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Wouldn't It Be Funny If

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Wouldn't It Be Funny If....

A Senior Thesis by Taryn Sirias

May 2nd, 2014

Painting

Washington University

Abstract:

Examining both historical comedic development and personal conceptions of comedy in art, “Wouldn’t It Be Funny If…” explores the validity of the joke as a means of critical inquiry and communication between artist and viewer, and attempts to figure my own artistic practice in this larger tradition.

When I first viewed Adriana Lara's painting *Etre #2* (2011), I remember thinking to myself that it was the most idiotic work of art I had ever seen. Approximately six feet by eight feet, it depicts a highlighter green alien with highlighter blue eyes upon a highlighter pink background. If I overuse the word "highlighter," it is because the painting reminds me of the drawings a sci-fi obsessed former classmate used to doodle in his notes using exactly this instrument. Aesthetically, the work is undeniably juvenile. As I revisited the painting again and again, however, something changed. I laughed, first to myself and then loudly, brashly. My laughter was jarring in the sterile space of the gallery. I began to think not that this painting was idiotic, but that the situation in which I was experiencing it was idiotic. I began to think of the absurdity of art. I began to ask, how much work can a laugh really do?



Figure 1

Typically, my reactions to artwork are highly rational. That romantic notion of looking at a painting and feeling it, really feeling it in your gut, in your head, in your toes - that notion has always been alien to me. I look at a painting and I see a calculated assertion of a particular point of view. As a former employer once succinctly observed, “you want a painting that outsmarts you.” Can a laugh survive in this category? Culturally, comedy is often treated as a second-class citizen. For example, see the Academy Awards, an event that despite its spectacle professes to be a determinant of value and which, unlike its plebian cousin the Golden Globes, neglects either an award or consideration for “Best Comedy.” Comedy loses out in value to everything from hair and makeup to animation. But nevertheless there is a rich history of critic, curators, and artists trying to understand its machinations and understand the impact comedy can make.

In order to arrive at a place where it could be critically dissected, the comic first had to gain validation as a legitimate field of study. My question “how much work can a laugh really do?” recalls a similar question asked by Sigmund Freud. In “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,” he writes “Is the subject of jokes worth so much trouble?” (Freud 29). His answer is a vehement affirmative, though he suggests an end point to the efficacy of evaluating the joke. Freud writes that the criteria and characteristics by which we can define and evaluate a joke “contribute to our knowledge of jokes no more than would a series of anecdotes to the description of some personality of whom we have a right to ask for a biography” (Freud 29). In other words, to conceptualize of a joke as one would conceptualize its autonomous parts is to conceptualize of an individual as one would a police composite drawing. The sum is greater than its parts, and Freud is happy to allow that sum to exist beyond to realm of articulate-able reason. Ironically, he

provides an out for his own intellectual investigation and diminishes the immediacy and rigor of the comic as a field of study.

In the half century following Freud, as Modernism marched staunchly towards its apex, the pursuit of the comic subsided beneath the myth of the artist as lone visionary. This is not to say that comedy was not present in artwork, Alexander Calder's popularly enchanting performances of "Circus" (1926-31) prove laughter was alive and well, rather this is to say that comedy was critically regarded as incidental and non-essential. It was a nod to the populist appeal that had to be overlooked or even overcome. Look to Clement Greenberg's treatment of David Smith's experimental white sculpture: making the claim to serve the "law of modernism that the conventions not essential to the viability of a medium be discarded as soon as they are recognized," Greenberg strips the color, strips the incidental. Just imagine the rapidity and fervor with which he would have stripped the sculptures were they Pepto-Bismo pink.

