



18 February 2015
by James Chute

Art imitates comedy



Curator Jill Dawsey keeps her eyes and ears open, and a few years ago, she started hearing artists and seeing art that was related to stand-up comedy.

“So many contemporary artists are talking about stand-up comedy, making work that references stand-up comedy or is somehow indebted to strategies borrowed from stand-up comedy or the aesthetics of comedy,” Dawsey said.

So she did what curators do: She put together an exhibition now at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. For a good time, and a whole lot more, stop by “Laugh-In: Art, Comedy, Performance” at the museum’s La Jolla galleries. Containing the work of roughly 20 artists in a variety of mediums, including video, it is at once entertaining and provocative, and at times more than a little disturbing — just like stand-up comedy.

When you think about it — and Dawsey has been thinking about it nonstop — art and stand-up comedy have a number of uncanny parallels. Here are a few Dawsey pointed out that are evident in this exhibition.

Element of surprise: “A good joke to me is like good art. There’s a surprise that takes place and we’re willing to go along with either the comedian or the artist. We’re willing to follow them, and in the best work, our expectations are subverted, or rather, changed. We see the world in a new light; that’s what a joke can do; that’s what art can do.” (You may be laughing at the beginning of Jonn Hershend’s deadpan “Self-Portrait as a PowerPoint Proposal for an Amusement Park Ride,” 2010, but you won’t be at the end.)

High anxiety: “There are increasing pressures on artists to perform, to sell, and to be entertaining, and so perhaps artists see a natural parallel in the figure of the comedian. There are also a lot of questions of voice going on and questions of audience. Is anybody listening? And what can and can’t be said in the work a given artist (or comedian) is making.” (You wonder what would have happened if Stanya Kahn had wandered around La Jolla rather than L.A. in a penis suit in the not-easily-forgotten “Lookin Good, Feelin Good,” 2012.)

Body parts: “A lot of the artists use their own bodies, or they photograph other people’s bodies or make videos, that are about performance in some way. So a lot of work in the show is about the performing body and the vulnerability and risk of being a body performing on a stage. Stand-up is also an embodied activity, and also very personal. It initiates this very intimate relationship, this very direct conversation with an audience.” (You had to like “post-backlashfeminists” Chan & Mann, whose “Chan & Mann’s New Fantasy (The Video),” 2013, amiably raised numerous hot-button issues.)

Challenging authority: "Stand-up creates this kind of other world in which common sense can be abandoned and hierarchies can be abandoned, upended, and the normal order of things can be upset. So it's a place to challenge authority, it's a place to talk about things that don't always get talked about, whether they are taboo, or whether they are simply painful to talk about." (Whether Eric Garduño and Matthew Rana's "The Right to Remain Silent Diptych," 2011, or Glenn Ligon's "No Room (Gold) #4", 2007, the exhibit offers a compendium of social issues, but in a surprisingly nuanced way. It's almost as if in the process of smiling or laughing, you're a little more open to what's right in front of you.)