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## What's So Funny About Contemporary Art?

Artists are finding inspiration in gags, slapstick, clowns, comics, and stand-up comedy. The results are sometimes satirical, sometimes ludicrous, and sometimes 'so funny you could cry'

BY LINDA YABLONSKY

**First you laugh.** Then you wonder why. This is the one-two punch of humor in art today, where laughter is nervous but never cheap, and comic turns are but the gateway to a world of doubt. Indeed, funny art comes so loaded with piercing ironies, sudden surrealities, and deadpan expressions of horror or grief that we cannot be sure if it is even okay to laugh. A lingering tendency among critics to dismiss artists who employ humor as mere jokers hasn't prevented such artists from turning to satire with renewed vigor. Cartoon images now seem to be everywhere—in painting and sculpture as well as video and digital animation, tacked to walls or drawn directly on them. The funniest-looking figures, however, are less Popeye than R. Crumb's bearded Mr. Natural, fraught with anxiety, swearing, sweating, and questioning every feeling and thought.

"This is why humor can be useful," says Adam McEwen, a mordant, British-born New York artist, who has his first New York solo show opening next month at the Nicole Klagsbrun gallery. "It can destabilize a situation and, in a split second, draw the viewer in or allow something else out."

What is that something else? Ask John Currin. "When I started making funny paintings," he says, "they felt deeper and more about heavy things, like death and sex and love, that I always wanted my paintings to be about. The sillier they looked on the surface, the more they seemed to contain those feelings."

He is not alone in this thinking. Consider Amy Cutler and her *Tiger Mending*, a demented 2003 gouache on paper. Evoking Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, Cutler pictures three prim women sitting in tall grass, mending the hides of full-grown sleeping tigers. The women, all identical (surrogates for the artist), are so unruffled by the outlandish situation they might as well be at a quilting bee surrounded by kittens. It is a funny image, in a sardonic kind of way. It is also rather poignant.

British artist Sarah Lucas is another who approaches so-called women's work, particularly in regard to sexual relations, with tongue firmly in cheek. Her 1990s erotic bunny sculptures—limp, seriously anorexic, stuffed nylon dolls, so exhausted they can hardly sit up in their straight-backed chairs—are as comic as they are pathetic. Ultimately, they discomfort more than they please.

Of course, that is the point. Art that makes you laugh does

not really have to be funny—not *just* funny, that is. After all, a one-liner is simply that, a gag, an entertainment. For humor to exert any power in art, where meaning is layered and context is all, it must turn the ground on which it stands to jelly. As Lucas says, "If I make a female form out of a bucket and a couple of lightbulbs, that's a very melancholy figure. It's also kind of absurd."

This witty-sad paradox has long legs in contemporary art. Take *Dog Duet*, a short 1975 video by William Wegman, featuring his weimarers Fay Ray and Man Ray. With Wegman conducting off-camera, a tennis ball in hand, the dogs sit quietly, swinging only their expressive heads in a piece of canine choreography that is both cruelly funny and poetic.

Wegman made a number of such videos throughout the 1970s; though related directly to process art, some were biting enough to earn him commissions from *Saturday Night Live*. They will appear in a retrospective organized by the Whitney Museum's new curator-at-large Joan Simon, that includes drawings, paintings, and photographs. (It opens next spring at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts, and will travel to the Brooklyn Museum.) "I never made them to be funny," Wegman says of the videos. "The humor came about through a search for a conceptual format of picture and word."

Barbara Kruger hit her stride with the same format, in captioned images that, with great economy of means, created bruising cultural commentaries. One, an appropriated photograph of a housewife holding a magnifying glass, reads, "It's a small world but not if you have to clean it." The image later influenced a debate over a new living-wage law in the Los Angeles city council. "That's the power of humor to carry a critique," Kruger says.

Much of what we find funny, in life or art, is nasty, dark, violent, unforgiving, and often attended by the pain mirrored in the face of the classic clown. Think of Picasso's Pierrots, the psychotic clowns of Bruce Nauman's 1987 video installation *Clown Torture*, or Cindy Sherman's recent series of ultrastylized but pathetic clowns. All reveal, rather than disguise, existential agonies that are also present in the "comic" scream of a

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Sam Kinison or the nasal snarl of a Lenny Bruce. But it is the poker-faced silent-film comedian Buster Keaton who remains the standard-bearer of an entirely visual, slapstick art that is funniest at its most despairing. "That's art," says Richard Prince. "So funny you could cry."

