



Celebrating Saskatchewan Artists

Steven Ross Smith



Conceptual Art Packs Critical Punch

**Sarah Beck, Visual Artist, Saskatoon
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What might a diminutive redheaded conceptual artist in Saskatoon have in common with a larger-than-life film and radio genius who was born in Wisconsin and embraced by Hollywood?

Sarah Beck cites Orson Welles as her hero. Welles, a film and audio icon of the twentieth century, is the creator of *Citizen Kane*, *War of the Worlds*, and other productions. Beck is the creator of ÖDE, a legitimate company with real products, but which is also an artistic statement. ÖDE has yet to meet the level of fame of *War of the Worlds*, but Beck is young, talented and ambitious.

Her aspirations seem born of passion and the need to channel her multi-faceted societal observations through art. She admires Welles, not just for his masterpieces, but for the fact that he continued making films out-of-pocket when Hollywood dropped him from favour. Also included in Sarah Beck's hero list are Brian Jungen (young and rising Canadian artist), Kurt Vonnegut, and Andy Warhol. Her guiding perspective is not unlike the stances of her heroes.

Sarah Beck's visual and conceptual art is as focussed as a laser; and clever. It is as layered as a midden, albeit a young midden—not an inappropriate comparison, as Beck's work reveals traces of a culture's passing—not a disappeared culture, but the one we live in.

Beck grew up in an artistic and inventive home in Saskatoon. Her mom was a bookkeeper and her dad was a MacGyver—a machinist and a mechanic who could invent and create ways to make things.

The inspiration for Sarah Beck's art making came from an unlikely place—from the particle board furniture that she and fellow students acquired to sit, eat, work, and sleep on in their time in residences and apartments. It was furniture that “fell apart by the third move.” Observing the ubiquity and flimsiness of this furniture, Beck began to contemplate what she refers to as our “disposable culture” which we support by our “rampant consumerism.”

Beck is smart, just twenty-nine, and best known for her first artistic outing—the image of an MDF (medium density fibreboard) replica of a South African tank, vintage 1997, which has been shown in Saskatoon, Regina, North Bay, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Vancouver. As a result, Beck is often referred to as “Tank Girl”—but her artistic vision and practice is much larger and nuanced than one image.

The sophistication of Beck's art has been shaped by her education and professional experience in film and photography. In 1994 Beck left Saskatoon and studies at University of Saskatchewan to go to Toronto to study photography and cinematography at Ryerson University. She wanted to be a photo-journalist. At Ryerson she studied the science and history of photography and took a minor degree in the sociology of communications. Her Bachelor thesis and first major exhibition dealt with modern feminism. It reflected our complicity in the best and worst of our culture, and how we buy and create our identities.

In Toronto Beck worked professionally on photo and film shoots, most often as a film electrician (a crew member, primarily concerned with lighting). In fact she was one of only four female film electricians in the whole country. While working in a variety of locations she was surprised, in the homes of wealthy people, to see the same MDF furniture she'd been fascinated by as a student. She also learned the sophisticated and manipulative elements involved in creating our lifestyle desires.

Observations turned into ideas and ideas into expression as Beck began creating ways to mirror the power of images, advertising, and products, to make us aware of the methods that direct our buying. To this purpose, in 2001 she created ÖDE, which means both *waste* and *fate* in Swedish.

"I had ÖDE planned for some time, but needed a commitment from a gallery before I could build it."

In 1998 gallery owner Michael Bjornson of Vancouver saw some of her photographic work and called her. He was curator of the Third Avenue Gallery (now the Bjornson Kajiwara Gallery). She met with him and presented her concept for the ÖDE project. She was surprised when "he set a show date based on the concept. I immediately went into action." She is still grateful. "He launched my work and showed me the ropes."

Beck purchased the plans for the tank on the Internet—a 1997 South African Rooikat tank. "Rooikat—doesn't that sound so Ikea?" Beck says, with an ironic laugh.

With the help of her father Jim Beck, a carpenter, several friends, and almost two tons of MDF board, a white tank took shape in a large Quonset in Waldheim. In August 2001, ÖDE showed at the Third Avenue Gallery in Vancouver.

ÖDE markets the Rooikat, under such slogans as "ÖDE cares" and "A better everyday life." From ÖDE, you can purchase the tank—for just \$10,000—or you can order a copy of the snazzy catalogue. It contains appealing images of happy, comfortably dressed, good-looking people—women and one token man—at a task that at first appears to be assembling furniture; as we follow the images through the catalogue, the item eventually becomes the MDF Rooikat built to scale. At the conclusion, the women assemblers pose around the finished object looking secure and contented.

