner's approach to unexpected challenges, be they creative ones that force her to learn new methods to make her art or personal ones that alter the fundamental



Froggie Make Up Kit. Ceramics,
2 x 8 x 8 inches, 2012.

landscape of her life. When compared with much of the other work in the exhibition, this painting is surprisingly grounding. It strikes a different tone and possesses a more somber mood but it also provides a moment of respite amidst the cacophony of colors, shapes and sounds that bounce around the gallery competing for attention.

Grouped nearby, Wagner's other most recent work carries on a quiet conversation with the larger-than-life painting. These seven works on paper – all untitled and all created with oil, graphite and mixed media – assume a more subdued, relaxed stance in relation to the animated video directly across the gallery or the fanciful plush sculptures situated nearby. Rather than telling a story or introducing a character – as much of Wagner's work does – these works read more like a collection of ideas or isolated observations that connect more to mood than meaning. The shapes and forms that appear in the works are fragmented and their composition spare, deliberate, contemplative, underscoring the recent shift in approach Wagner has assumed over the last twelve months. Yet, despite the seeming shift in tone, Wagner's playful nature breaks through in the form of batting eyes that hug the borders of color blocks, partially formed prehistoric creatures that inhabit infinite space, strange combinations of innocuous objects that merge and meld, and splashes and smears of color that read like backdrops to a dream.

Although couched in fantasy and fairytale, Wagner's work has always been largely autobiographical. Taking inspiration from friends, family members, even much-loved pets, Wagner spins tales of adventure and escape, self-revelation and transcendence involving a band of nearly a dozen undeniably endearing beings she calls Qwerkys: make-believe critters with playful names and idiosyncratic personality traits who inhabit the fictitious world of O-poppida. Wagner herself is embodied by the protagonist known as

Tootie, a precocious, highly excitable, and infinitely likable artist whose pet dog, Fun Face serves as the conduit to her imagination and gives the Qwerkys inspiration to embrace their own creativity and uniqueness. Other Qwerkys include Mr. Look at Me, (modeled on Wagner's husband, Kenneth,) who is charismatic, and unfailingly loyal, and Miss Pretty, a shy creature pictured as part octopus and part hand, who serves as Tootie's best friend.



Look to the Left. Room view, dimensions variable, 2013.

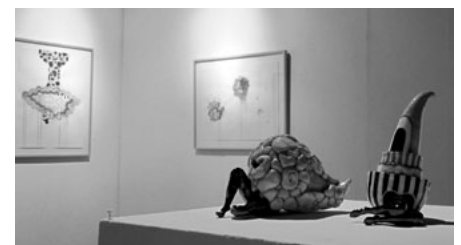
All of these characters appear throughout Wagner's body of work, providing a continuity and engendering a familiarity and affection that taps directly into our own childhood nostalgia. These magical beings connect us to the creativity, joy, innocence and wonderment that we all possess early in life but often lose as years pass and the harsher realities of life take hold. We are all constantly evolving, shaped by the people around us, the choices we make, the experiences we have, and the things we learn along the way. Through her work, Wagner appeals to us to retain our sense of discovery and possibility, to believe in magic and reinvention, to transcend the restriction of rules and create our own.

In my 20 years as a curator, I have had the great fortune of watching the evolution of the creative lives of hundreds of artists. I've

also had the even greater fortune of working with many of them personally. Watching artists' work grow and change over time – as they explore new techniques or new media, as they respond and react to the world around them, as they experience new things – is one of the most remarkable aspects of this job. Artists expose themselves in their work and have a very acute way of channeling things that they see, hear, and encounter in truly remarkable ways. It takes a kind of fearlessness to be able to do that. To make a work of art – an act that is so completely personal and internal, and then share the results of that act with others truly takes courage.

In the sector of the art community that I work in, we talk a lot about the value of artists challenging themselves and their audiences. As in any professional endeavor, it's disastrous to get stuck in a rut. Artists are expected to continue to shift and change and respond and reinvent constantly. Most of the time, these are creative challenges. Over the past year, Wagner has had to rethink every aspect of her creative process. She's been forced to engage with the realities of her illness and the uncertainty of what comes next. Through the work in this exhibition, we see her struggle and follow her journey as she charges headstrong into the next chapter of this continuously unfolding story. Like the stories she weaves through the work she creates, Wagner's own journey, like that of her characters, is one of fearlessness, self-determination, and ultimately transcendence.

Diane Barber, Independent Curator



Look to the Left. Room view, dimensions variable, 2013.