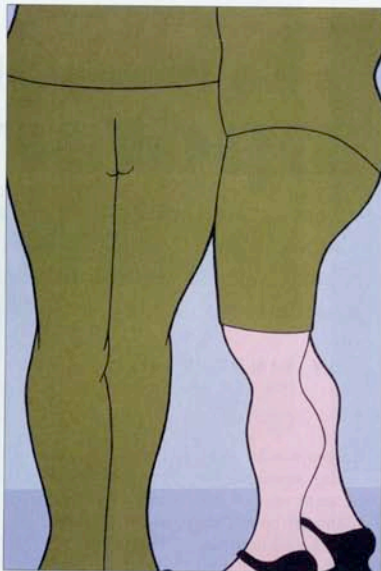
Prince came to critical attention around the same time as Kruger. Since 1986 he has been recycling sad old jokes—like "I never had a penny to my name, so I changed my name"—through several series of paintings, "redrawing" cartoons the way he had been "rephotographing" idealized images taken from furniture or Marlboro Man ads in magazines. Eventually he dropped the cartoons to concentrate on punch lines alone, silk-screening them in hot colors on otherwise uninflected monochromes. Prince says, "I don't see myself as making funny work. The jokes are funny. The paintings are not."

Their prices can be sobering. At auction last spring, Phillips de Pury sold Prince's *My Name*, a 1987 monochrome diptych, for \$747,200. As Tobias Meyer, head of the contemporary-art department at Sotheby's, puts it, "Art loses its humor when it gets traded for a lot of money."

This is one issue that performance and video artist Michael Smith deals with head on. In one installation, *Open House*, made with Joshua White for a 1999 exhibition at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art, Smith appears as an ambitious but bumbling artist, "Mike Smith," who realizes his only unqualified art-world success when he sells the loft he owns in SoHo. "He may not have been a very good artist," says the real-life Smith, "but he was going to make some money on that." Clearly, the piece was more cynical than funny. Nevertheless, Smith's performance in it and other, equally parodic works is so droll that he is often mistaken for a stand-up comedian, while his art is treated as goofy satire that somehow misses as entertainment.

**Artists of every** generation find themselves in a dialogue with the past. In the tradition of Daumier,

Ad Reinhardt drew satiric cartoons throughout the late 1940s and early '50s for publications that included *ARTnews*. In one comic, half a dozen pigs—clearly art critics—huddle together, speaking of the business of art. In his 1991 "Dialogue" series of installations, Los Angeles-based artist Mike Kelley hilariously animated the same idea by placing rag dolls on the gallery floor under an afghan, where they engaged in a



John Wesley's comic-book aesthetic, as in *Aer Lingus*, 2002, appeals to younger artists.



*Untitled (Dead)*, 2001, by Adam McEwen, who claims, "Humor makes it possible to be subversive."

laughter is a "good, solid connection from an artwork to a viewer. It is art that is functioning well."

In Currin's experience, "When you do something funny in a painting, you threaten to wreck the painting, make a mockery of your own work." But, he adds, "that also makes it more of a challenge." He points to *The Cripple*, his 1997 portrait of a refined dowager with a crazed smile. "That was a serious painting," Currin recalls. "But it seemed maudlin and cruel until I put

the big smiley face on it. That turned the whole thing into a Bob Fosse, all-that-jazz moment. It made the painting funnier, and more complex."

If nothing seems more problematic for artists than humor, to independent curator Clarissa Dalrymple, there is no question of its importance. "Humor is the light that has to shine out of art to make it work," she says. In fact, humor seems most effective when it is naughtiest. "Humor makes it possible to be subversive," McEwen says. In a recent series of works on paper, he substituted messages on shopwindow signs such as *Sorry We're Closed*

with "Sorry We're Sorry" and "Sorry We're Dead."

"I don't think good art has to have humor," McEwen says, "but art that has absolutely no humor is like art that has no humanity." For his upcoming show at Nicole Klagsbrun, he has created paintings that contain the texts of obituaries—of living people in the public eye—funny paintings with a darkly critical underbelly. "To me," says McEwen, a former obituary

weighty, art-theoretical discourse on, for example, the subject of "19th-Century White."

Bonnie Clearwater, chief curator and director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, credits Kelley, in articles and conversations with other artists in Los Angeles in the early 1980s, with introducing humor into contemporary art as an aspect of the sublime. "The original idea of the sublime was rhetorical," says Clearwater, who started out as a specialist in medieval manuscripts. "Longinus, the first-century Roman rhetorician, defined the sublime as what bowls over a crowd. And artists know you understand their work when they see you laughing."

Is the gallery the proper place for laughter? Sean Landers thinks it is. Though he wondered whether the laughter greeting his early paintings—canvases covered with every insecure thought in his head—was derisive or sympathetic, he also felt, "If people didn't laugh, I thought I was failing." To Landers

writer for London's *Daily Telegraph*, "history is a fiction. It depends on who's controlling it."

What his paintings share with other funny art is a narrative. It is in Cutler's fractured fairy tales, Prince's punch lines, Wegman's process videos, Smith's content-heavy parodies. Jokes need a setup, a funny situation, a narrative juxtaposition, to generate laughs, be they from the belly or through the nose.

"Having animals in human situations is always funny," says Jane Kaplowitz, who made a series of watercolors featuring "lesbian" penguins and "gay" monkeys after reading a news article about homosexuality among nonhumans. "It's like seeing your parents have sex. It's embarrassing."

