



Title

Humour in contemporary art

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About the author(s)

Heta Patel is an artist based in London. He uses film, sculpture, photography and live performance to explore identity, often using the languages of popular culture to locate marginalised cultures within mainstream aesthetics. His YouTube channel can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4NC7vDIUpB_rplnrPEti9w

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Humour in contemporary art

by Hetain Patel • 20.11.2018

I am an artist, not a critic, and so articulating my experience of an exhibition through words has been an interesting challenge. Comedy has always been an important part of my life – from a young age Eddie Murphy's films from the 1980s showed me how comedy could be used to acknowledge racial marginality within the mainstream – but it was years before I allowed myself to include humour in my practice. Initially there was a fear that the art world would not take me seriously if I did. Quite honestly, there is a residue of that feeling to this day.

Humour can bring a directness to art that could be considered unusual in an art world that seems to enjoy indirectness, both artistically and professionally. And yet, the ability to see the funny side is vital to the human experience and, like art, is something that has the potential to bridge the manufactured divides across race, gender and class. The exhibition *Knock Knock: Humour in Contemporary Art* at the South London Gallery offers a refreshing selection of works by both established and lesser-known artists who use humour to create rich and critical works of art.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Saw*, by Ceal Foyer, at the South London Gallery, 2018 (Photograph Andy Stagg).

Naturally, I was not expecting a belly laugh, and indeed the show

provided none. Arguably, the main function of humour as a device in art is not to make people laugh, but rather to transport them somewhere else. Often socio-politically motivated, humour can provide a different perspective on or new language with which to explore already well trodden paths. A lot of art is witty rather than downright hilarious, and it is this aspect that the exhibition focuses on. Some of the most notably comedic artists – Doug Fishbone and David Shrigley, for example – are not included in the show.

So, if not for a laugh, what purpose does the humour presented here serve? Some works employ eye-catching, recognisable tropes of jokes and gags, such as Ceal Floyer's *Saw* [FIG.1](#) and *Mouse Hole* (1994). The Looney Toons slapstick of the former – a jagged saw emerging from the gallery floor, caught cutting away a perfect circle (for you to fall through) – and the latter's cartoonish trompe-l'œil provide a welcome rush of nostalgia, but they also open a door to engage with some of the darker, more politically charged works on view.

Eleanor Antin's *100 Boots (uncancelled set of postcards)* (1971–73), for example, displays postcard-size photographs of a hundred empty boots, documented on a journey across America. The pictures make absence tangible and collective, forming an effective protest for the politically silenced or invisible. Nearby, Barbara Kruger's *Untitled (We don't need another hero)* (1988) collages the title text with a black-and-white image of a man peeling a banana, playfully subverting the language of advertising to talk about gender and power. Hardeep Pandhal's take the recognisable from of comic seaside cut-outs [FIG.2](#), but his protagonists talk back, confronting the viewer with phrases such as 'gagged by English'. Each of these works use wit or inversion to highlight those people who are marginalised, suppressed or absent altogether. Art that employs humour can compel you to drop your guard, to wait for the punchline and move on to the next. Setting up this mode of engagement could have been a danger in this show, but there are enough politicised works among the one-liners to encourage the viewer to search for what is behind the initial lightness.



Fig. 2 Detail of *Konfessions of a Klabautermann*, by Hardeep Pandhal. 2017. Printed plastic and powder coated steel, dimensions variable (Courtesy Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival 2017 and Berwick Visual Arts; © Hardeep Pandhal; Photograph Janina Sabaliauskaite; exh. South London Gallery).

Some of the works included look more like what we 'know' as art – Harold Offeh's arresting and gently upsetting video *Smile* **FIG.3**, for example, shows his pained attempt at holding a wide toothy smile throughout Nat King Cole's song of the same name. Formally, its rawness echoes Bruce Nauman's selfie videos from the 1960s and 1970s, but with the important distinction that the close-up shot shows a black man, choosing to frame himself within contemporary art, struggling to please.



Fig. 3 Film still from *Smile*, by Harold Offeh. 2001. (Courtesy the artist; exh. South London Gallery).

Another recurring feature of humour is its realignment of the familiar. The exhibition looks at a number of ways popular culture is employed by artists, often using the recognisable in order to question wider norms or assumptions. Pilvi Takala's video work *Real Snow White* **FIG.4** covertly documents a young woman dressed as Snow White being denied access to Disneyland Paris. When she poses for photographs and signs autographs for tourists outside the main gates, staff from the park quickly emerge to order that she desist her 'disguise', refusing to accept her as the 'real snow white', who is, of course, in the park.



Fig. 4 Still from *Real Snow White*, by Pilvi Takala. 2009. Video (Courtesy the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa London; exh. South London Gallery).02. Detail of

Konfessions of a Klabautermann, by Hardeep Pandhal. 2017. Printed plastic and powder coated steel, dimensions variable (courtesy Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival 2017 and Berwick Visual Arts; © Hardeep Pandhal; Photograph Janina Sabaliauskaite; exh. South London Gallery).

Perfectly positioned on the top floor of the gallery's new annexe, and a natural end to the show, is *We also sell socks* **Fig. 5**, by Lily van der Stokker. The artist's shop-front style painting, which exclaims 'cheap artworks, easy to understand', succinctly addresses any dismissive correlations of humour to value in art – it gives words to what we could be thinking, and scolds us for it, reflecting on the economic value of seriousness in the art world. Not intended as a side-splitting finale, but certainly something which has kept me thinking since, Van der Stokker's painting provides an ideal, if indirect punchline for the show.



Fig. 5 *We also sell socks*, by Lily van der Stokker. 2012. (Courtesy the artist and Valeria and Greogrio Napoleone Collection, London; photograph Roberto Marossi; exh. South London Gallery).

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