

# ART REVIEW: GRINS AND GRIMACES AT 2 GALLERIES

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## ART REVIEW

### GRINS AND GRIMACES AT 2 GALLERIES

By SUZANNE MUCHNIC,  
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Oh boy, here come a couple of humor shows to help us ease into summer. It's the season for gallery jokes and tongue-in-brush artworks.

We'll go to the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA) to laugh with 43 artists in "Humor in Art." Then we'll drive to Molly Barnes Gallery to giggle with eight humorists in "Zany Cal-Aesthetics."

It's bound to be a hoot. How can we fail to be entertained by such proven wits as William Crutchfield, Bruce Houston and Gifford Myers, or a roster of artists that includes such outrageous pseudonyms as Irene Dogmatic, Madam X and Tom Foolery?

How indeed? Well, probably because humor is in the funnybone of the beholder, and even card-carrying comics aren't amusing all the time. More important, humor has a gritty underside as well as a sparkling surface. It can be abrasive as well as cathartic.

As it turns out, the two shows leave quite different aftertastes, even though some of the artists are in both of them. "Humor in Art," at LAICA through Aug. 15, oozes into the senses as a social criticism exhibition dominated by artists whose wit is a vehicle for hostility, fear, frustration or rebellion. It's a spicy, dry, sometimes bitter potion. "Zany



Michael Peed sends up a "Smoke Screen" in stylish wood sculpture at LAICA's "Humor in Art" show.

Cal-Aesthetics," at Molly Barnes Gallery through Sept. 5, isn't exactly sweet, but seems as frothy as a summer cocktail. Bubbling geniality and gentle irony make its shots of straight commentary glide down easily.

So here we are with two humor shows of nearly opposite flavors. Instead of being pacified by the elixir of light humor, we are stimulated by a fresh injection of an old question: What makes something funny?

Michael Kurcfeld, curator of "Humor in Art," says, "There are no pat recipes for humor, but its active ingredient is play." In a bright,

concise and well-considered essay, he suggests, "Humor and play feel good because they provide safe arenas in which to manipulate the forces that normally manipulate us."

Kurcfeld, a New West art writer, obviously takes humor seriously. He went to considerable effort to cover the wittily subversive front of both Northern and Southern California in assembling his large group exhibition. The problem with his choices is that some of the artists' concern with violence, consumerism, corporate tyranny and domestic strife overrides their twists of humor. Wit makes their desperation

palatable, but it seems almost beside the point.

When Robert Arneson draws a prickly face with its tongue out and shoves it at viewers, it seems an angry gesture. When Scott Grieger scribbles "The United States of Anxiety" in a map on a chalkboard, he's talking about a pervasive problem. Harry Lynn Krizan's designs for a "Robot Hunting Rabbit" (to run on Astroturf) and a "Freeway Dog Stroller" (canine toilet for cars) are chilling reminders of human domination of nature.

Ben Sakoguchi's barbed updates of orange-crate labels and Masami

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Karen Bresch's ceramic rooster as butcher's "Assistant" at LAICA.

# GRINS, GRIMACES

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Teraoka's perennially amazing commentary on the westernization of Japan sparkle with wit, but they never let us forget the intensity of their social messages. Irene Dogmatic's posteresque depictions of violence are just plain scary.

The show's conscience-rending atmosphere is lightened by such wacky one-liners as Karen Breschi's ceramic rooster as a butcher's assistant, a winsome family of chairs by Gary Martin and Gifford Myers' ceramic "Hedge" papered with dollar bills. Pieces by prominent humorists such as Roy De Forest, Ed Ruscha, William T. Wiley and George Herms are not their funniest.

One of the most interesting aspects of the exhibition is the way it picks up Punk, New Wave and expressionistic figurative trends among the younger generation. We've seen representatives such as Pierre Picot, Gary Panter, Robert Yarber and Laurie Pincus exhibited locally, but Michael Peed's wood sculpture is new here. His "Cigarette Girl" and smoking card players, painted in glossy enamel, put '30s theater and cafe folks in a package of primitive stylishness.

At Molly Barnes Gallery, some of the art and all of the artists are familiar, except Mark Kostabi. A young graphic artist who communicates clearly in spare line drawings, he has limned an ambidextrous artist on a large wall and a man turning into a ladder on a small piece of paper.

Simone Gad is here (as she is at LAICA) with characteristically tacky homages to movie stars worked out in naugahyde, plastic bric-a-brac and other materials chosen for their aesthetically offensive qualities. Bruce Houston (also at LAICA) looks purely poetic and amusing in trucks that stretch out for miles and go around corners. Rick Oginz's previously seen sculpture, "Painting as Theater," and his wonderfully wacky "Broadway Series" of drawings, done in his downtown studio, secure his place as a humorist.

In the back gallery, Ilene Segalove's 28-minute videotape is a poignant, droll, occasionally angry account of growing up in Beverly Hills. Segalove takes on classic-car traffic jams, designer labels, real estate values and Gray Line tours with such a deft touch, she ends up being both convincing and funny.

Humor is considered an embarrassment and a source of irritation in the house of High Culture, and its perpetrators are court jesters. They are on parade this summer, but they don't necessarily send us away laughing. They don't even advance a clear definition of humor. Instead, they suggest it's a matter of fantasy, surprise, ingenuity, timing and context, that its effect depends upon its audience's state of mind and experience, and that what's funny is still an interesting question.