

canadianart

ALAN BELCHER

Downs & Ross, New York

Alan Belcher gathered a group of his friends on two oversized white mattresses raised approximately three feet off the floor at Downs & Ross. These are not his actual friends, of course, but rather small assemblages representing 14 of them, made with plush toys sewn together. For instance, *Lenny* (all works made between 1996 and 1997) at roughly one foot by two and a half feet, consists of stuffed ginger root, a frog leg and a human heart, all larger than normal, and a polyhedron. Viewers are left to conjecture how the objects might relate to the person they designate, but it is possible to imagine Lenny as someone grounded, bodily (hence, the frog leg) and with many different aspects. In fact, the press release, which doubles as an exhibition checklist, mentions that Lenny is “Lenny McGeachie, Toronto / hair stylist, vegan, gay dad / friend of Alessandra,” the latter of whom appears in the show represented by a soccer ball, a four-leaf clover, a tongue and a bunch of Chiquita bananas with a brown spot (*Alessandra*).

While each friend receives a unique constellation of objects, Belcher is also interested in what they share, and so a number of elements (e.g., ginger root) were repeated throughout the exhibition, although in different sizes. The items Belcher references range from the inanimate to the animate, from the organic to the inorganic and from the quirky (a video game character’s hairstyle) to the mundane (an orange bottle of Tide laundry detergent). There are frequent references to food, internal organs and sex. The project extends to the nonhuman with one work dedicated to gallerist Jack Shainman’s late dog (*Romeo*). These objects are less meant to be read literally than as metaphorical versions of alternative artistic and queer communities based primarily in Toronto and New York. The latter includes a number of people affiliated with Nature Morte, a gallery co-founded by Belcher in 1982 and a nexus for the 1980s East Village art scene.

Felix Partz, a core member of Toronto-based art collective General Idea who died in 1994, was highlighted by having his assemblage affixed to a wall separating the two galleries. (*Robin*—i.e., Robin Weglinski, an important early member of Nature Morte—appeared on the opposite side.) *Felix* is represented by an oversized ginger root and purple Bic pen cap, as well as by a georhomboid, a brain and a black bear’s gallbladder. The sense is of a serious intellect and dynamic personality, and the associations that each cluster stimulates can only increase the closer one might be to their original subjects, thereby strengthening the ring of community.

At the same time, the material with which these objects are constructed is friendly and inviting. After all, plush toys encourage touch and even a little cuddling, although Belcher’s “portraits” did not quite allow for this in the white cube setting. Their installation on mattresses in separate galleries—five on the smaller one in the front room and seven on the larger one in the back—gave them an intimate, even slightly erotic, quality. This organizational mode is another example of the serial form in which Belcher has worked throughout his career, one that enables recognitions of differences within the same. It also allows for the aesthetic representation of the mass-produced quality of everyday life. At “Friends,” this was put in the service of polymorphously pleasurable visual puzzles that rewarded careful looking in order to better understand their sets of formal, semiotic and social relations. —**ALAN GILBERT**



Alan Belcher *Felix* 1996
Acrylic plush stuffed with polyester
fibrefill 124.5 m x 68.6 cm x 30.5 cm
PHOTO JEFFREY STURGES

NEW YORK

AGENDA | UPDATED ON NOV. 25, 2019

16 Great Things to Do in New York

By Vulture Editors

Art

7. See [Alan Belcher: Friends](#)

Plush sculpture.

Once upon a time in the 1980s in the East Village, Alan Belcher helped change the world as co-founder of the vanguard Gallery Nature Morte. Belcher is back with a show of beautiful sewn, colored, stuffed shapes named after friends here and gone. The collection is a testament to a life lived in art, ever expanding and never losing his religion of art nor his commitment to other artists. —J.S.

Downs & Ross, 96 Bowery, through December 22.

