



A work from *Clones, Mybrids and Techno-beasts*, by Lisa Birke at Bau-Ki Gallery.

Artist's bestiary relies on wicked sense of humour

Lisa Birke's new paintings turn genetic engineering into art

BY ELAINE CORDEN

PROFILE | Think of plush toys, mounds of them, tangled together in enormous furballs — superfluous limbs, shiny eyes, fuzzy pink noses mutating into new combinations. The latest works by Vancouver painter Lisa Birke are imaginative, kaleidoscopic and more than a little unsettling. They are, in the tops, "eye candy with a hint of acid."

Birke, who has completed five exhibitions in less than four years (her most recent show, at Vancouver's Bau-Ki Gallery, ends this week) clearly has science and technology in mind. This collection of paintings, *Clones, Mybrids and Techno-beasts*, takes genetic engineering as its starting point. In these paintings, common animals such as dairy cows and rabbits, morph into nightmare creatures. In one, a cyborg rabbit stands guard over a hang gliding, Technicolor cow while a half-man-half-beat creature hangs patiently from a tree branch. In another, fluffy rabbits sport tall-fellow-yellow hair and birds' beaks, while a grumpy, scuffling cow turns eight pairs of eyes toward the viewers.

Birke's bestiary presents animals as both hapless victims and unlovable freaks. Her most ambitious painting shows a dalmatian and her owner, along with 100 clones of the original animal. Birke renders this squirmy sea of identical canines in painstaking detail: the animals by turns endearing and grotesque in their exact likeness. Another painting depicts a life form of disembodied poultry limbs fused with chopsticks and sauce packets.

According to Birke, *Clones* progresses naturally from her last major collection, *Fun 'N' Hoops*, in which the artist used literal interpretations of the identities we construct, piling objects into decontextualized mounds.

"With *Hoops*, I was really interested in our consumer society and how we define ourselves by what we own," explains the 37-year-old Emily Carr grad. "The piles were like images of what was stereotypical of a particular identity, like 'Here is a pile of Women.' It was kind of like a lab, like I was scientifically constructing culture, and just rearranging it into heaps."

In Birke's imagination, that manipulation of culture soon led to the manipulation of nature, giving rise to this exhibition's extraordinary take on cloning and biotechnology.

While the artist's own feelings on genetic modification are apparent in

her works, Birke insists she wants the viewers to form his own opinion. "It's really scary to think of what we could and can create with biotechnology. But I also wanted to show that there are good things that can come from it."

Birke's new works depict the unfortunate results of interbreeding and scientific monkeying, but there is also a decidedly wicked sense of humour here. Birke creates gruesome genetic mishaps, but combines them with elements of light-hearted, cartoonish imagery. In the process she creates images purposefully at odds with one other.

"I try to give things a Disney-like quality to draw people in, but then there's a dark, cruel element as well," she says. "I'm really drawn to art with a dark humour, like Gary Larson and Edward Gorey. I do like to put the animals in tragic situations, and be cruel to them. It's funny because, in real life I'm not like that at all."

Birke may be amiable socially, but her works have a disquieting effect on some of her viewers. Some are absorbed and entertained by the imagery she presents, but others — reacting to the ghoulish creatures in the canvases — have had to leave the exhibit immediately.

Fortunately for Birke, her work is commercially successful. Her previous exhibitions have sold out before opening night, and *Clones* is nearly sold, too.

Elaine Corden is a Vancouver writer.