

Aha!

Visual Wit and Humour

Galleries West invited Nicholas Roukes, author of the recently published *Artful Jesters*, to guide us through some of the wittiest work in the West

BY NICHOLAS ROUKES



Jim Picco: *Untitled*, 1997, Crayola wax crayon on paper

"The intuitive act of moving ink and crayons and oil paint on paper and canvas, and the serendipitous little accidents and surprises that occur is my prime motivation. Along the way, many of the things

I love or despise seem to end up on the painting's surface."
— Jim Picco

The funny thing about humour is, despite our society's remarkable achievements in science and medicine, laughter remains a mystery. Comedian Steve Allen stated that analyzing humour is like trying to grab a bar of soap in the tub. When you think you've got it, you don't.

Ironically, humour's catalysts – incongruity, ambiguity, inconsistency, mystery and contradiction – are frowned upon by serious-minded folk, but are adopted as working tools by humourists. They say all jokes pivot on the interplay between familiarity and surprise. A joke isn't a joke if the audience doesn't get it; if it doesn't have a frame of reference with which to make an analogy that prompts that essential 'Aha!'

ART HISTORY'S FUNNY BONE

Through the centuries, there have been maverick artists who have sought to amuse, provoke and enlighten viewers through visual wit. Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) painted grotesqueries of hybridized creatures and demons. Pieter Bruegel (1512-69) produced satiric drawings to expose the follies of his 16th century culture. Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1537-93), proclaimed centuries later as the progenitor of Surrealism, drew attention for his bizarre portraits comprised of fruits, vegetables and miscellaneous objects. Jacques Callot (1592-1635), a French engraver, presented comic fanfares of dwarfs, vagabonds and street people. Caricaturists Hogarth, Gillray and Rowlandson, among others, satirized the social and political eccentricities of 18th century England.

The classic notion of comedy considered its function to be corrective – a means of directing laughter at folly and vice so wrongdoers would mend their ways. The clergy preached the evils of humour and proclaimed it to be "the work of the devil."

Today, we've lightened up. Humour and laughter, say our psychologists, are not only wholesome and hygienic, but of crucial importance for the revitalization, transformation and celebration of life.



Bonnie Marin: *Peek-a-Boo*, 2004, oil paint and collage on board, 12" x 16"

"I love to use humour in my work. Cultural stereotypes, gender issues and clichéd sexual roles are my targets. In *Peek-a-Boo*, I took images from the Fifties and put them together to create a new twist and to show that the so-called idealism of the "Leave it to

Beaver" world isn't what it appears to be." – Bonnie Marin

Shows at Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art, Winnipeg, MB.

20TH CENTURY LAUGHS

Humour made a quantum leap into the vanguard of high art in the early 1900s. Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, Marc Chagall, Paul Klee, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Alexander Calder, Jean Dubuffet and René Magritte led us through an extraordinary century of visual jesting. It was a century marked by American Dadaism, based on the notion of ready-made art such as Duchamp's 1917 urinal exhibition; Surrealism in the vein of Miró's comic inspired fantasies; the caricaturish portraits and visual puns of Picasso; Dubuffet's anti-cultural Art Brut; and by the consumerist imagery of 1960s Pop Art. West Coast Funk became a playful and eccentric Northern Californian art movement, expressed for example in ceramicist Robert Arneson's visual punnery. Meanwhile, comic figuration made its way into mainstream art through such artists as Red Grooms, Peter Saul, H.C. Westermann, to name just a few.

WHAT'S SO FUNNY ABOUT ART?

The universe of humour is made up of many satellites such as wit, whimsy, irony, parody, satire and comic absurdity. Humourists elicit laughter by presenting inverted pictures of the serious world. Clearly, the genres of whimsy and comic nonsense have no axe to grind; their *raison d'être* is to provide momentary diversion from the world's troubles and woes. Parody and satire, on the other hand, incite laughter but at the same time tweak our conscience by reflecting our diminished humanity and its foibles.