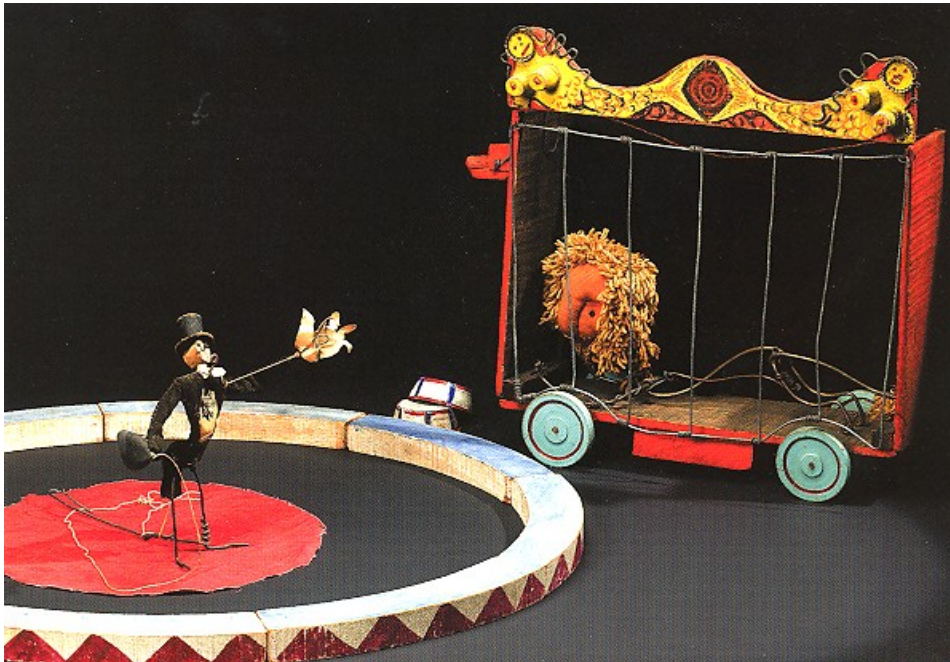


Figure 2

The sixties ushered in a renewed interest in the comic and in its capabilities as an instrument of *différance*. Kristine Stiles, writing about the Fluxus artists and their quality of goofing off, argues that “goofing-off requires developing a fine-tuned sense of what it means to pause long enough and distance oneself far enough from worldly objects and events to recognize their illusory dimension and thereby reinvest the world with wonder” (Stiles 52). If a laugh is the consequence of comedy, goofing off is food and fodder for comedy. And comedy, with its awkward, ironic, or bizarre juxtapositions, was seen as a mechanism to cleave open a complacent acceptance of artistic, cultural and political traditions. Andy Warhol’s *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* is the product of situations in which the participants were no doubt goofing off, and the book is uproarious. Yet it weighs heavily and probes into discomfiting negative spaces as excerpted here:

She said, ‘If you know life is nothing, then what are you living for?’

‘For nothing’

‘But I love being a woman. That’s not nothing,’ she said.

‘Being a woman is just as nothing as being a man. Either way you have to shave and that’s a big nothing. Right?’ I was oversimplifying, but it was true.

Damien laughed.

Taken from historical conversations between the artist and various companions, this conversation darkly speaks to the mythologies constructed around the artistic experience. These mythologies, as Warhol comically deconstructs them, insist upon romantic ideas of inherent meaning and of the artist as creator. The portrait of the naïve romantic viewer is

taken to an extreme when the woman speaks of the risks artists take. Warhol's "I" retorts, what an insult to "the men who landed on D-Day, to stunt men, to baby sitters, to Evel Knievel, to stepdaughters, to coal miners and to hitchhikers"(Warhol 68).