Momus

After the Afterparty: Alan Belcher and Friends, in Retrospect

2020-01-10 14:01:18 Saelan Twerdy

Alan Belcher's *Friends* at [Downs & Ross](#) is an afterparty. The works in the exhibition are a series of mascot-like plush sculptures sitting in groups on broad, mattress-topped plinths, hanging out as if coming down from a night at the club. Each cuddly character is composed of mutant combinations from a lexicon of emoji-like elements that include body parts, geometric shapes, foodstuffs, household items, "traditional Asian medicinal aphrodisiacs," and video game icons. Though they have the bright colors and professional facture of kids' toys or corporate swag, these "friends" were hand-sewn by the artist. They vary slightly in size but most of them would be pretty impressive prizes at a fairground shooting range. Most importantly, each one is named for one of Belcher's own friends or acquaintances, making the ensemble a portrait – a screen capture, you might say – of Belcher's social scene, in which his dual position as an artist and gallerist made him a nexus point.

Belcher co-ran [Nature Morte](#) gallery in NYC's East Village, a short walk from where Downs & Ross is now, from 1982 to 1988. At the time these works were made, between 1996 and 1997, he had just moved back to his native Toronto from Cologne, Germany, where he had been living for five years. Initially shown in New York, London, and Toronto, the sculptures were received with a "dull thud," in the artist's own words, though he acknowledges that his friends enjoyed being commemorated. Seen now, they feel almost alien, both improbable and surprisingly fresh, as if they had appeared out of nowhere, dragging history behind them.



Alan Belcher, "Friends," installation view, 2019. Photo: Jeffrey Sturges. Courtesy of the artist and Downs & Ross, New York.

The fact that this body of work was made over twenty years ago necessarily gives the exhibition a retrospective, even elegiac, quality somewhat at odds with the sculptures' zany, irreverent appearance. One, titled *Felix* (1996), memorializes General Idea member Felix Partz, who died of AIDS-related causes in 1994. Several of the series' subjects have now deceased, including Costa Pappas, who appeared in some of Nan Goldin's photos, and Romeo, a bull terrier who belonged to Belcher's erstwhile gallerist Jack Shainman. Some of the people "depicted" in the series – though Belcher insists that the elements in each configuration are "abstract" and not meant to signify anything about the subject – have drifted out of his life, while others remain close friends. As a whole, the series links New York and Toronto with cities in California, Germany, and elsewhere: a loose international network of queer subculture and conceptual art in which Belcher was a multifarious connector.



Alan Belcher, "Alessandra," 1996. Photo: Jeffrey Sturges. Courtesy of the artist and Downs & Ross, New York

For these works to appear now, in this particular space, testifies to the resurgent interest in Belcher and his milieu among younger artists and gallerists. In the 1980s, Nature Morte exhibited a variant of Neo-Conceptual art that was opposed to the splashy Neo-Expressionist painting of the day but still fascinated with commodity aesthetics. Some of the artists that showed there were associated with the "Pictures" group (and Metro Pictures gallery) and some were tagged with the often-maligned "Neo-Geo" epithet, but most hybridized some combination of Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptualism without running afoul of the standard protocols of commercial gallery practice. Like numerous other upstart galleries in New York at that time, Nature Morte eschewed the ethos of established alternative art non-profits in favor of a quasi-commercial – if informal – model.

The 1980s boom in DIY art galleries was an important precedent, if not always a conscious model, for the kind of screen-facing, small-scale artist-run spaces that abound today. The art that circulated there, occupied as it was with media technology, image culture, and branding, also remains an under-recognized forerunner of the Post-Internet art of the last decade. *Friends* is prescient in exactly this way, uncannily anticipating the emoji-fication of language wherein the notion of personality as an assemblage of prefabricated images is practically the default.



Alan Belcher, "Costa," 1996. Photo: Jeffrey Sturges. Courtesy of the artist and Downs & Ross, New York.

It's easy to see why Downs & Ross is a natural fit for Belcher's work. The first venture of Tara Downs (who runs Downs & Ross with her partner Alex Ross, formerly of [Hester](#) gallery) was [Tomorrow](#) gallery, which she co-founded in 2011 with Hugh Scott-Douglas and Aleksander Hardashnikov in a studio-warehouse on Toronto's Sterling Road, across from the premises now occupied by the MOCA Toronto.