Visual humour may sometimes be cruel but, paradoxically, it is invariably thoughtful – it always allows the viewer to have the last laugh.

VISUAL HUMOUR IN WESTERN CANADA

Humour is alive and well in Canadian art, inspired in part by international movements and by personalities such as those mentioned above, and by

various Canadian artists who, from the Sixties, dared to amalgamate wit and fine art.

The prolific and innovative art of Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal and AA Bronson (known as General Idea) immediately come to mind, as does the art of Iain Baxter, a conceptual artist who has been dubbed by critics as "The Marcel Duchamp of Canada."

The performance and mixed media art of Joyce Wieland, John Will and Clive Robertson, and the mail art of Anna Banana, Edwin Varney and Don Mabie recall acts of inspired wit and iconoclasm by Western Canadian artists who dared to explore unconventional pathways for visual creativity.

Today many of these same artists still produce their eclectic brand of art, now softened and made acceptable by time, and joining them are a legion of newcomers with styles that range from playful whimsy and tongue-in-cheek parody to thought-provoking caustic satire and outright comic nonsense.

British Columbia

Lisa Birke is a painter and sculptor whose art oscillates between humour and horror. Witty, humorous and disturbing images of techno-beasts and cluttered still lifes, which she calls "eye candy with a hint of acid," hint at our topsy-turvy ecosystem and at questionable practices for scientific advance. **John Gilbert's** humorous 3D "portraits" are the antithesis of conventional portraiture. Rather than laboriously representing the sitter's facial appearance, he puts together disparate objects which symbolize the sitter's hobbies, interests and peculiar predilections. **Peter Shaughnessy's** comic, hammer-headed anthropomorphic creatures parody social mores and conventions; the surprising juxtaposition of disparate elements and ironic configuration invariably prompt spontaneous laughter from viewers. The quirky humour of **Christian Nicolay**, invariably enigmatic and derisively mocking, is in sync with the artist's statement: "Without



Lisa Birke: Techno Spotted-Hyena Beast, 2003, sculpture, 18" x 21" x 21"

"The combined comic book aesthetic with everyday reality is explored in the army of my sculptural Techno-beasts. These beasts represent the next stage in the evolution of fictitious wild computers that have integrated themselves into the animal kingdom and are reproducing

exponentially. They are a humorous interpretation of computers taking over people's lives – mesmerizing the human race with their flickering blue hypnotic screens." – Lisa Birke

Represented by Bau-Xi Gallery, Vancouver, BC.



Jefferson Little: Sniff Life with Exit Music, 2003, wood, acrylic, oil paint, 9" x 12"

"Consciously or otherwise we attach meaning and significance to things and objects that have no specific meaning save a personal one. By going through a process of dissection and reassembly with these cheap plastic toys, I seek to deconstruct their popular identities in order to achieve a narrative of

pop imagery that is both familiar and frightening." – Jefferson Little

Represented by Susan Whitney Gallery, Regina, SK.

absurdity, humour or chance I could not wake up in the mornings, yet without structure, conscious goals or practice I would be lost."

Alberta

Among Albertans, there's **Jim Picco**, an intuitively motivated artist whose work displays a passion for irony and comic surrealism, and **Jeff de Boer**, multimedia artist and creator of whimsical 3D artworks which range from minuscule suits of armour for mice and cats to towering merry-go-rounds. **Pat Strakowsky** is a sculptor and mythmaker who displays a flair for making charming 3D narratives in a Folk Art-like style. Bronze sculptor **Reinhard Skoracki**, with a bias for dark humour, realizes his art in the form of bantam tableaux revealing hypocrisy and laughable mortal conduct. **John Will's** satiric performance art, mixed-media art, video, photo documentaries and word paintings dig sharply at North American culture. **Bart Habermiller's** ironic and invariably laughable site-specific installations such as *Firestone Falls* (1994), an installation comprised of hundreds of discarded automobile tires that seemingly fall from one gallery level to another, prompt viewers to ponder ecological issues and modern-day manufacturing ethics.