Since post-modernism, the art world is often looks like the subject of one long roast. As in any roast, we all have our favorite acts. My favorites tend toward those artists whose humor illuminates idiosyncrasies and structural faults but resist claims at complete artistic distance. Take Martin Kersels. His humorous physical gags illustrate imbalances in society, as *Tossing a Friend (Melinda)* (1996), but his corpulence, beyond serving as an instrument of the art, aligns him with men of power and men of leisure, those who he seeks to indict. Kersels tells a joke, but resists allowing himself to escape innocently, as would be the case if he wore a fat suit or hired another to act in his exploits. In addition to complicating what may otherwise be a didactic situation, the artist who employs this half-joke sympathizes with the audience. Look to Christopher Wool, commonly thought of an endgame artist or "one of many painters who have experimented with bringing their medium to extinction," and yet who still do paint (Smith). He emerged in the late eighties with bleak, satirical works stripped of excess and of the painterly hand. His works "looked unremittingly Minimalist, and skeptical in a way that painting hadn't looked for a while" (Smith). Though satirical and even at times laugh-out-loud funny, as with the infamous "Apocalypse Now" (1988), that Wool still works in the genre of painting, furthering painting, and even honoring its traditions aligns him with the viewer. It is if he stands beside the earnest gallery visitor, winks and say "Yeah, painting is all bogus, but I can't help but love it."



Figure 3

This winking gesture, from artist to viewer, is what has kept Adriana Lara's *Etre #2* at the forefront of my mind since I first encountered it almost a year ago. Like Wool, she continues painting while still pointing to the absurd and arbitrary nature of artistic value. It is with this simultaneously critical and sympathetic eye that I entered this final semester and began to paint. My present work is a series of paintings paired with a three-dimensional element. The paintings are renderings of doodles I made, silly, dumb things. One depicts a man with a nose shaped like phallus. Another an anthropomorphized upside-down pineapple whose leaves double as pubic hair. A third is a flat green background bearing the words "whose that hand" though the letter W is depicted with an extra peak. When the paintings are presented, the three-dimensional element is introduced. In the case of the doodle paintings, that element is an abundance of playing marbles scattered upon the floor.

It is an uncomfortable experience to write of comedy and to write of one's own developing art within the space of the same page. I feel as if I am presupposing a certain reaction, presupposing the existence of humor that may not be present, or at least may not

be present to the extent that I wish of it. And to that, I emphasize that though comedy in art is a prevailing interest of mine, it is only of comedy's individual elements that I can talk of in relation to my own art. These elements, to hark back to Wool, Lara, and the half-joke, are a sincere conception of painting as a genre and a critical eye to the structures and expectations surrounding painting.

The title of the series rests now at *Toys*, a nod to the notion of goofing-off as well as a descriptor of the juvenile sensibility of the works. During our last critique a fellow painting major referred to the paintings as "like baseball cards," and it is this description which I have found most useful. Like baseball cards, I mean for the point of the paintings to be drawn primarily not from the imagery upon them, but for what they signify. These are paintings of drawings, paintings that continue a tradition but do so by highlighting upon the arbitrary evaluations upon which the tradition is built. The pineapple is, to return to Andy Warhol's bemused nihilism, nothing. But to complicate measures, I do not sacrifice the value of the imagery entirely. These are still pictures that I hope get a reaction, perhaps not a loud guffaw, but a smirk or even a half-smile. The images are visual gags, but it is that gag that most adheres to expectations of a painting. It is the gag that is most sincere.



Figure 4

With the sincerity of the paintings comes a sense of safety or comfort as the viewer. It is because of this that I introduced the marbles. Relying on the possibility or perceived possibility of danger, I intend the marbles to activate the space in which the paintings are on display. To require attention to footwork, to one's physical positioning, to recall the all too cliché situations of slipping on marbles, losing one's marbles, and to distract from the viewing of the painting.

Something happens when the pieces are separated from one another and from me and my words; they subside into the territory of actual nonsense. I cannot hope for them to signify a larger structural critique alone. Is there a fix for this? Do I even want to fix this? As of right now, I don't have an answer. And so I return to the laugh, the sense of

humor, to the juvenilia, to the things that remain even when the works are seen in isolation. I am faced again with the question “is this enough,” with Freud’s “is the subject of a joke worth so much trouble?” My answer is yes. When we laugh, we enter the artist’s joke, and when we enter the artist’s joke we are made responsible for our reactions and the foolishness, bias, and base instincts that drive them. To quote Terry Gilliam, when asked about the controversy surrounding *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*, “I can’t believe what a timid people we have become. Offense is good. Offense makes people think. It makes people argue” (Fox 224).

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