Tomorrow was *the* trailblazing art space in Canada in terms of the recent wave of DIY artist-run galleries. Each of the principals was fresh out of art school and, from the start, they were networking internationally, exploiting the visibility afforded by the internet and showing the first wave of Post-Internet artists, like Brad Troemel and Parker Ito. Like many venues that followed it, Tomorrow showed emerging artists while operating on a basis that was more ad-hoc than an established commercial gallery, and also unlike the Canadian artist-run center. Much of what they exhibited seemed like the physical extrusion of exchanges that were being lived online.

Eventually, Scott-Douglas and Hardashnikov left to pursue their careers and Downs decamped to Berlin to work as associate director of the Tanya Leighton Gallery before resettling Tomorrow in New York in 2014. Most DIY spaces on the Tomorrow model are provisional, short-term projects, too precarious to last. Downs, by contrast, has made a rare leap in turning what was once an edgy project space into a serious commercial enterprise.

A sign of the new maturity represented by Downs & Ross was their decision to begin showing older artists and works, particularly ones like Belcher's, which may have been neglected when they were first shown but now feel relevant and contemporary. The very first exhibition at Downs & Ross in early 2017 was composed of works made between 1981 and 1983 by Vikky Alexander, another Canadian artist whose career crosses between US-Canada scenes (New York Pictures and Vancouver School Photoconceptualism) and whose work has lately been subject to re-evaluation.

Belcher has also been an important figure for Montreal art space [Vie d'Ange](#), which included works from his 1989 *Oil* series in its inaugural [group show](#) in 2016. When Vie d'Ange officially closed its doors on Rue Marconi this summer, their final exhibition, *Condemned*, consisted of a single installation by Belcher that reprised his *Condo* works of 1987-91, in which photos of a Toronto Harbourfront condominium development were sliced into strips, laminated, and mounted on an imposing construction of cinder blocks.



Gallery in-situ, view of Alan Belcher's "Condo 88.9," 2019, at Vie d'Ange.

In this case, it stood as a sober monument to the displacement wrought by real-estate speculation and gentrification. The previously undeveloped enclave where Vie d'Ange was located, affectionately known to some residents as the "Marconi Maze," is undergoing colonization by massive tech companies whose property acquisitions have led to the ejection or closure of several local businesses and a steep rise in rents.

With *Condemned*, the issues that the work addressed when it was first produced are essentially the same ones it speaks to in the present context, despite the twenty-year gap – though, to be frank, I find a certain flat-footed literalism in its combination of signifiers and its material presence that's unfortunately typical of Belcher's output. Though his work is full of interesting left turns, his particular brand of object-based conceptualism has often been conceptually thin and aesthetically clunky. Which is to say that there are reasons he hasn't been better known. It's also telling that, while Downs & Ross and Vie d'Ange have each presented his work more than once, they've stuck exclusively to his early period.

Friends is intriguing in part because of how eccentric it is in relation to most of Belcher's oeuvre. Many of his works have a handmade quality, and some even incorporated embroidery and sewing (notably his [voodoo doll self-portraits](#)), but this mascot series stands apart. It's more abstract than much of his other work, occupying a pleasantly absurd, self-contained aesthetic universe, while also feeling more intimate and personal, freighted with the gravitas of representing real lives and a moment in time.



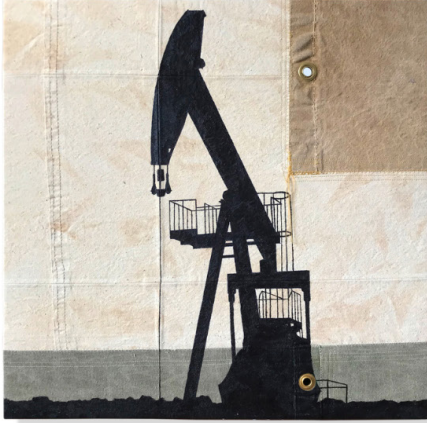
Alan Belcher, "Felix," 1996. Photo: Jeffrey Sturges. Courtesy of the artist and Downs & Ross, New York.

