

Have You Heard the One About the Urinal?

By Kris Wilton
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NEW YORK— Humor, really, is a lot like art: it's attempted by many but mastered by few; it defies definition and bristles at classification, but you know it when you see it; it can distract, enlighten, or offend; it's subjective, messy, and often doesn't make sense. Humor is also harder than it looks, which could also be said of injecting humor into art. What, after all, makes a painting or sculpture funny? Subject matter? Point of view? Is Duchamp's urinal funny? Or just art?

"Knock Knock: Who's There? That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore," a new show currently on view at Fred Torres Collaboration in Chelsea and Armand Bartos Fine Art on the Upper East Side, brings together more than 75 works — beginning with Duchamp — to examine not only how humor functions, but to what end. In curating the show, the galleries' respective directors, Elana Rubinfeld and Sarah Murkett, waded through works by 400 artists looking for examples seem funny on first glance and that "then hit you with something else," Rubinfeld told ARTINFO.

"The show really isn't just about humor," says Murkett, "but about using humor to get at something deep in the human experience."

The show presents a taxonomy of different types of humor: absurdity, slapstick, conceptual jokes, intellectual ones, irony, hyperbole, caricature, gallows humor. There's something for every funny bone.

The uptown portion favors Dadaism, Surrealism, and more juvenile, bodily humor, as in three Martha Rosler collages that paste naked breasts on clothed catalog models. Funny! Larry Miller's *Orifice Flux Plugs*, a handy kit in a plastic case, is filled with everyday objects from the expected to the bizarre that could be used as the title describes. It includes a cigar, a tampon, a baby's pacifier, a plastic saxophone, a bean, a bullet, and a light bulb. Robert Watts's scientific-looking *Booger Sizing Chart*, 1986, comes complete with models of noses.

The downtown space centers on self-deprecation, pratfall humor, and more conceptual work, aiming for more of a "party" atmosphere, Rubinfeld says. Guy Richard Smit combines self-parody and stand-up in *In Purgatory*, a five-minute video showing his mouthy artist alter-ego lambasting the art world — a real treat for its inhabitants, as always. Lee Materazzi has contributed photographs of re-enacted home disasters in which the subjects have fallen and entangled themselves with items like a ladder and a laundry drying rack. Nearby, David Humphrey's sculptures *Puppies* and *Dogs and Chicks*, both 2009, feature stuffed animals in sexy, oddly precarious positions.

The works range from art historical pieces, like a 1930 version of Duchamp's *Mona Lisa*—appropriation *L.H.O.O.Q.* (the letters, read aloud as "Elle a chaud au cul," meaning "she's hot in the ass," or horny), to emergent ones, often mapping lines of influence between them.

Among the great pleasures at Fred Torres are Kris Porter's lively, meticulously drafted grotesqueries, which clearly owe a debt to cartoonist R. Crumb, himself represented here by two nearby drawings. Similar parallels are sprinkled throughout two galleries. For example, uptown, Duchamp appears in a 1924 photograph by Man Ray, his face and head covered by shaving cream; downtown, Justin Cooper's photographic self-portraits depict his face — and identity — completely obscured by a stack of leis in one and a plastic bag of seashells in another.

Shannon Plumb's *Commercials* is another treat, showing the plucky video artist transforming herself, Cindy Sherman-style, into a troupe of characters advertising everyday objects in flickering old-time silent video, paying homage to Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin.

Self-portraiture runs throughout the show, much of it disguised and much of it apparently stemming — like a lot of humor — from personal pain. Philip Guston, like Cooper and Duchamp, presents himself masked; Armen Eloyen and William Pope.L respectively appear as a wooden figure and a worm-like creature. Kate Gilmore's video *Star Bright/Star Might*, 2007, shows the artist trying to push her face through a star-

shaped hole, evoking empathy and pathos more than snickering.

Some of the most recent works take a postmodern approach to visual humor, adding unexpected details to established visual forms. At Fred Torres, David LaChapelle updates inappropriately booze-filled family snapshots from the 1960s and 1970s with even more inappropriate elements, like a man feeding beer to a dog or wielding a gun. Uptown, Marc Dennis reimagines clouds as the thought bubbles of birds in his 2008 “Bird Thinking of a Cloud” series.

Some of the works are laugh-out-loud funny. Some, particular those by Dada and early conceptual artists, raise an eyebrow, and others, applying humor to difficult situations, leave the viewer with knots in his stomach, as in the case of Rachel Owens’s unsettling contributions. Owens modifies the front pages of newspapers, ostensibly to soften the bad news by, for instance, drawing funny hats on George W. Bush, and his cronies. However, her attempts at whimsy only serve to present the headlines — as in *September 5, 2005*: “New Orleans Begins a Search for Its Dead” — in sharper, more painful contrast.

Some of the most enjoyable works in the show, meanwhile, are not intended to be funny at all, like Claes Oldenburg’s *Miniature Soft Drum Set*, a floppy sagging tabletop sculpture made of canvas, rope, and wood. When the curators contacted Oldenburg’s studio to see about getting an example from the edition of 200, they were soberly informed that Oldenburg’s work isn’t funny. Really? A droopy drum you can’t work a beat out of isn’t funny? Then it’s depressing — occupying the other side of the broad line explored in this show.

“Knock Knock Who’s There? That Joke Isn’t Funny Anymore,” at Fred Torres Collaborations and Armand Bartos Fine Art, runs through April 9.

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