

How the Art World Finally Started Taking Funny Art Seriously

For a long time, only a small number of artists who deploy humor in their work were given the spotlight. That's changing.



Gladys Nilsson, *Hoofers*, 1963. Image courtesy of the artist, Garth Greenan Gallery, and Parker Gallery.

By J. Cabelle Ahn
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If you spend enough time in the annals of art history, you'll find something (or someone) to laugh at. Humor was central to Pieter Bruegel the Elder's paintings of proverbs, which skewered human foibles and social

pretensions. Eighteenth-century British caricaturists such as James Gillray and Thomas Rowlandson used satire to make sense of political turbulence, leaving behind indelible images of Napoleon as an absurdly diminutive general. By the 1830s, French caricaturist Honoré Daumier had so brutally mocked monarchs and political leaders that he was imprisoned for “inciting contempt of the government.”

Less than a century later, Marcel Duchamp turned the joke on art itself. His pioneering works include *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919, a mustachioed copy of the *Mona Lisa* whose title, when read aloud, sounds like “she’s a hot piece of ass” in French. (The work features in the artist’s traveling retrospective, which opens at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in October after debuting at the Museum of Modern Art this spring.) Duchamp’s legacy shaped what kind of artist could be taken seriously for being funny. Often, they were white and male; usually, they were European; preferably, the work was conceptual. Think: Italian provocateur Piero Manzoni’s cans of purported excrement and Swiss artist duo Peter Fischli and David Weiss’s transformations of banal materials into high art.

“For a long time, male artists have received disproportionate recognition for their use of humor,” says Francesca Wilmott, curator of “Gleefully Askew: A Gladys Nilsson Retrospective” at Sacramento’s Crocker Art Museum (on view through Nov. 29). It is the first institutional survey of Nilsson, the 86-year-old member of the Hairy Who, a group of Chicago-based artists who blended Surrealism with the visual language of comic books.

Although institutions have intermittently exhibited artists of color and women who deploy wit, satire, or absurdity in their work—Nilsson, Pat Oleszko, and Mike Henderson among them—Wilmott notes that “the humorous aspects of their practices have often been downplayed in favor of their conceptual or formal qualities.” Only recently, she says, have scholars “begun to catch up with how women and artists of color have long wielded humor to resist systems of power.”

Atsuko Okatsuka, a TikTok-viral stand-up comic whose sets often focus on her experience as an immigrant, co-curated “Punchline II,” a group show on view at Boston’s Praise Shadows Gallery (through Aug. 8) featuring some members of this alternative comic canon, including Oleszko, Masako Miki, Liliana Porter, and Sarah Cain. Okatsuka sees the Internet as a way around traditional gatekeepers in both the art and comedy worlds. “If we waited for the ‘deciders,’ who are still not as diverse as you’d think, we’d make slow progress,” she says.

Part of humor’s appeal among artists then and now is that it is a subtle pathway to weightier subjects. “I never begin making a work with the intention of being funny,” says the Berkeley-based artist Masako Miki, whose exhibition “The Garden of Wandering Spirits” is on view at the SCAD Museum of Art this fall. Miki creates colorful sprites inspired by Japanese folklore and Shinto animism that appear goofy at first glance. But Miki maintains that her characters, like so many others, laugh as a way to cope with trauma. “Humor can bring us closer to the mystery of life rather than diminish it,” she says.

The paradox of humor is also attractive to the octogenarian Argentine artist Liliana Porter, whose miniature tableaux comment on the absurdity and futility of labor. “That closeness of opposites interests me,” says Porter, who is also included in “So Cute! The Art of Happiness” at the Louvre-Lens, opening Sept. 23. When she tasks a tiny figurine with cleaning up ink splattered across an entire wall, the line

between comedy and tragedy becomes gossamer-thin.

For Erwin Wurm, whose sculptures anthropomorphize everyday objects like purses and pickles, humor is bait. “I try to avoid describing my work simply as ‘humorous,’ not because humor cannot be intelligent, but because the word is too limiting,” he says. The artist, whose solo exhibition “Dreamers” is on view at Venice’s Museo Fortuny through Nov. 22, says that the concept can “function as a trap.” As an example, he points to his “One Minute Sculptures,” which ask visitors to assume strange poses with everyday objects for 60 seconds.

“Participants usually begin by laughing,” he recalls. “But one minute is longer than people imagine; the smile gradually fades, and a different awareness emerges. These are not jokes—they are ways of questioning what we take for granted.”

For some, however, art is simply not that serious. “I am not an angst-filled painter. I’m a happy person,” Nilsson says. “I’m very casual about what I do, and it comes out funny. That’s all there is.” Sometimes the best punchlines speak for themselves.