Of course, much of this effect derives from the passage of time itself; its success depends partly on the different circumstances of viewing it today. Furthermore, many of the 1990s references that were important to its creation – Asian Pop "kawaii" culture, "kiddie rave" techno, and '90s video games, for instance – aren't especially legible now and, to the extent that they are, they represent nostalgic kitsch rather than the up-to-the-minute saturation in hypermodernity that Belcher's 1997 [press release](#) proclaimed with lines like: "These bio-tech bouquets salute the Pacific Rim's majestic rule of the contemporary." (It's worth noting that Belcher spent six months in Japan in the middle of producing the series).

The presentation format also makes a difference: at Cold City in 1997 most of the sculptures sat on the floor, aside from a couple placed on a futon mattress, and the word "tomodachi" (Japanese for "friends") was lettered on the wall in kanji script. Downs & Ross's mattress plinths preserve the futon's connotations of crash-pad fun while also sprawling far more luxuriously across the floor space and (to me, at least) evoking a medical or even mausoleum flavor: a hospital bed or a softer version of a marble slab. The kanji, unsurprisingly, do not appear, except as embroidery on some plush Cheetos tucked away in the back of the gallery.

If younger artists look at Belcher's sculptural practice, curatorial activities, and social milieu and see a reflection of their own activities, I think much of it has to do with how he and his peers responded to conditions of rising political conservatism and market stratification in the Reagan era. Galleries like Nature Morte and artists like Belcher did it themselves and found ways to survive and succeed, though partly by jettisoning the utopian aspirations of earlier generations, embracing entrepreneurial models and an ethos of irony and provocation. As these very works testify, though, not everyone did survive the 1980s and not every survivor thrived. *Friends* shows how Belcher moved on, adapting to the bubbly optimism of the Clintonite 1990s, though upon opening the time capsule, it's the shades of tragedy and horror imparted by our present perspective that make these relics compelling.

ARTFORUM



Alan Belcher, *Oil On Canvas (G)*, 2018,
oil on tarpaulin, 24 x 24".

NEW YORK

Alan Belcher

LMAKGALLERY

298 Grand Street

May 4–June 10, 2018

As my Instagram feed would attest, I have a thing for stuck-on signs and vehicle wraps. I'm taken with the conflation of utilitarian objects and instrumental images, of public displays and commodity come-ons. For someone whose roots lie in Pop, such amalgamations feel more like accidental art than advertising. Toronto-based artist and East Village legend Alan

Belcher seems to share this fascination for photographic transposition and dimensional confusion, which, in his hands, open the commerce of imagery to pointed usurpation, poetry, and critique. Given that contemporary art increasingly manifests—wittingly or unwittingly, ironically or not—as a catalogue of competing brands, the artist's decades-long double-dealing in the currency of the product pitch would now seem more relevant than ever.

In a move unquestionably witting and ironic, Belcher here presents a suite of eight small- to medium-size pictures of silhouetted oil derricks, all 2018, finely rendered in pitch-black oil paint on canvases composed of patchworked tarpaulins. In pirating the material of Western art's execution—oil on canvas (which is also the title of each painting)—and supplanting it with punning displacements, Belcher wraps the age-old support of genteel representation in a set of connotations redolent of more worldly and politicized concerns, namely, those attending the administration of wealth, power, industry, and labor. A prolific artist with a deep history, Belcher is best known for astutely transfigured readymades and brand-conscious presentations that focus and shift attention in illuminating ways. In this instance, and not for the first time, he shines a light on painting itself, reconceived as a materially and interpretively rich image-clad object.

—Jeff Gibson

City Slickers: Cleveland's First Front International Triennial Explores American Metropolises—Without a Local Perspective



BY ALEX GREENBERGER  August 8, 2018 11:48am



To be fair, Grabner, who is based in Milwaukee, includes a section that advocates for artists from the region, and it's one of the triennial's finest offerings. "The Great Lakes Research," a group show at the Cleveland Institute of Art, features 21 artists based in Chicago, Detroit, Toronto, Cleveland, and other Great Lakes cities. That was where I made a few discoveries: Pao Houa Her, whose terrific photographs depict Hmong people adjusting to Western settings; Joe Smith, who offers an air freshener as a pesky readymade; and Alan Belcher, whose wall-mounted sculptures are based on icons that appear on iMac computers. That exhibition said more about art in the Great Lakes region today than anything else on view.

