

ART REVIEW

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Pointing out creativity's goofy side

By Ken Johnson, Globe Staff | July 17, 2007

In 1982, Joe Gibbons was a patient at McLean Hospital -- the psychiatric hospital in Belmont -- where he'd elected to go as an alternative to prison for various petty crimes. While there, he typed a letter of complaint to the governor of Massachusetts on a paper place mat from the hospital cafeteria.

"The management is utterly irrational," he wrote in part. "They will not let us use narcotics or stimulant-type drugs here. Mr. Governor, this is the 1980s! The world is falling apart all around us. Not being able to participate in its deterioration only alienates us further. Nor will they allow us to drink away our problems, as if solace could not be found in a bottle. Where they get their weird ideas I do not know."

Evidently Gibbons did not post his missive because it is now framed and on view in a delightfully amusing exhibition called "Pull My Finger" at Allston Skirt Gallery . Curated by Boston artist Joe Zane , who, along with Gibbons, teaches art at MIT, the show offers a fine opportunity to ponder just what it is about humorous contemporary art that makes it so funny.

Although its title could lead you to assume otherwise, the exhibition is not an exercise in juvenile scatology. It does feature a Pop-style text painting by Carl Ostendarp in which exuberant cartoon letters spell "iffffpfp ," which might be read as mimicking the sound that would customarily punctuate the old "pull my finger" routine. But Ostendarp's painting, in rich hues of cherry red and bubblegum pink, has a formal elegance and sensuous craft that belies its dumb surface impact.

The show's spirit inclines less toward slapstick than a kind of hyper-sophisticated goofiness. In a four-part work by David Robbins , a publicity headshot of Jerry Lewis -- drinking from a mug with his own caricatured mug printed on it -- is flanked by framed pieces of black paper. The work's title, "The Sphinx," links two kinds of enigma: that of the comedian whose public persona hides his true inner self (assuming there is one), and that of the Minimalist monochrome, whose blankness might or might not conceal some inner meaning.

Tony Matelli's painted bronze, doll-size "Vegetable Man" also productively meditates on art and kitsch. The figure of a man composed of asparagus, string beans, a carrot, a cucumber, and other vegetables, it resembles a novelty item you could buy at a county fair. But it also alludes to the 16th-century artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo , who created fantastic portraits of people composed of vegetables, and it mischievously comments on the interplay of illusionism, abstraction, and physical materials that has animated modern art from Manet to Koons.

Humor in art almost always entails a surprising relationship between form and content. Jason Schiedel has set up a television on its side so that it plays a video of a rapidly scrolling suburban landscape at a near vertical angle. In it, the little figure of a flailing man careens at a frightening speed over the ground as though falling down the face of an endless cliff. This is somehow hilariously funny , like a scene in a Buster Keaton movie .

Humor is also often found in works that view the world from a seemingly naive perspective. Michael Smith , who is best known as a preternaturally gifted comic performer, video artist, and conceptualist, here presents cheerfully wacky, faux-naive cartoon diagrams in which it seems he's trying to comprehend various fundamental systems. In one, he associates the bodily actions of eating, digesting, and walking with the more abstract or industrial categories of receiving, storage, and distribution.

The one piece in the show that lacks a comically revelatory interplay of form and concept is a papier-mâché puppet made by collaborators John Bell and Isaac Bell . It's a sweet representation of the devil, but it needs a puppeteer to bring it to life.

If you have time, it's worth watching a 45-minute video from 1985 in which the late, great monologist Spalding Gray interviews the aforementioned Joe Gibbons. You will learn the origin of a photograph on view elsewhere in the show in which Gibbons poses with a painting by Richard Diebenkorn . Under the aegis of an organization of his own creation called the Art Liberation Front and the influence of a considerable quantity of champagne, Gibbons had "liberated" the painting from an exhibition at the Oakland Museum of California in 1977. It's a funny story.

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