Beck calls herself the service representative for ÖDE. To set up the company, make the catalogue and tank, and prepare large photographic images for exhibition, Beck invested about \$40,000—her own money and that of supportive friends and relatives. It was a big risk, but Beck is fearless. Her daring is paying off in artistic terms.

After the Third Avenue Gallery exhibition, Beck headed back to Toronto to film work, but found that the film business had changed. "When I got back from Vancouver, the twin towers fell within forty-eight hours, and film season was over—all that work had come from New York. So I made a change. A door opened that I was ready and eager to step through, towards something that really really matters to me."

She returned to Saskatoon, where she could live affordably, rent good studio space, and have money left over to travel and to contemplate buying a home.

Other exhibition opportunities opened up. For the next four years ÖDE was exhibited, most recently at the Mendel Gallery in Saskatoon in early 2005.

Beck's work was recognized in early 2005 when she won the prestigious Joseph S. Stauffer Award, given by the Canada Council to "encourage young Canadians of outstanding promise or potential." It is awarded annually in the fields of music, visual arts, or literature. It had not been given to a visual artist since 2001.

Beck is now at work on a new project, collaboration with fashion designer/textile artist Breeyn McCarney, who studied textiles and tailoring at Central Saint Martins in London, England. "She brings the technological expertise," says Beck.

The project is called *MOTHER*, and involves the creation of survival suits for women who work in sweat shops in countries such as Bangladesh and China. These suits will be presented as fashion in a retail window display, but will also incorporate all that these women need to survive in a sweatshop environment—corseting for back support, steel-toed shoes that generate power by walking, and a catheter. The concept is done, and now the planning and manufacturing are beginning. To start, Beck shipped an industrial sewing machine to Saskatchewan, and her collaborator relocated from Toronto to Saskatoon. Beck and McCarney will make their own garments and decorate them with their handmade brocades. There will be a Web site and print material—perhaps a pamphlet or catalogue. True to ÖDE, the statement made will engage the aesthetic of beauty as a contrast to "developed" society's often blind complicity in the oppression of others. It is Beck-like—

another fresh, challenging, elaborate, and labour-intensive concept. It promises to be a powerful political and social manifestation that continues Sarah Beck's cultural dialogue on the issues of complicity in the culture, the language of advertising, consumerism and profiteering.

Sarah Beck is a rising presence whose art will be widely seen and whose voice will be heard. As she says "my art is my soapbox."



Sarah Beck

photo: darrol hofmeister

Artist's Statement

It is my goal through my practice to act as a social barometer and cultural activist. With a focus on complicity in the culture of consumption and using the tools of lifestyle advertising, I address what I believe to be important, on the soapbox art has afforded me. I strive to make my work accessible because I *want* it to be accessible, allowing the message to determine the medium I will express myself in. I choose to make art that steps out of the gallery, whether by language, signifiers, or by its physical nature, to reach a wide audience.

Career Highlights

Graduates from Ryerson University's Photography Program, winning several awards (1997); returns to study cinematography.

Wins Best Gender film at National Student Film Festival, 1999.

Shoots several films as a cinematographer, including *Mechanics*—winner of Best Film at the Manhattan Short Film Festival September 2001.

ÖDE opens at TAG August 1, 2001. Susequent exhibitions: Belle-view Art Museum, Seattle, summer 2002; Levy Gallery, Philadelphia September 2003; Mendel Gallery, Saskatoon, winter 2005; Rosemont Art Gallery,¹ spring 2005; ÖDE's anti-tank fencing, is launched at the White Water Gallery, North Bay, February 2005.

Sarah Beck wins Joseph S. Stauffer Award, 2005.

Voted Best Artist in Saskatoon by *Planet S* newspaper readers.

Web site

www.shopode.com

1. Now Art Gallery of Regina

Celebrating Saskatchewan Artists

“In the late petroleum era the artist/viewer collaboration has never been more important. Art must meet the challenge of the times. Life depends on it.”—*George Glenn, Visual Artist, Prince Albert*

“We humans are the most beautiful when we walk in line with our spirit. When I act and sing and write, I become a vessel for spirit to work through. Not only does it keep me grounded, it keeps me humble.”—*Andrea Menard, Actor, Singer, Saskatoon*

“Every time I walk out of the house I think why would I want to live anywhere else.”—*Sean Virgo, Writer, Eastend*

With words such as these, 33 stories of more than 40 artists and arts entrepreneurs are told. They reveal the profusion of arts and crafts being created all over Saskatchewan.

