

## FRED TORRES COLLABORATIONS

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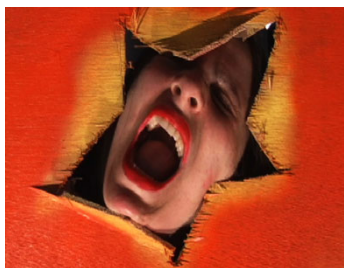


### Can Art Be Funny? By Anthony Haden-Guest

A witty new show celebrates Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, R. Crumb, and other artists who took on serious issues with a good laugh.

*Knock Knock: Who's There? That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore* examines the delicate relationship between art and humor, and—it must be said straightaway—you won't find it a laugh a minute. But that's not the point. Sarah Murkett and Elana Rubinfeld who co-curated the show in two New York venues—Armand Bartos Fine Art and Fred Torres Collaborations—make it plain that the intention is to explore the various ways artists have used humor to address more serious issues.

As such, the choices in the show are provocative but occasionally bear out the old adage: Dying is easy, comedy is hard. Many of the pieces are witty or droll—but they would be even funnier as stand-alones if they didn't have to compete with so many different comic voices.



I liked Justin Cooper's photographs of swaddled heads, the *Failure Drawing* by the always interesting William Pope.L, and David LaChapelle's subversive photographs—particularly one in which an un-punkish teen is giving a puppy a drink from a can of Bud—and also the cheerful vulgarity of Larry Miller's *Orifice Flux Plugs* and Robert Watt's *Booger Sizing Chart*.

But, as is inevitable at a crowded comedy show, I sometimes simply don't get the joke. Philip Guston's use of comic strip pictorial language has always seemed to me his way of establishing grim prole authenticity (like his cigar butts and hooded Klansmen), rather than as an appeal to the Comic Muse. And *Star Bright, Star Might*, the Kate Gilmore video at Torres, in which the artist is trying to deal with an obstacle, stuck me as simply poignant.

Delphine Reist's piece at Fred Torres—four metal stands blow party noise-makers every now and again—actually induces a laugh. And the stand-out pieces of the whole show are Shannon Plumb's videos at Armand Bartos, which are not only hilarious but made me wonder why more video artists don't exploit the comedy potential of the medium. (Bruce Nauman's *Clown* videos are terrific but funny? Nah!) Until I realized I knew the answer. A ho-ho joke can disrupt, as much as, say, images of explicit sex. Which, I suppose, is why artists tend to approach laugh-out-loud humor in such a gingerly fashion—American artists in particular.

Marcel Duchamp was up for it, of course. There are several Duchamps at Bartos and while his most overtly funny pieces could be painfully punnish—L.H.O.O.Q.? Please!—he also used plenty of humor in his readymades. "Humor was a sort of savior so to speak", Duchamp said in a 1960 interview. "Because, before, art was such a serious thing, so pontifical that I was very happy when I discovered I could introduce humor into it. And that was truly a period of discovery." Duchamp also credited Jean Arp with advancing the use of the joke. He wrote: "The important element introduced by Arp was 'humor' in its subtlest form, the kind of whimsical conceptions that gave to the Dada Movement an exuberant liveliness as opposed to the purely intellectual tendencies of Cubism and Expressionism. Arp showed the importance of a smile to combat the sophistic theories of the moment."

But artists in the United States have usually been cagey about humor. The New Yorker's late, great Saul Steinberg, would, I think, be generally described as a superlative cartoonist but Arne Glimcher of PaceWildenstein, Steinberg's dealer, observes that he always refused to be so characterized. "He saw himself in terms of Picabia or Klee," Glimcher says. "Early Picabia. He always rejected the idea that he was a cartoonist."

Similarly, I once actually laughed in front of a Neil Jenney canvas at a 2001 show at Gagosian—a real laugh, not the knowing chuckle you get from people telegraphing that they've got the point of some four hundred year old witticism in Shakespeare. But when I recently mentioned this to Jenney he said "I've always had a lighthearted attitude somehow. But I don't really intend my stuff to be humorous. It's supposed to transcend humor somehow." He added "When you make art you really kind of wish that it would be as profound as possible. And the humorous part tends to be a little on the superficial side to some degree."