WENDY WAGNER

Born in 1967 Austin, Texas

Lives and works in Houston, Texas

EDUCATION

1998-01	Alfred C. Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
1997, 1999, 2000	Collin Community College, Plano, TX
1990-92	The Art Institute of Houston, Houston, TX
1989	Maine Photographic Workshop, Rockport, ME
1987-88	Austin Community College, Austin, TX

AWARDS & SCHOLARSHIPS

2008	<i>Hunting Art Prize Recipient</i> , Hunting, PLC
2003	<i>Honorable Mention, Assistance League of Houston Celebrates Art</i> , Williams Tower Gallery, Houston, TX Juror: Connie Butler, Curator, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA
2000	<i>Carol Crow Scholarship</i> , Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX <i>Director's Scholarship</i> , Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
1999	<i>Herbert C. Wells Scholarship</i> , Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2012	<i>Paper Work</i> , Darke Gallery, Houston, TX
2011	Texas Women's University, Denton, TX
2011	Houston Fine Art Fair, Solo Booth, Darke Gallery, Houston, TX
2011	College of the Mainland, Texas City, TX
2011	<i>Once Upon a Time in the Land of O-Poppida</i> , Darke Gallery, Houston, TX
2011	<i>Lookie!</i> , Bosque Gallery, Lone Star College Cy-Fair, Houston, TX
2010	G-Trinity Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
2011	The Art Institute of Houston, Houston, TX
2009	G-Trinity Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
2011	<i>Beam Me Up</i> , New Gallery/Thom Andriola, Houston, TX
2011	Houston Center for Contemporary Craft-Artist Hall, Houston, TX
2007	<i>The Show Must Go On!</i> , New Gallery/Thom Andriola, Houston, TX
2006	<i>World of Whimsy</i> , North Harris County College, Houston, TX
2005	<i>Funner</i> , New Gallery/Thom Andriola, Houston, TX
2004	<i>Trees and Other Places</i> , ArtHouston, New Gallery/Thom Andriola, Houston, TX

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2011	<i>Texan-French Alliance for the Arts, Art Award & Auction</i> , Decorative Center Houston, Houston, TX
2010	<i>Material & Structure</i> , PG Contemporary, Houston, TX, Curator: Zoya Tommy
2009	<i>Texas Anti-Matter</i> , The University of Texas Permian Basin, Odessa, TX, Curator: Wayne Gilbert
2009	<i>Texas Twang</i> , SHIFT, Seattle, WA, Curator: Wayne Gilbert
2008	<i>Flicker Fusion</i> , DiverseWorks, Houston, TX, Curator: Diane Barber
2008	<i>Ladies Night Out</i> , G Gallery, Houston, TX, Curator: Wayne Gilbert
2008	<i>Collage</i> , Williams Tower Gallery, Houston, TX, Curator: Sally Sprout
2006	<i>Sculpture Vision</i> , North Harris County College, Houston, TX
2004	<i>Arcaute Arte Contemporáneo</i> , Monterrey, Mexico
2000	<i>A Common Bond</i> , Williams Tower Gallery, Houston, TX, Curator: Sally Sprout

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2011	D. Ansporn, Catherine. Art Notes with feature image, PaperCity Magazine, May 2011 Schulze, Troy. Capsule Review, Houston Press, May 2011 Wozny, Nancy. <i>Art is Funny: The Houston works that provoke giggle fits</i> , CultureMap, February 2011
2010	<i>That's Clever</i> , HGTV, July 2010
2009	Artwork Cover Image, PaperCity Magazine, July 2009 International Herald Tribune, The Asahi Shimbun, Japan, June 2009 Mainichi Shimbun, Japan, June 2009 Akasaka Keizai, Japan, June 2009 Ponto, Michelle. <i>Goodbye Hello Kitty; Houston's Wendy Wagner is going to Japan</i> , KHOU, June 2009 Wozny, Nancy. <i>Feature, Deconstructing Dreams, Wendy Wagner</i> , Cover, ArtsHouston, January 2009
2008	<i>Great Day Houston</i> , KHOU, December 2008 Britt, Douglas. <i>Art gallery shows entice, surprise, provoke thought</i> , The Houston Chronicle, February 2008 Wozny, Nancy. ArtsHouston, February 2008 Anderson, Virginia Billeaud. <i>Flicker Fusion at DiverseWorks</i> , Glasstire, January 2008
2006	<i>What's in Store</i> , Continental Airlines (In Flight Video), November 2006 Moloney, Tim. <i>For Art's Sake</i> , 002 Magazine, January 2006
2005	Ray, Lisa. ArtsHouston, December 2005
2003	Johnson, Patricia C. <i>Texas Artists Stand Out</i> , Houston Chronicle, November 2003



Sgt. Rock. Acrylic and oil paint, tinted gesso, pencil, colored pencil, gloss varnish on bass wood, 84 x 72 inches, 2011.

Cover Panel: Detail of *Look to the Left* (triptych). Acrylic and oil paint, tinted gesso, pencil, colored pencil, on canvas, 48 x 216 inches, 2012.



Lookies (diptych). Paint and mixed media on paper, 17 x 21 inches each, 2011.

Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 34th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,867 artists in 279 visual art exhibitions, 119 music, dance and theater events, 14 film festivals, 23 literary readings and 482 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from

the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 950 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



women and
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