**In the high-low** art world of today, humor crosses many divides. "The next Carnegie International is as serious as can be," says its curator, Laura Hoptman. "Yet out of 38 artists, I came up with five people I think are laugh-out-loud funny." Not least among them is Maurizio Cattelan, who will appear in the show, opening on the 9th of next month at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Art. Hoptman identifies Cattelan as a "perfect example of an artist who many consider a joke, but who is a social commentator of the first order."

Hoptman also points to the philosophical humor of Paul Chan, a young Hong Kong-born American artist who will have his solo debut in New York at Greene Nafatali next month. His contribution to the International is *Let Us Now Praise Famous American Leftists*, a digital animation that incorporates, in Hoptman's words, "the faces of the Left comically disguised with facial hair."

Blame it on Marcel Duchamp. In 1919, when the playful Dadaist drew a mustache and goatee on a postcard of the Mona Lisa and named it *L.H.O.O.Q.*, he opened a giant can of double-edged laughter that clearly has yet to die down. A number of younger artists today have adopted the comic-book esthetic of a John Wesley or a Raymond Pettibon, neither of whose painting is all that funny, to comment on troubling issues in contemporary life. "Comedians know what everyone laughs at, because they know what everyone represses," notes Clearwater. "Mike Kelley said that."

He could have been speaking of Taylor McKimens, a largely self-taught artist who, like many today, learned to draw from comic books, video games, and illustrations on cereal boxes. Now he employs cartoonish imagery of the Philip Guston and Robert Crumb school to make art that looks funny but really isn't. His objects are rooted as deeply in his growing up trailer-park poor as they are in Pop, particularly Claes Oldenburg's "soft" sculpture and Ed Kienholz's slapstick environments.

For his first solo show, last year at the Clementine Gallery in New York, McKimens constructed a three-dimensional shack out of his comic drawings and filled it with such images of unpalatable domesticity as the cut-out figure of a deadbeat slacker in his underwear. The same figure, pinker and fatter,

with a paper bag over its head, reappears in "Saturnalia," a group show at New York's Deitch Projects, on from the 7th of next month to December 9. "I'm definitely not trying to make nice images," McKimens says. "But I don't feel it's useful to shock people anymore. The humor is the sugarcoating that makes it digestible."

Still, people continue to regard funny art with suspicion. Since laughter is physical, it may discourage more thoughtful engagement by a viewer. When Prince walks into a gallery, for example, and hears people laughing, he believes it "cancels out any normal relationship with an artwork. Normally," he says, "you're making a subjective decision about it, but there is nothing subjective in that laughter."

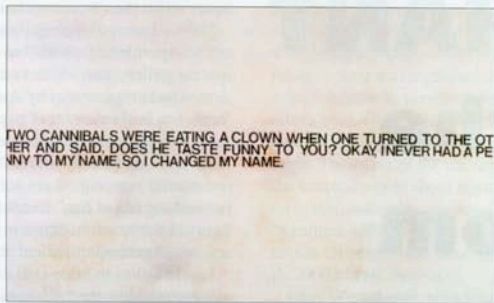
Of course, humor itself is entirely subjective. For some, Paul McCarthy's often violent performances and sculptures are more horror show than Punch-and-Judy. Matthew Barney is another whose most outrageous images bridge the ludicrous and the sublime. Christopher Wool may have put it just right in a 1992 word painting: "Fuckem if they can't take a joke."

Perry Hoberman collects computer parts the way Prince does worn-out jokes, but he claims satire—a narrative art—for his most useful tool. "After a certain period of time," he says, "you almost have to make fun of things that become sacred cows." In *Your Time Is Valuable* (2003), he uses the computer's abilities to send up the relationship of art to its market. "All artwork is worth the time you spend with it," he says of the piece, "but that means if your time is valuable, then the more time you spend with art, the less valuable it is."

One of Hoberman's heroes is John Baldessari, who hit a nerve with his 1972 video *Baldessari Sings Lewitt*. In it the artist stands straight-faced before the camera and "sings" the Minimalist master's 45-point treatise on Conceptual art, not noted for its humor, to the tune of the "Star-Spangled Banner" and other upbeat songs. Baldessari says, "If things can't hold up to criticism or examination, which sometimes means ridicule, then it's not very good. Sol's things have not suffered at all," he adds. "They've gotten more of an audience."

For Chris Doyle, a Brooklyn artist who channels complex emotions through deadpan humor, laughter is often the best revenge. He has cast hot dogs, red bricks, and lawn chairs as human surrogates in videos that consciously mix storytelling with abstraction. In *The Way Our Story Unfolds*, a 2003 video animation, two lawn chairs and a hose play out an achingly funny seduction scene in a study of aging and the nature of love that is both tender and brutal. "I use dumb materials like hot dogs and lawn chairs because I believe there is pathos in those things," Doyle says. "If you can't find tremendous humor in the everyday," he adds, "the sadness becomes overwhelming."

Perhaps it's best to leave the problem there. As E. B. White once wrote, "Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it." ■



Richard Prince, *Cannibals and Clowns*, 2000. Observes Prince, "The jokes are funny. The paintings are not."