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Nicole Beno [Exhibition Catalogue]

Columbus, Linda

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All images by Nicole Beno. Courtesy of the artist.

NICOLE BENO

Text by Linda Columbus, Programs Assistant, Onsite Gallery
Curator of Nicole Beno vinyl mural

In an attempt to gain understanding and insightful knowledge too often we dwell on definitions. Is it public or private? Do we deconstruct or decontextualize? Is it art or design? Although legitimate arguments in their own right, by neatly organizing our thoughts into distinct and separate categories and limiting our understanding to theorization and academia, we undervalue the education of materiality. However, rather than treating mind and matter as two ontologically distinct opposites, there exists a truth in considering them as simultaneous forces that are complementary rather than competitive; not to "perceive them coming together after the fact...[but] to conceive of them as together from the beginning."[1]

Enter Nicole Beno, graphic designer/visual artist whose aesthetic is informed by the handmade/digital and whose practice is both commercial/conceptual. A series of binaries herself, Beno takes no issue straddling boundaries. An exploration and celebration of combining, merging and melding is inherent in her practice — her designs and images evoke a free-spirited exuberance. Naturally, she considers her process as play.

When viewing Beno's portfolio of commercial graphic design work and her screen printed art installations, there is an undeniable joy which emerges from her practice of play, curiosity and experimentation. The built-in joie de vivre and Beno's fearless attitude approaching colours and textures communicate delight in her designs. As pioneering play researcher and psychiatrist Dr. Stuart Brown describes, "the genius of play is that, in playing, we create imaginative new cognitive combinations, and in creating those novel combinations, we find what works."[2]

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1 Waldron, William S. "A Buddhist Critique of Cartesian Dualism in the Cognitive Sciences." *Brain Science and Kokoro: Asian Perspectives on Science and Religion*. Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2011. Print.
2 Brown, Stuart L., and Christopher C. Vaughan. *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*. New York: Avery, 2009. Print.

Beno's work is informed by this experimentation and play with physical objects, using familiar materials creating hand-made and irreplicable gestures. Freeform paint strokes, tactile Play-Doh and collage are a few examples of source material she directly creates and manipulates. She plays and investigates by physically working with these materials, "using a handmade process as a way of thinking through making."[3] She scans and intermixes her handmade gestures with digital mark-making, cutting and pasting, resituating materials from their original contexts. She weaves the physical and digital together in ways that confuse and blur definitions, revealing and concealing sources. For example, generating digital custom typography followed by printing, cutting and rescanning the form that results in reintroducing a digitally-informed aesthetic, forming a new language that speaks to both the visceral appeal of the hand-made and the logic and precision of the digital. Her equal attention to both the physical and digital, with a primarily computer-constructed output "[challenges] understandings of design as a process solely executed with a computer."[4]

To a degree, Beno's practice of weaving visual material from a disparate range of sources touches upon the controversially defined Post-Internet discussion: a relatively-newly coined term for art not created on, for, or after the Internet, but speaks to an "Internet state of mind — to think in the fashion of the network."[5] Examining Beno's designs, as a viewer we are able to distinguish and label singular parts of her visual vocabulary — a Photoshop transparency layer, a furry pom-pom, a barcode, a paint spill — but to do so would be beside the point. The value of the original source from which Beno extracts her visual textures, although identifiable, is not relevant in its new presentation via Beno's hand. Her work is not a composite assemblage of visual constituents but an alternative transmission in which to experience them all simultaneously.

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3 Beno, Nicole. Interview with author. 20 February 2016.
4 Beno, Nicole. Interview with author. 20 February 2016.
5 Archey, Karen and Robin Peckham. "Art Post-Internet." Ullens Center for Contemporary Art. Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, 1 March 2014. Web.

Beno's work feels like a celebration of a nexus connecting multiple supposed binaries, including the analog and the digital, two realms commonly perceived as opposites — a bias that social media theorist Nathan Jurgenson states is a fallacy, arguing instead that "digital and material realities dialectically co-construct each other."[6] You cannot enter/exit, sign-in/sign-out of physical or digital spaces — they are enmeshed in such a way that both realities are experienced together and distinctions are becoming increasingly futile. Much like mind and matter, the analog and the digital are not dichotomies but forces that are to be understood in tandem. Beno's piece, a 15.5 foot tall by 30 foot wide vinyl mural, embodies these supposed contradictions — the design was created from a playful dance between handmade and digitally produced marks and gestures, finalized and flattened into pixels and then finally printed on a plastic material that's physically mounted onto a public space. Standing outside in the midst of traffic on Richmond Street West, a sensory overload of sounds, sights and smells, viewing the mural evokes a feeling of looking at a towering computer screen.

A harmonious allatonceness[7] emerges from the coexistence of these oppositions. Rather than at odds, they complement one another to generate the notion that "the coming together of objects... is a function of a pattern of interaction between them and not an intrinsic property of one of them."[8] Beno's practice and process epitomize this experimentation of crossing boundaries and exploring when something is not one, both, neither/nor, but all. Through her joyful compositions, she shows us that the space between oppositions is the ideal environment in which we can play.

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6 Jurgenson, Nathan. "towards theorizing an augmented reality." *Sociology Lens*. The Society Pages, 5 October 2009. Web.
7 McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: U of Toronto, 1962. Print.
8 Waldron, William S. "A Buddhist Critique of Cartesian Dualism in the Cognitive Sciences." *Brain Science and Kokoro: Asian Perspectives on Science and Religion*. Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2011. Print.

Vinyl mural by **Nicole Beno**, 2016. Photo by Madelyn Alexander.