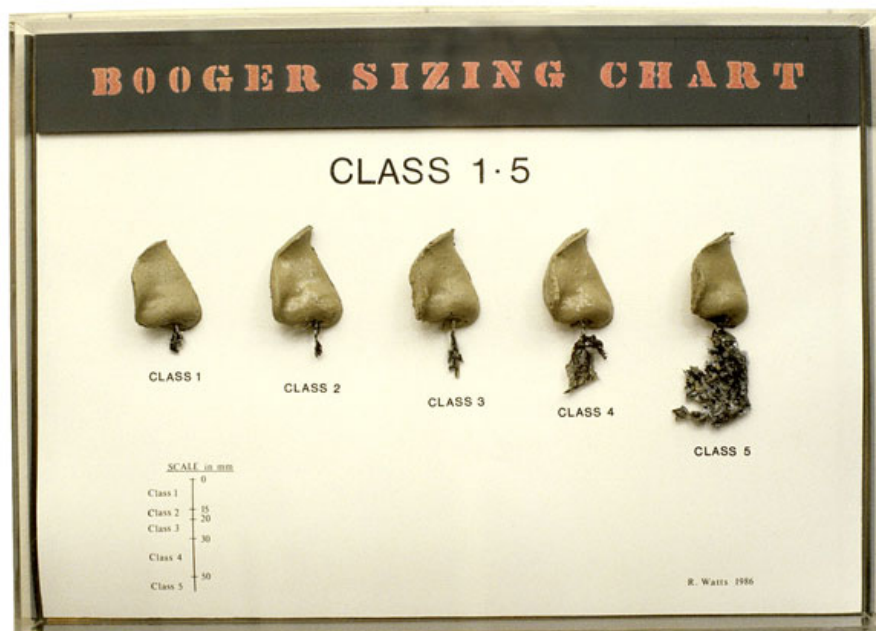
That's American artists. Euros clearly feel very differently. Consider Francesco Vezzoli. Or Maurizio Cattelan, many of whose pieces can resemble cartoons in existential quest of a caption. Or the sometimes savagely funny Chapmans. Or Glasgow's David Shrigley. Indeed as John Wesley, another potently amusing American painter, observed to me, "the worst thing you can say about a Briton is that they don't have a sense of humor."

Visit *Knock Knock*—it'll take you places the art world doesn't often go.

## Image Gallery



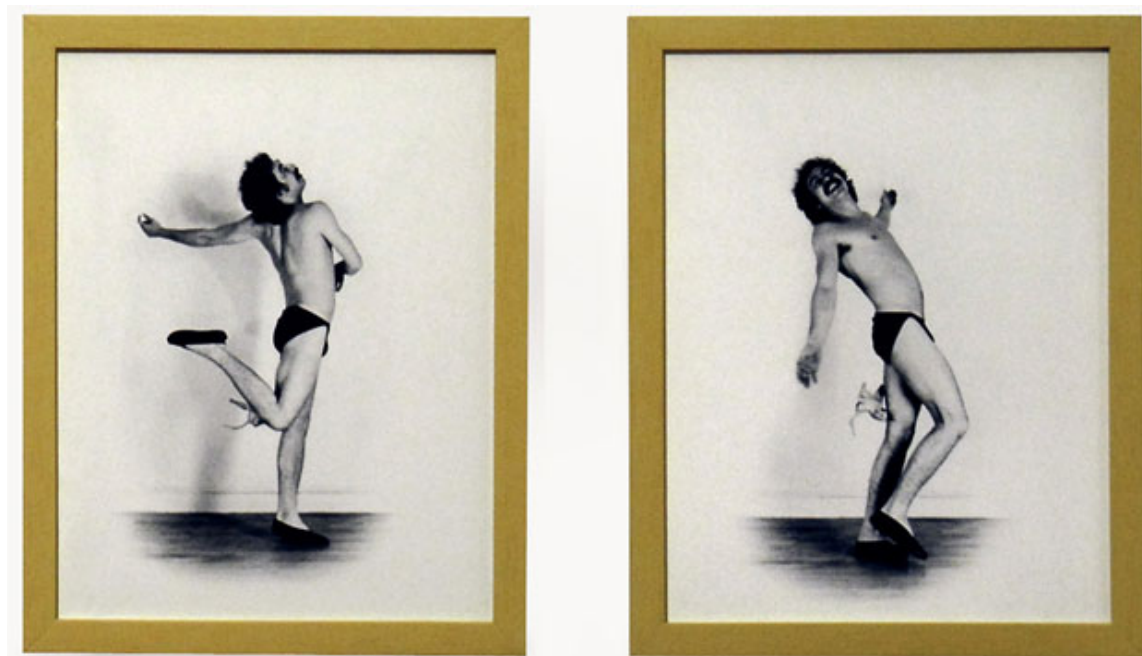
Kristopher Porter Untitled, 2009  
Image: Courtesy of Fred Torres Collaborations, New York  
Watercolor and ink on paper, 15 x 22 3/8 inches



