

This text was written to accompany the exhibition 'Children of the voyage' at Elisa Platteau gallery, Brussel, in 2008. [www.elisaplatteau.com](http://www.elisaplatteau.com). Jodie Hruby is an artist and critic living and working in Brussel.

### **Jodie Hruby 'Children of the voyage' : 2008.**

To Neal Beggs (Larne, Northern Ireland; 1959) a work of art is a work of humanity. He is compelled to interweave his life and his art. As an artist Beggs is aware that he is investing material with power, and his quest is in the "ability to identify similitude, to bring two or more things together in order to highlight experience". His work is closely connected to the particular adventure of climbing. A former mountaineer, Beggs's lifestyle and attitude have instilled in him the desire to "suppress the borders between art and life". Endurance and endeavour are constant features of both, and are thereby powerful agents in his work. Like climbing, Beggs sees art as an experience conducted over time, a process in suspension. However seemingly individualistic Beggs's art may at first appear, the contrary is true; anthropological and spiritual aspects provide the fundament. He examines the coding between landscape and humans, between nature and culture, coaxing their inherent symbioses to the fore. Beggs is attracted to speed, efficiency of movement, surface, and skin – aspects of everyday life that relate to landscape. Simulacra and reinterpretations of natural and ordinary elements reveal a hidden meaning. The illusiveness of the horizon, the attraction of the void, the pull of gravity – these phenomena are present in his work and lend it an existential tinge. Climbing mountains and rocks are Beggs's way of engaging in a dialogue with the landscape, a suitably solid metaphor for his artistic process.

The intrinsic potency of Beggs's work is palpable; however, its impact does not lie on the surface and cannot be obtained at a glance; rather, it is contained in the quintessence of the source(s) from which it originates – that which has brought it to life, and the magic it exudes is only fully realised upon contemplation. Indeed, the attentive viewer becomes truly captivated, and the sensation, just as when one interacts with nature, is intense. Neal Beggs's evocative tableaus depict perceptions of the 'real'. For him the 'real' is an unmediated experience; it is his wish to engage the viewer in that unmediated space.

At ELISA PLATTEAU GALERIE the exhibition Children of the Voyage comprises of diverse poignant works from Beggs's repertoire, which, together with the entitled piece form a sonorous body. The experience begins at the entrance to the gallery, with a solitary rock; its appearance is apparently fortuitous, an entirely relevant signifier of Beggs's work as a whole. Neal Beggs is fond of rocks, of how the hand moves across the surface of the body of a rock, in the same way as across a human body or the body of a car; how the eye glides across the surface, surveying it with minimal effort.

A video plays on the sidewall. Beggs does not consider any of his video depictions as performances, although this is primarily how they are interpreted, due chiefly to the convention of the action involved. In fact Beggs does not appear as himself in his videos. He tends to keep his back to the camera, figuratively and metaphorically, thereby intentionally appearing as any man. He believes "depersonalising the work gives it a slightly mysterious quality", which is deemed important to the viewer's experience. The concept of The Alphabet Climb (2004) was simple: Beggs would video his artist friend Dan Shippies climbing the wall of a self-service restaurant in Montserrat. As he switches the camera on, something altogether different, but not out-of-keeping, occurs. A friendly stranger wanders over... "So is climbing the theme of your film?" he soon asks. "Not necessarily", Beggs responds. This open-ended answer typifies Beggs's interest in happenstance, the delightful way in which situations coincide, testifying to one's connectedness to everything and everyone else. While holding the camera, Beggs spontaneously engages in casual conversation with the stranger, who is moved to share his own adventure. The intended content thereby becomes supplementary to the incidental occurrence, and the video is imbued with a curious significance.

In the central space the work Starmaps is handsomely presented as an alignment of four. Part of a continuing process that began in 2005, this programme of mapping is now newly applied to Brussels. Here, at a scale of 1:20000 Greater Brussels receives the Beggs treatment. As with The Helvetic System (2006-2008) pertaining to Switzerland,

topographical maps are covered over in black thus obscuring their geographical coordinates; onto these dark monotone fields the mountain peaks (for Brussels read: high spots) are plotted as white dots; at once it is as though the image has been inverted and one is instead looking into the cosmos, seeing constellations in the night sky. A "space of reverie" has opened up, in which the imagination is free to travel between these two very 'real' coexisting realities.

At the upper level of the gallery giant black letters announce Children of the Voyage. The room resonates. This short phrase encompasses more than the room can contain. Extrapolated from the 1970s T-Rex hit 'Children of the Revolution' Beggs has instantly referenced his youth while indicating his passion as a human and an artist; he has intuitively defined the state of being and the unity with all else in the universe... the unending search for something, which we all share. An enticing counterpoint, Sleeping bag – red version (2000) lies resolute and vibrant on the floor in front, simultaneously reflecting and absorbing the naked boldness of the statement above. Meanwhile Sleeping bag – silver version (2001) lies in its own shimmering glory further a field, taking equal part in the active interplay between entities. The work Sleeping bag describes the grammar it employs – a space of security and illusion; here the comfortable coalesces with the fantastical; the essential is garnished with sequins.

Neal Beggs studied at Sheffield Hallem University and at the Glasgow School of Art, where he received a Master's degree. He currently lives and works in France and the UK. He has exhibited throughout England, Scotland, France and Belgium, including the Museum of Modern Art, Glasgow, Tower Museum in Eastbourne, and Musée Géo-Charles in Grenoble, as well as in numerous venues in Spain, Italy, Germany and Japan. During the past year, his work has been shown at Rayon Frair and White Office in Tours and Network Centre for Contemporary Art in Aalst. In February 2009 he will exhibit at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Château-Gontier. Works by Neal Beggs are in public and private collections in Glasgow, Paris and London, and in the FRAC. Text by Jodie Hruby. Brussel 2008.