

Stephen Friedman Gallery

FAD Magazine
Somerset house to celebrate the beano & the art of breaking rules
Mark Westall
2 March 2021

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Dennis and Gnasher, Minnie the Minx, Bash Street Kids and the rest of the Beano gang take over Somerset House this autumn in a contemporary celebration of the world's longest-running comic. This autumn, Somerset House presents Beano: The Art of Breaking the Rules, a major exhibition celebrating the world's longest-running weekly comic and a British cultural icon: Beano.

First released in 1938 and still crafted weekly from its home in Dundee, Beano has entertained and inspired across the decades, forming a lasting impact on the contemporary cultural landscape and, crucially, on today's artists themselves, by always applying one simple rule – rules should be broken. This landmark exhibition explores both Beano's and contemporary art's unruliness and irreverence, through the eyes of extraordinary artists who embody the Beano sensibility of rebellion.



Image: Minnie the Minx, 2020. Courtesy of Beano.

In the 70th year of Beano's top mischief-maker Dennis, Beano: The Art of Breaking the Rules will feature original comic drawings, never previously seen in public, selected across its 4,000-plus editions (to date) and rare archive artefacts, alongside works from leading artists and designers, imbued with the same Beano spirit of breaking the rules. Contributors include artists Bedwyr Williams, Hardeep Pandhal, Fourth Plinth artist Heather Phillipson, Holly Hendry, Lindsey Mendick, Sarah Lucas, Simeon Barclay and editorial cartoonist Martin Rowson.

Rebellion has always been at the heart of pioneering artistic practice, and for the past 82 years Beano has been right there too, inspiring generations of young people to discover the possibilities and sense of freedom that come through creativity. The riotous comic has created a gateway for some readers into the world of art and culture, where they can find an outlet to challenge convention themselves, just like Beano's beloved band of mayhem-makers.

Beano's iconic cast – Dennis and Gnasher, Minnie the Minx, Bananaman, Bash Street Kids, Billy Whizz and Roger the Dodger to name just a few – have mastered the art of rebellion, be it against convention, teachers or evil fruit supervillains. The characters are united in their ingenuity, endlessly hatching creative plans to bend or break the rules, even if they don't always succeed in doing so. Across ten decades, Beano's anti-heroes have encouraged young people to push and play with boundaries, an example that some of its readers have taken with them into their creative careers with unexpected results. Such is the starting point of this exhibition.

Beano: The Art of Breaking the Rules opens with the Beanotown Museum, introducing the maverick creators behind Beano, charting how they came to create the original characters. The show then moves to uncover some of the comic's recurring themes, which resonate with the exhibition's cohort of contemporary artists and the comic's many other fans. Tackling topics such as Class, Education, Feminism and Art head-on, Beano showed its stars doing it differently. It is only the adults depicted that ever make assumptions about what all children are supposed to do or be. Here, contemporary works – including new commissions especially for the show – will interact with the original strips, together providing fresh perspectives on the comic masterpiece. The exhibition further explores how Beano has powerfully penetrated alternative pop culture and closes with an interactive workshop space, inspiring all ages to encounter their own creative misdemeanours.

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"I warned Dennis that one of the pictures in his new show at Somerset House would make people laugh so hard, they risked fracturing their funny bones and he said, 'That's just a mirror!' Beano relishes making an exhibition of anyone who takes themselves too seriously and we can't wait for families to enjoy what we have planned. Because without Art, the Earth would be just...Eh?" - Mike Stirling, Editorial Director, Beano Studios

Audiences will be made to feel as if they are stepping inside a page of the comic, with ongoing gags, editor's notes and larger-than-life recreations of the regular sights of Beanotown, from Bash Street School and Bunkerton Castle to the homes of Gasworks Road, providing the backdrops for the audacious contemporary creations on show.

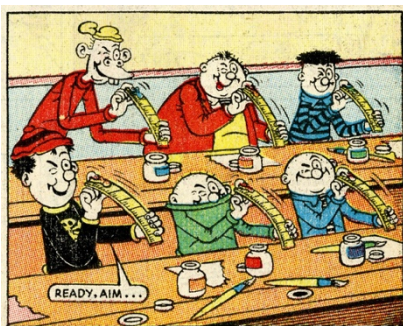


Image: Bash Street Kids, 1982. Courtesy of Beano

Beano: The Art of Breaking the Rules is curated by artist Andy Holden, a lifelong Beano fan. His artistic practice spans sculpture, large installations, painting, pop music, performance, and multi-screen videos, often using the allegory of the cartoon as a way to comprehend our contemporary landscape.

"Both art and Beano are about being told to do one thing, then doing another: both require a creative solution. Beano was for me a gateway into comics and a love of drawing, and from there a springboard into a love of art. Beano's irreverent sensibility is something that appeals to you as a child, but also, for some, never leaves you. To be able to present an immersive display of Beano's history, and to examine its influence on art and culture is the curatorial equivalent of a 'Beano feast'.



Image: Dennis, Gnasher and Minnie the Mix. Courtesy of Beano.

"The exhibition will bring Beanotown to life and populate it with a new set of resident maverick artists. In researching the show, almost every artist I've approached so far came back with yes, I loved the Beano and hopefully this exhibition will show how some of the themes that have run through Beano's history are often the same ones that feed a creative, rebellious sensibility." - Andy Holden