

ARTS & BOOKS

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Mary Boone Gallery / Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery

'SQUEEZE': Mika Rottenberg makes a statement, with humor

It's OK for serious art to be funny

SHARON MIZOTA

Stored in a secure facility in the Cayman Islands, Mika Rottenberg's new sculpture will be sold in shares to collectors who have never seen it in person. The only public image of the work features a smiling New York art dealer, Mary Boone, holding the precious object: a raggedy cube made of raw latex, rotting lettuce and tins of blush.

Whether you think this arrangement is brilliant or ridiculous probably depends on how you feel about the contemporary art market. Rottenberg, named one of the 10 most promising New York artists by New York magazine in 2007, is interested in the mysterious mechanisms by which art's value is created. "Something that could look like nothing could be worth millions of dollars," she says. "I think that's fascinating."

Her video installation "Squeeze," currently on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, imagines the

[See Humor, E4]



HENRY PRINCE Mary Boone Gallery / Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery

MIKA ROTTENBERG:

At top, two images from "Squeeze," a video installation that tackles issues such as labor and gender.

Art that's smart and funny

[Humor, from E1] production of the ungainly art object as a somewhat magical process. Combining footage of real workers in the lettuce and rubber industries with staged shots of claustrophobic spaces in which women perform repetitive but seemingly unrelated tasks — mashing, scraping, massaging — the piece engages serious issues of labor, gender and globalization. It is also surprisingly funny.

In one sequence, field laborers insert their arms into holes in the ground; miraculously, the arms emerge in a room where they are massaged by another set of women. Nearby, the naked rear ends of other workers protrude through openings in a wall, cooled by sprays of mist.

The show is one of several current exhibitions that use humor to raise questions about the relationship — whether estranged or entangled — between art and everyday life. John Baldessari's wry twists on artistic convention are a recurring theme in his retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Hugh Brown's imitations of works by famous artists are on view at Robert Berman Gallery and video artist Ryan Trecartin's latest media-addled vignettes recently arrived at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Pacific Design Center gallery.

Of course, humor is subjective, and not all of these artists are trying to be funny. In fact, artworks that go for easy laughs are often dismissed as superficial entertainment — or worse, simple mockery.

Rottenberg, 34, insists she is not trying to make fun of Boone or any of the workers and performers who participate in her videos. "Humor is just a way to help digest things," says Rottenberg, who uses it to deal with what she sees as harsh realities

beyond her control. "It's like either I'm going to cry or I'm going to laugh."

No stranger himself to the thoughtful side of funny, Baldessari, 79, has been gently turning artistic and popular culture on its head since the 1960s. "The humor found in Baldessari's work stems from the way in which he calls attention to absurdities that already exist," writes LACMA curator Leslie Jones in an e-mail. One example is the painting "Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell" from 1966-68, in which Baldessari simply transposed a found text onto a canvas. The text offers advice on which colors and subjects artists should use to maximize sales of their work. "Baldessari highlights the illogical notion that paintings of bulls or roosters will sell better than paintings of cows," writes Jones. "That's funny to us, but the person who wrote it was probably dead serious."

The humor in such works depends on a bit of inside knowledge — that the text was appropriated, not written by Baldessari. While the painting exposes the ridiculousness of the original text, it also marks a boundary between those who know and those who don't.

Brown, another Los Angeles artist, takes this idea of the inside joke to elaborate extremes. His detailed works riff on the recognizable styles of famous artists such as Jackson Pollock, Henri Matisse and, yes, John Baldessari, with a single, signature difference: each piece includes a reference to a chain saw.

An avid collector of anything having to do with chain saws — he owns more than 150 chain saw toys — the 56-year-old artist sees the works less as a love letter to power tools than as an *homage* to the art he loves. To that end, he does extensive research into the artists he mimics: He studied footage of Pollock making his drip paintings before he attempted his own version and employed the same neon fabricator as Bruce Nauman. "If one of those artists had actually done them, it would look just like that," he says of his creations — except of course, for the chain saw.

Brown sees the ubiquitous power tool as a non sequitur that might prompt people to question the authenticity of the works. "I almost want them to be a little bit confusing, like you weren't sure what you just saw," he says.

But one gets the sense that for Brown, it's even better if people

don't catch on. He gleefully recounts stories of those he has fooled, including an Orange County critic who saw the works at Cal State Fullerton last year and assumed they belonged to a rich collector with a penchant for chain saws. Still, most of the artists Brown copies are so recognizable that most people get the joke. "The museum told me that they never had a show where there were so many people who left smiling," he says.

Of course, using humor to deflate the pretensions of the art world is nothing new. Since 1917, when Marcel Duchamp put a urinal on a pedestal and signed it with a pseudonym, artists have been poking fun at the definition and conventions of art. But despite a lineage that runs from Dada and Surrealism through Fluxus, Pop art and much contemporary performance and video, the discussion of humor in art is still something of a neglected subject.

"Humor is still regarded as associated with entertainment value, so to talk about art as entertaining kind of simplifies things," says Sheri Klein, professor of art education at the University of Wisconsin-Stout and author of the book "Art and Laughter." She thinks artists, curators and art historians might be reluctant to talk about an artwork's humorous aspects because they're afraid it won't be taken seriously.

This concern has to do with class distinctions that date back to Western art's aristocratic heritage. "Long ago, when all the rich people wanted to make paintings of themselves, smiling was not something you did in a painting," says Klein. "It was something that the lower class did when they got drunk and had their carnivals."

Yet art seems to get more carnivalesque every day. In a kind of concentric three-ring circus, the Museum of Contemporary Art recently hosted a taping of the soap opera "General Hospital" in which actor James Franco played an artist. Franco also declared the taping a performance art piece, which he documented in a film that also will be shown at the museum.

Another show at MOCA, "Any Ever," is a suite of new works by Trecartin, whose manic, ultra-contemporary videos have been described by Times writer Jori Finkel as "demonically funny."

Trecartin, 29, who lives itinerantly in cities from Philadelphia to Miami and now Los Angeles, is part of a generation of artists for

whom humor no longer carries a stigma, says Jon Davies, who co-curated "Any Ever" at the Power Plant in Toronto last spring. Instead, hilarity is just one of many emotions that flit across the screen. "He is very interested in these very complicated states of not knowing how to feel or feeling lots of different things at the same time," says Davies.

He adds that much of the works' humor springs from the juxtaposition of disparate voices, objects and ideas. Sprinkled with cheap digital effects, even cheaper furniture and ever-morphing personalities who speak a patois of clichés, acronyms and buzzwords, the videos are fast-paced, resolutely physical condensations of our sprawling media landscape. "His work is very much just trying to reckon with this overload and represent how all that information has an effect on human bodies," Davies says.

Trecartin, unlike many video artists, has posted several of his works in their entirety on YouTube, and it's tempting to suggest that his work in some way bridges the gap between art and pop culture. But Davies maintains that it does more than simply add to the media glut. "He is really playing a role in shaping how we view this material," he says, adding that the work, which has become faster and faster over the years, "almost forces your brain and body to adapt to it."

Klein agrees that while contemporary artists increasingly blur the line between art and entertainment, humor still functions differently in the two realms. "The aim in humor for entertainment is to help us forget our troubles," she says. "The role of humor in terms of art is awareness and liberation and change. So I think the outcomes or the aims are different, but the techniques might be the same."

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