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Imaging a City of Marcel Duchamp's Readymades

Have you ever accidentally walked into an occupied bathroom? That incredulous shock of embarrassment is precisely what the Swiss Institute's new exhibition conjures.



Zachary Small August 13, 2018

Commemorating the centennial anniversary of Marcel Duchamp's breakthrough "Fountain" (1917), the *objet trouvé* urinal that stunned the world with its blatant potty humor, *Readymades* intends to do the same for JPEGs, street performers, and security gates. Also included is a variety of objects that could pass for stage scenery and props. One that springs to mind is [Lutz Bacher's "FIRE"](#) (2016), an enormous firetruck print on plywood. Although not as large as a real firetruck, Bacher's rendition shrinks the room, minimizing the importance of other objects by sheer scale. Not that it necessarily earns its precious East Village real estate. Sidling around this toy truck, one notices Alan Belcher's aforementioned "Desktop" (2012/2018) wall installation including 23 ceramic JPEGs. Compared to "FIRE," which only globs up the gallery's precious square footage, Belcher's "Desktop" better gets at the question of how we might evolve Duchamp's concept of the found object further. By transforming the flat image icon we all know into a wall sculpture, the artist has creatively reconstituted an everyday object from digital image to physical object.

HYPERALLERGIC



Installation view including Alan Belcher's "Desktop" (2012/18) in the background. Unique installation of 25 ceramic "____.jpg"s (image by author)

In the Swiss Institute's inaugural exhibition for its new East Village digs, Belcher is not the only artist seeking to express our internet tendencies in express physical form. Richard Sides and Gili Tal's unfussy installation of T-shirts, cardboard boxes, and shopping bags seen in the far corner of the institute's first gallery also accomplishes this task. Appropriating internet memes and art world jokes for statement shirts, the artists have emphasized the blasé cheapness of such clichés. Farther into the gallery, artist Flannery Silva's "Poser Tube Doll Limited Edition" (2018) rotates a series of photographs of women's legs in high heels. These images could have easily come from a shipping catalogue or an online portfolio of stock images. Standardized as they are, the viewer notices a formulaic pattern of posing for women's apparel.

Are You Buying What These Artists Are Selling?

The absurdity of American commercialism is laid bare in the Hirshhorn's latest exhibition

By [Roger Catlin](#)

SMITHSONIANMAG.COM

FEBRUARY 26, 2018

Appropriated advertising abounds in "Brand New." Images that were in advertising photographs are photographed again and repurposed in pieces like Richard Prince's 1980 *Untitled (Hand with cigarette and watch)*.

There are reimagined commercial products in "Brand New" as well, some with original, lampooning labels that harken back to "Wacky Packages" trading cards, such as Erika Rothenberg's 1989 *Freedom of Expression Drugs* or [Alan Belcher's 1983 \\$51.49.](#)

Putting products on display as art was the stock-in-trade of Andy Warhol, whose obsession with icons of American culture is readily apparent in his famous portrayals of Campbell's [soup cans](#) and [Marilyn Monroe](#).

Frieze

Reviews /

Alan Belcher



BY INGRID CHU
05 MAY 1999

'Private Language' is Toronto artist Alan Belcher's latest exhibition to feature work inspired by his research in the Pacific Rim. Using the various locations of The Japan Foundation, Belcher presented a suspiciously clean installation, exhibiting five bodies of work characterised by their predominant use of Japanese text. The language barrier, coupled with obscure titles like ...praying for the bombs to drop and We ate dogs... (both works 1999), meant that extrapolating meaning proved difficult, despite what the artist cites as Canada's cultural imperative to 'go bilingual'. But what initially appeared to be a casual display gradually metamorphosed into a sophisticated interplay between form and function.