Robert Watts, Booger Sizing Chart, 1986  
Image: Artwork Robert Watts Estate 1986/2010  
Mixed materials 12 1/4 x 17 1/4 x 2 1/4 inches



Rachel Owens, April 30<sup>th</sup> 2006, 2006  
 Image: ZieherSmith, New York & Armand Bartos Fine Art, New York  
 Watercolor on paper, 9 ¼ x 13 ¼ inches



Larry Miller, Chicken Little: Performance Stills from the Magic Dance, 1974  
 Image : Artwork Larry Miller, 1974/2010  
 Six Silverprint Photographs, 11 x 14 inches



Armen Eloyan , A while ago the elephant ordered the ants to make him a burger (I), 2009  
 Image : Artwork Armen Eloyan, Courtesy, Timothy Taylor Gallery, London; Armand Bartos  
 Fine Art, New York  
 Watercolor on paper, 16 1/8 x 12 1/8 inches



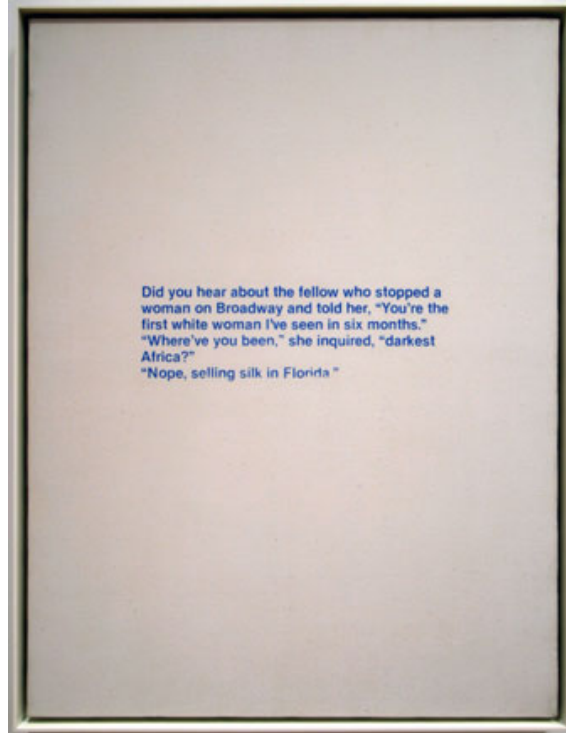
Martha Rosler, Small Wonder 1966-72  
 Image : Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell – Innes and Nash  
 Photomontage 24 x 20 inches



Man Ray, Self Portrait with Starfish, mid 1940s  
Image : Armand Bartos Fine Art, New York  
Gelatin Silver Print Paper, 4 7/8 x 3 3/8 inches, Framed 12 x 9 5/8 inches



