

## Alan Belcher

The Japan Foundation,  
Toronto

'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 genera-

tions 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.

frieze 93



Alan Belcher  
*Place my Heart...*  
1999  
Painted ceramic,  
Bordeaux wine  
18x15x15 cm

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