Belcher uses this foreign language in order to create visual road blocks that discourage easy translations of his work and test his own ability to communicate as an artist. Collapsing formal and linguistic influences - spanning from 18th-century, Edo-period display to bad 'Japlish' translations - his investigations examine both pre-Hello Kitty and post-Sailor Moon generations by fusing historical and pop traditions. Part of his 'Diary Flag' series (1998-99) - flags made of white denim twill - ...abdominal muscles (1998) is a six-pack of beer, inserted vertically into a large, white pillow case hanging from gold hooks. Japanese characters applied to the fabric read 'Throwing up is much easier when you have abdominal muscles'. What appears to be an ancient proverb simply translates into a post-party reality. His statements reverberate through his use of word play, despite the fact that he consistently manipulates them visually. The messy blackboard text reference to Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories in Three Darwin Slates (1999) emphasised just how much there is left to learn. Broken pieces of slate hanging on the wall or perching on easels showed off the artist's chalk scribbles.

Belcher's generous use of lacquer lends many of the works a luxurious surface, which covers even the most mundane materials like lip gloss. From the rocks and bricks that anchor portions of his 'Diary Flags' to the floor, to the glaze on his rough-hewn slates, little remains in its natural state. The 24-carat gold used to immortalise 'the Grande Dame of 20th-century style', legendary Vogue editor Diana Vreeland, proves highly effective. Adorning seven wood boards coated in red lacquer, Belcher's golden brushstrokes transform one room into a spiritual retreat.

At other times, the artist's hand is less evident, yet still potent. The scent of sake permeates the air near *One Drop...* (1999), a ceramic bowl dripping with spirits, whose text literally spills off the edge. Spirits also fill the inside of a ceramic jar in *Place my Heart...* (1999), for which Belcher uses Bordeaux wine to fulfil Napoleon's dying wish: 'place my heart in spirits of wine'. The incorporation of journal entries from Napoleon, Darwin and Vreeland into his own experience may suggest appropriation, but he obviously intends 'Private Language' to act as a fragmented approach to role-play.

Three of Belcher's colourful, soft-sculpture *Friends* (1996) are named after some of his real-life chums: Fern, Kostas and Sabine. This plush posse resembles the contents of a toy-box, strewn intermittently across the floor and haphazardly placed on low platforms in one of two large rooms housing most of the works. Mixing unrelated objects like fruit and body organs, his cuddly clique possesses an underlying alien presence, sewn together like 21st-century playmates.

Maintaining the allure of what one considers to be foreign can become culturally perverse, sustained by the by-products of a global economy devoid of any global communication. 'Private Language' is an open book, evolving slowly for appreciative visitors willing to take the time to stop, look, listen and even smell its potency. Much like the rich Bordeaux wine, Belcher's statements take time to ferment, quietly but inevitably filling the mind, body and spirit.

INGRID CHU

Ingrid Pui Yee Chu is a Hong Kong-based curator, writer and, with Savannah Gorton, co-founder and director of the non-profit commissioning organization Forever & Today, Inc.

**racing forms
by p.c. smith
a gallery tip sheet**

Alan Belcher at Jack Shainman

Jan. 4-Feb. 9, 1997



Jenny
1996



This Canadian artist's new series, "Friends," constructed in acrylic plush, mutates only slightly the idea of stuffed animals. Images of fruit, fried eggs, soccer balls and cartoon animals pop out of complex, bulging configurations. Art's spiritual comfort is satirized as warm and fuzzy anthropomorphic infantilism. The materials remind one of Mike Kelley (one could name other antecedents as well), but Belcher's color and form here tends more towards Playskool Biomorph. Besides co-founding the influential East Village gallery Nature Morte, over the last 15 years Belcher has created a sound-bite-rich range of conceptual objects, always with interesting social awareness. His work has remained somewhat in the shadow of his peers, artists like Ashley Bickerton and Jeff Koons, probably because they have a patched-together, junky esthetic that lacks expensive sheen. Until recently, his objects have questioned the role of photography: photographs of contraband mounted on luggage, or of buildings under construction wrapped around cinderblocks (1988), or voodoo fetish self-portraits using photo-booth faces and bits of his own hair, clothing and nail clippings (1995). Thus far, Belcher's work has been too easily forgotten.