

The Art of Funny: Cartoon Imagery, Often With an Edge

The prevalence of humor in today's art might be historically unprecedented. In Western tradition up to the 1960s, comic art was always a minor genre.

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ART REVIEW

Now, many of our most celebrated artists work in a comical vein. Jeff Koons, Cindy Sherman, Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, among others. This is something to ponder and "Puddle, pothole, portal" at the elegantly expanded SculptureCenter offers a good occasion for doing so.

As an art show, it's an uneven, haphazard affair. But because it presents so many different kinds of visual and conceptual humor among works by 23 artists, it's worth leaving aside questions of aesthetic quality to consider the ways and whereof of funny art.

The show was organized by Ruba Katrib, the center's curator, and the artist Camille Henrot. They were inspired by the movie "Who Framed Roger Rabbit" and by the visionary cartoonist Saul Steinberg.

"Puddle, pothole, portal" runs through Jan. 5 at SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens; 718-361-1750, sculpture-center.org.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GRIMM GALLERY, JASON MANDELLA

Mick Peter's "Albert and Jenny," 2011. The exhibition focuses on paradox and exaggerated scale.

One room presents works by Steinberg. "Bank Street (Three Banks)" pictures what might be a terrorist attack: A nervously sweating soldier crouches in an intersection where anthropomorphic rabbits and a miniskirted woman lie dead in the street. A row of bank buildings hints at a possibly nefarious

bigger picture of money and politics. Made in 1975, it's as relevant today as it ever was.

Jordan Wolfson's scatological montages of photographic and cartoon images annotated by vulgar bumper stickers connect to the "Roger Rabbit" mix of animation and real-life action, but his expression of anxiety in a time of sexual consumerism has a much harsher edge.

The painter Jamian Juliano-Villani revels in cartoon imagery. "Roommate Problems" depicts the suicide by hanging of a pair of '60s-style bell-bottom trousers. Mick Peter's sculptures have sketchy, New Yorker magazine-style caricatures drawn on shaped, free-standing slabs, wedding Modernist abstraction and middlebrow illustration. Riffing on Minimalism, Marlie Mul's large, free-standing transparent panels have cartoon pink bandages painted on them, as if they'd suffered multiple cuts and bruises.

Consisting mainly of three-dimensional objects, the exhibition focuses on comedic art's structural properties like paradox, exaggerated scale and dysfunctional mechanics.

Animation appears in various forms. A short film loop by Mark Leckey focuses on the tail of Felix the Cat appropriat-

Puddle, pothole, portal
SculptureCenter

ed from old cartoons. It's just a fat black line, but appears to be dancing as if imbued with an exuberant life of its own. Antoine Catala's robotic machines inch across the gallery floor like turtles and stop helplessly when they hit a wall.

In several places, pieces of clear glass resembling spurts of water project from pipe fittings attached to walls. Made by Win McCarthy, they suggest that the walls are full of water as if in a dream.

Olga Balema's Minimalist hybrids of paintings and sculpture have thick membranes of painted rubber stretched around bent and twisted frames of metal rod. It's as if they were wrestling themselves away from the strictures of the flat rectangle.

A nearly 50-foot-tall assemblage by Chadwick Rantanen is made up of curvy, wooden desktops. It has telephone handsets hanging from spiral cords, ballpoint pens dangling from thin chains, and other pieces of office equipment attached. It's funny to think of it in relation to "Endless Column," Brancusi's monument to infinite possibility. Mr.

Rantanen's sculpture celebrates the infinitude of bureaucratic drudgery.

An installation by Judith Hopf has two-by-four studs framing a pair of glass doors. Look again, and you see that the handle on one door is actually a cartoon drawing. The doors are non-functional, but you can pass between the studs. This exemplifies a simple principle: Humor leads you to expect one sort of thing and then delivers something delightfully different.

The comedy isn't necessarily in the immediate object, however. A small sculpture by Lina Viste Gronli is a construction of black lengths of wood joined in a configuration like a capital "G." The punch line is in the title: "G is for Getting a Divorce (Home Edition)." What initially appeared to be a banal minimalist sculpture is suddenly something else. Humor alters reality.

A skeptical critic might see humorous art as escapist. But there are serious lessons to be taken away from this exhibition. Comedy liberates the mind from the idea that there's just one world order, which is why fundamentalist and authoritarian regimes tend to be intolerant of humor. A culture that loses its sense of humor is a culture to worry about.