

ARTS

Artist keeps it fun

**STEVEN
ROSS
SMITH**

The Arts



Part of a series commissioned by the Saskatchewan Arts Alliance

“I saw people looking at me and my art — adults and young people being happy, and that felt so good,” says Yuka Yamaguchi.

Happiness and playfulness are certainly at the centre of her artwork. For example, in February she showed a series that might be called self-portraits at Phonographique (the hip-hop boutique on Pacific Avenue in Saskatoon, run by Troy Gronsdahl, also known as Soso on his recordings.)

A notable drawing *New Me's Being Born* shows many little Yuka faces rising like bubbles from a cup-shaped womb in Yuka herself. Yamaguchi's portraits, rendered in coloured pencil and ballpoint pen, are light-hearted, almost cartoon-like but grippingly surrealistic. They show strangely configured wildlife, humans with disconnected parts, and



— Photo by Paul Masiowski

Yuka Yamaguchi is a conceptual artist, blogger and new media artist

take whatever they like. I just do what I do.”

Yuka is more than a visual artist who draws. She is a conceptual artist, blogger and new media artist. An example of her quirky diversity is *Big Jell-O*, which Yuka did not create as a work of art. She just wanted to make a huge Jell-O. She says, “I had time so I made it.”

draw on. She kept drawing in art classes in elementary school and showed her drawings to friends and classmates. The drawings were very popular.

After high school she didn't take art classes. At university she majored and graduated in social work. “I didn't want to go to art school to learn art,” she says. “I wanted to learn it from my everyday

famous Belgian surrealist painter.

In 2000 Yuka came to Canada with her partner Paul Masiowski to live in Winnipeg. In 2001 they married and moved to Kingston. There in 2004 she decided it was time to show her work, so she exhibited drawings at a Women's Art Festival. “People kept coming to see my work. It was encouraging.” In 2005 Yuka and Paul

Plastique Monkey provides people with a way to get connected.”

Also viewable on her site is her series of books — which exist as well as tangible objects — *The Boring Life of Spencer the Ennui Dog*. Spencer, an amigurumi knitted dog, appears in these books, which look like children's picture books and use quirky photo narratives to depict Spencer's life. Kids enjoy them, but so do adults. And again there is that sense of playfulness.

Yuka also creates photographic narratives using found figures and objects, which she locates at Value Village, Home Depot and the Dollar Store — in fact the name of her website comes from a Dollar Store plastic ape. She photographs these found figures in ‘situations.’ She says: “There's no scenario or narrative sequences before taking photos. In fact the objects tell their hidden emotions as I take photos. I just wait for the moment when the emotion appears.” One such sequence is a Nurse and Doctor episode called *Loud Silence*.

Since coming to Saskatoon Yuka has connected readily with the artistic community. “It's so welcoming. I've never felt as supported as here. The art community is so good. People here are fascinated by the local artists.”

Yuka will show her drawings this summer in Regina in a group exhibition called “Room for Changing” at Art Projects Gallery, 1217 15th Ave. Her solo work in this context will show from Aug. 13-19, with a reception on the 19th.

Meanwhile, her website really is worth a visit. Earlier versions are archived, so all the idiosyncratic channels of Yuka's imagination can be visited. And if a journey inside her head does seem strange, Yuka is the first to acknowledge this.

Where she fits in the art world is not her primary concern. “People are welcome to categorize what I do. But that's not my job. I'm not interested in categorizing. I'm busy doing my work.”