



The artist's imagination is full of the sick children he encountered at a Toronto hospital. And now these kids are us.

RAY CAESAR'S QUEASY DREAMWORLD

By Anneloes van Gaalen

With their high foreheads, pale skin, red lips and ruby cheeks, the boys and girls in Canadian artist Ray Caesar's work have that anaemic, Victorian look going on. These works of art aren't your typical portraits, though: for one, not a single lick of paint was used—every single one is digitally created. And, while Caesar's prints have the feel of romantic, pastel-tinted portraiture, there are also very dark, even macabre, details: porcelain-skinned doll-like figurines with strange mechanical limbs, claw-like hands or a reptile-inspired tail. Caesar's work is the stuff of dreams.

Born in London, Caesar has spent

most of his life in Canada, where he once worked as a graphic designer in the art and photography department of the Toronto Hospital for Sick Children. It was here that he was exposed to the ill, abused and deformed children who would form the inspiration for his work. 'I went to art college 25 years ago and, because of a general lack of good sense and bad guidance, ended up studying interior design. I was thrown out for an embarrassing incident late one evening when I thought I was alone,' Caesar has been quoted as saying. 'I then somehow got into medical graphics and spent 17 years in [the] art department at the hospital. To this day, my art is defined by the wonderful miracles and great sadness I

saw in this amazing place.'

The artist explains: 'I chronicled everything from child abuse, reconstructive surgery, to the heroic children that deal with the hardship and challenges that life has to offer. I spent many years creating medical and research documentation, technical drawings, images of huge equipment surrounding tiny premature infants, visual tools for brain-damaged children and—perhaps the most difficult for me—drawings documenting animal research.'

Overwhelmed by what he saw, Caesar opted for a career change and went from documenting child abuse cases and surgical reconstructions to working as a digital animator and 3D artist at an animation studio. And not without success, either: 'At one point I was told that I was nominated for an Emmy,' he told US art magazine *Huge*. 'I had no idea what that was, but I got a great trip to California out of it plus the use of a rented tuxedo which was unfortunately returned in a very poor condition.' Caesar didn't end up winning the Emmy (*Star Trek* did). Around the same time, he decided to change careers once more.

He says the change occurred after his mother visited him while he was sleeping. This, in his own words, was 'slightly

Here's looking at YOU kid. Castor by Ray Caesar:

unusual' because she had passed away some months before. While fast asleep, Caesar had a vision of her urging him to return to his first love: art. 'I hated making art for so many years. It never occurred to me to show it in a gallery and I didn't even want to put it up on my own wall. The act of making it was not pleasant, but for some reason it was an obsession. I made a valiant attempt to quit and was doing quite well when my mother [appeared to me]' Caesar recalls. 'She was always a bit strange and if anyone could find a way to come back and scare the shit out of me, she was the one to do it. Anyway, I started making pictures again and contacted a gallery for the first time on a whim. Now I am making art for a living. I guess my Mom was right after all. Trust her to have the last word.'

Caesar's art has a definite painterly quality, but as explained above, all the works are entirely digitally rendered, and a true labour of love. For the first step of the process, he creates models using 3D software, which he then wraps in painted and manipulated texture maps: 'I colour the models first in a very simple way, then each surface is wrapped with a texture that may be painted digitally, such as a flower petal, or from a digital photograph such as a wood surface. I collect textures the way some people collect little silver spoons and I have a story about each texture in my collection.' Each of the models has an invisible 'skeleton', which allows him to place each figure in a fantastical environment. Different lighting effects finish what can only be described as digital masterpieces.

The people responsible for bringing Ray Caesar's work to the Netherlands are Esther Koch and Hans Bos, a pair of graphic designers and gallery owners. The creative duo—who've been working together at the KochxBos design agency since 2001—have now opened KochxBos Gallery, which will feature the kind of lowbrow, underground artists that Caesar typifies. Hans Bos—who says, 'I'm part graphic designer, part artist myself'—came across Caesar's work in a New York gallery and immediately fell in love with it: 'I particularly liked the fact that the work has so many layers. At first look, you just see these lovely and sweet creatures. But look closer and you see that this cute-looking kid has a tail. It is these hidden aspects that intrigue me, it's a kind of modern symbolism.'

Unfortunately, Ray Caesar won't be present for the opening of his Amsterdam exhibition. 'He lives a rather secluded life,' says Bos, who points out that, despite the somewhat eerie aspects of the work, Caesar's prints also breathe a sense of serenity: 'It's like [he] translated the suffering he saw in that children's hospital into works that depict the beauty of people who might have suffered but who have also come to terms with that suffering and misery.' Or, in the words of the artist himself: 'In my dreams I am often back in the hallways of that hospital, and it's not without a certainty I am living my dreams now for those that didn't get a chance to live theirs.'

The World of Ray Caesar opens Thursday and runs until 15 February 2006 at KochxBos Gallery, 1e Anjeliërsdwaarsstraat 3-5, 681 4567.