David Humphrey, Dogs and Chicks, 2008  
Image : Courtesy of Fred Torres Collaborations  
Fake fur, celluclay, and hydocal, 39 x 58 x 17 inches



Richard Prince, Untitled (Silk in Florida), 1987  
Image: Artwork 1987 Richard Prince, Courtesy of Fred Torres Collaborations  
Silkscreen on canvas, edition 3/5, 24 x 18 inches



Shannon Plumb, Commercials, 2002  
Image : Courtesy of the artist, and Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York  
DVD video, 25 minutes, 37 seconds





William Pope.L , Failure Drawing #960 Worm Into Space, 2004  
Image : Courtesy of the artist, Mitchell-Innes and Nash & Fred Torres Collaborations  
Black Marker and Ink on Hotel Stationary, 5 7/16 x 3 15/16 inches

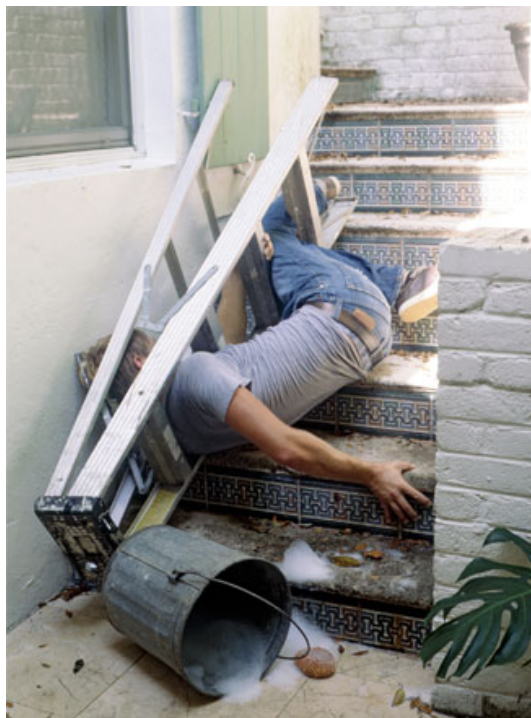


David LaChapelle, Recollections of America: Double Date, 2006  
Image : Fred Torres Collaborations, New York  
C-print, edition 5/5, 20 x 20 inches



David Kramer, Untitled (Boating Party), 2007

Image : Armand Bartos Fine Art, New York and Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris  
Oil on canvas and mixed media, 56 x 76 inch painting  
12 x 48 x ¾ and 12 x 48 x 1 ½ pedestal



Lee Materazzi, Ladder 2009

Image: Spinello Gallery, Miami, courtesy of Fred Torres Collaborations  
C-print, edition 1/5, 40 x 30 inches



Delphine Reist, Stifflets, 2009

Image: Courtesy of the artist, Triple V, Dijon, Fred Torres Collaborations  
Mixed Media, Dimensions variable



Kate Gilmore, Star Bright / Star Might, 2007

Image : Courtesy of the artist, Smith – Stewart, New York, Fred Torres Collaborations  
Single Channel video, 7 minutes 36 seconds, edition 4/5



Richard Slee, Atishoo 2008  
Image Hales Gallery, London and Armand Bartos Fine Art, New York  
Glazed ceramic and found objects  
Gun  $7 \frac{1}{8} \times 46 \frac{1}{8} \times 4 \frac{3}{8}$  inches, Flame  $7 \frac{1}{2} \times 2 \frac{3}{4} \times 4 \frac{3}{8}$  inches



Marc Dennis, Bird Thinking of a Cloud #15  
Image : Armand Bartos Fine Art, New York  
Oil on canvas mounted on panel, 9 x 11 inches



Justin Cooper, Untitled (Seashells), 2006

Image: Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago, courtesy of Fred Torres Collaborations  
Archival inkjet print mounted on Sintra, edition 1/3, 45 x 35 inches