

Wednesday, September 14, 2005

Remember laughter?

By Nadine Kam

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What if you opened an art show and everyone laughed? That's just what happened during Thursday's opening of The Contemporary Museum's latest exhibition, "Situation Comedy: Humor in Recent Art," much to the relief of curator Michael Rooks.

"I was nervous beforehand," he said. "I'd been working on the show for two years, which meant reading and reading and looking at still images, so you're removed from the work and then you start thinking, 'Maybe this isn't so funny.' But we were cracking up the whole time so we knew it would be good." And laughter may be just what the audience, and perhaps the nation, needs today. Ever since 9/11, it seems that the tragedies, losses and disasters, both manmade and natural, have been piling up faster and faster, a giant snowball preceding an avalanche.

Rooks had that feeling several years ago when he was working for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, charged with staging exhibitions "that were kind of heavy and dealing with very serious issues, like AIDS and war; issues that are very important and touch all of us in several ways."

But the human spirit can take only so much, and Rooks said, "After doing several of these exhibitions that were very heavy, I started thinking another approach is through laughter. That's how we mediate these kinds of issues in our daily lives."

With curator Dominic Molon and the sponsorship of Independent Curators International, New York, "Situation Comedy" was born, premiering at TCM and continuing through Dec. 31.



The ambitious exhibition encompasses video and sound installations, paintings, sculptures, drawings and photographs, and gives onlookers the opportunity to participate in a standard form of humor, becoming stand-up comics as part of Laura Nova's interactive "On the Spot."

The exhibition is divided into six sections that focus on different kinds of humor: slapstick, the absurd, parody, irony and sarcasm, jokes and bad taste.

The show will travel to Chicago; Winnipeg, Ontario; and Fort Lauderdale, Fla., through summer 2007. A 72-page illustrated catalogue includes an essay by the curators, as well as one by David Sedaris, excerpted from his book, "Me Talk Pretty One Day."

Humor -- so prevalent in theater, film, television and writing -- is often conspicuously absent from the visual art world.

"A lot of the humor is aimed at art and artists because they take themselves seriously and because the world takes fine art seriously, so it's a great target for satire," Rooks said.

At issue are serious divisions of class, sophistication and education. Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset address such issues through "Powerless Structures," a take on the wall-safe-behind-the-painting cliché. In the work, a replica of a valuable white-on-white canvas by Robert Ryman is "slashed" to get at the valuables hidden behind it, as a commentary on economic values, social status and post-modern art. The thief doesn't have a clue that the artwork may be more valuable than what's in the safe.

Kurt Cobain once sang, with a mixture of envy and derision aimed toward the blissful, unquestioning masses, "I wish I could be like you, easily amused."

An "art" crowd is not supposed to fall for the cheap laughs associated with slapstick, sitcoms and the like, but that's what happens as viewers watch Peter Land's many pratfalls in the single-channel video "Pink Space," where the artist, dressed in a blue lamé coat, continually attempts to take the comedian's stage, only to fall off each time.

The failures reflect on the artist's fears and feelings of inadequacy in light of society's expectation that he always say or do something meaningful.

Others viewers are reduced to laughing fits as they watch gallery goers take the stage in Nova's work, complete with curtain backdrop, microphone, mini stage, bad jokes scrolled on a teleprompter, and drumroll with cymbal crash punctuating the corny punchlines.

"Once you get past the jokes, there are serious subjects the artists are addressing," Rooks said, describing Nova's toying with individuals' insecurities.

"Public speaking is a horrifying thing for most people," he said. "Being 'on the spot' freaks us out."

But telling bad jokes is a self-protective measure, a way to mask or conceal the parts of our psyche kept closed to public scrutiny. And if the end result is simply that we can laugh at ourselves for a few minutes, that's all the better.

"Some of my colleagues did it together and it was so dumb," Rooks said. "When you tell the punchline you just think, 'I feel so stupid saying this.' "

An example: "I had a friend who was a clown ..."

"When he died, all his friends went to the funeral in one car."

Buh-dum-bump.

You have to be there.

'Situation Comedy: Humor in Recent Art'

On view: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays to Saturdays,
and noon to 4 p.m. Sundays through Dec. 31

Place: The Contemporary Museum, 2411 Makiki
Heights Drive

Admission: \$5; \$3 for students and free for
members and children 12 and under. Free on third
Thursday each month

Call: 526-1322

Also: Curator Michael Rooks will lead a College
Day walk-through of the exhibition at 11 a.m. Oct.
15. Free admission with college ID from 10 a.m. to
4 p.m.