



Former dentist David Khang wields a different brush now; Carrie Walker focuses on fauna. Alex Waterhouse-Hayward photo.

Science and animals meet art

VISUAL ARTS

DAVID KHANG

For David Khang, *interdisciplinary* does not simply mean an art practice that spans sculpture, installation, performance, video, animation, text, and printmaking. His art does all that, yes, but more importantly it bridges the wider realms of art and science.

Khang, who was born in Seoul, Korea, and grew up in Toronto, says that after he earned his first degree, in psychology, he bowed to family expectation and became a dentist. "I refer to it as being the logical accident of an immigrant experience," he explains. "The pressure is to professionalize."

Speaking with the *Georgia Straight* in his East Van studio, Khang recounts that it wasn't long before boredom with dentistry set in, and his creative and intellectual aspirations asserted themselves. He moved to Vancouver, earned a BFA at Emily Carr Institute (now University) of Art & Design, then completed an MFA at the University of California, Irvine, with a special emphasis on critical theory. When asked to describe the kind of art he makes, he smiles and answers, "Discursive."

Through whatever medium seems best suited to the project, Khang explores visual and verbal language as "vehicles of cultural and political relations". He has designed board games, reinterpreted early conceptual projects, and staged performances in which his body and those of his collaborators function as both script and marker. In *Speaking of Butterflies*, performed in Los Angeles in 2004, he pierced his tongue with silk threads to which monarch butterflies were "gently tethered". (The butterflies were released unharmed after the performance.) And in a performance of "live dentistry" at the Western Front in 2008, he created permanent dental decorations for Chilean artist Cheto Castellano.

With Khang's newly launched works, *Amelogenesis Imperfecta* (*How Deep Is the Skin of Teeth*), on view at the grunt gallery until September 22, and *Beautox Me*, at CSA Space through October 7, he has again found formally and intellectually complex ways to meld his seemingly disparate professions. The grunt gallery installation includes microscopic laser drawings on

epithelial cells and an animated short of a human tooth evolving into a fearsome, all-devouring shark. This work developed out of experiments Khang conducted during his 2010 residency at SymbioticA Centre for Biological Arts in Perth, Australia. "It began as a goal-oriented project to manufacture enamel," he says, "but ended up being a meditation on ethical interspecies relations." Fetal calf serum, he explains, is used "to fuel" all stem-cell research.

Beautox Me, the two-channel video work at CSA Space, examines our "increasingly manufactured physical appearance", Khang says. Videotaped by Elisha Burrows, two local actors recite emotionally charged speeches from Shakespeare before and after having Botox injections in their faces. It's significant that Khang administered the Botox (something dentists in this province are legally entitled to do), becoming the agent of a cosmetic process that masks facial expression, thwarting the nonverbal ways we convey emotion to one another.

Khang observes that artists and scientists share core concepts and are driven by a similar kind of intellectual curiosity. To these he adds his own aspiration: thoughtful courage. "Thoughtfully considering all angles," he says, "before enacting one's own ethics and one's own understanding."

> ROBIN LAURENCE

CARRIE WALKER

A sweet-natured whippet named Trooper greets visitors at the door of Carrie Walker's East Vancouver studio. He's immediately recognizable from the delicately rendered drawings of him that Walker created and exhibited in 2005. Still, the portraits of her pet are a bit of a blip in a body of work that explores our understanding—or misunderstanding—of nature through depictions of wild creatures. "I drew Trooper for my own pleasure, out of love for my dog," Walker explains. "I didn't draw him with any regard for contemporary art practice."

Her art practice hasn't suffered. Walker came to the attention of critics, curators, and art dealers with the series of nearly 300 pen and ink drawings of animal heads she created between 2001 and 2006. Working from photographs found in field guides and animal encyclopedias, she drew

everything from bats and vultures to orangutans and shrews. "With those portraits there was for me a conscious attempt to draw animals that I thought would elicit an emotional response from people," Walker recalls. At the same time, she focused on the less media-friendly fauna. "I was shying away from the iconic—the big animals like lions and tigers and pandas that get so much airtime."

In part, her work critiques the judgments of an animal's appearance or behaviour that often occur in nature books. "What I have always found interesting is the way humans write about animals," she says, citing oddly anthropomorphic adjectives like "malicious" and "hideous". Still, she frequently incorporates such descriptions into the titles of her drawings, creating an ironic distance between her art and her source material.

Recently, Walker has been inserting her renderings of animals into old found drawings and watercolours, often producing unsettling disjunctions by dropping, say, an African animal into a pastoral English landscape or a marine mammal onto a well-tended lawn. She also ramps up the surreal quality and alienated mood of her Found Drawing Project by greatly enlarging the scale of the animal interventions: a gopher may be the size of a mountain or a swan may threaten to consume a sailboat.

Walker seems to have smartly anticipated the contemporary art world's surging interest in the animal as subject. Our increasing detachment from nature, she suggests, leads us to imbue wild creatures with our longings for freedom and mystery. And she doesn't exclude herself from our growing urban removal from the natural world. "The reality is, even though I spend a ton of time reading about wild animals, I have almost no experience with them."

This fall, Walker is participating in three exhibitions: *Odd Occurrences* at the Seymour Art Gallery (until October 14), *Reflexive Animals* at the Simon Fraser University Gallery (until October 20), and *Scenes of Selves, Occasions for Ruses* at the Surrey Art Gallery (from September 15 to December 16). The Surrey show reveals an entirely distinct body of work—human rather than animal portraits—but that is another story for another day.

> ROBIN LAURENCE