Saskatchewan

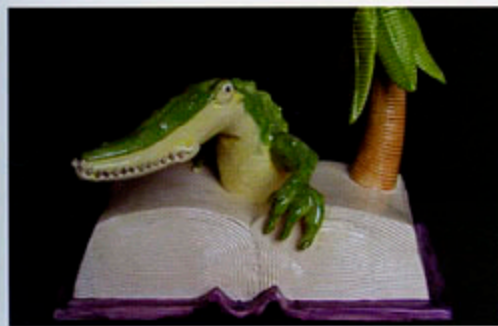
Garden-inspired art is the signature expression of Regina's **Victor Cicansky** (see cover feature), an artist who makes narrative tableaux of funny and sexy garden vegetables. In addition to his empathetic sculptures of farm animals, Regina sculptor **Joe Fafard** is well known for his clay and bronze caricatures of Saskatchewan townfolk and famous figures including, most recently, Stompin' Tom Connors (see page 44). **Jefferson Little** delights the viewer with sour/sweet puns and visual narratives which are enigmatic, yet evoke childhood remembrances tinged with angst and emotion. **Victor Tiede's** cartoon-like "animal-man" series

contains zany portraits that serve to remind us of our primordial nature. **Daniel Unger's** artfully composed compositions of barnyard animals and prairie landscapes, accompanied by provoking titles, invariably produce an amusing perspective.

Manitoba

Winnipeg artist **Jordan Van Sewell** perpetuates the legacy of California Funk art, particularly the imprint of Robert Arneson. His provocative ceramic sculpture is tinctured with a zany sense of humour. **Bonnie Marin**, also based in Winnipeg, evokes humour in her Pop Art-like collages, bookworks and paintings by juxtaposing images of popular culture with those of everyday circumstance; the surprising combination of images and wordplay is ignited by a facetious title. **Veronica Preweda's** tableaux of biblical scenes are made funny by the mechanism of comic displacement: Gumby, Lego, Pez dispensers and Fisher Price figures are freely incorporated in her art. **Blair Marten** is a politically motivated artist. On one occasion he orchestrated a hands-on workshop with kids and adults, inviting them to consider peace issues by transforming war toys into art toys – a slam at manufacturers and sellers of toys which symbolize violence and destruction as harmless playthings. **Les Newman** is a creator of flow charts, bar graphs, and atomic structures which portend to be diagrams of complex processes yet dissolve into absurdity with silly, contradictory titles. A complicated chart, for example has the byline, "Don't you know I want nothing more than to be nothing without you?" ■

Nicholas Roukes, well known in the field of art education for his lectures and books on art and creativity, is author of *Artful Jesters* (Ten Speed Press, Berkeley) and *Humor in Art* (Davis, Worcester). He is currently Professor Emeritus of Art at the University of Calgary. Visit: www.nicholasroukes.com



Jordan Van Sewell: *Terre Terrificus*, 2003, ceramic low fire, 10" x 5" x 7"

"The world has changed. It seems that no one is perceived to be safe anymore, anywhere. In a playful manner, this piece conveys the shift that has taken place. The reptile takes us back to our primordial beginnings when danger was real; crocodile attacks were quite feasible, not just something for the casual parlour reader to fret about. The

sophistication of literacy (conveyed by the image of the book) is no sanctuary. However, *Terre Terrificus* is just a piece of clay, right?"
– Jordan Van Sewell

Represented by Crafthouse, Vancouver, BC; Mayberry Fine Art, Winnipeg, MB; Lydia Monaro Gallery, Montreal, PQ.



Jeff de Boer: *When Aviation Was Young*, 2003, metal, paint, 20' high. Located at the Calgary International Airport

"There has always been a special place for humour in my sculpture. One area of interest for me is the toy because play is the foundation of creativity, and because a toy is an object from the adult world made small. When I designed my sculpture for the airport, I wanted to take this idea in reverse – take

the world of the child and make it big." – Jeff de Boer

Represented by Douglas Udell Gallery, Vancouver, BC, and Edmonton, AB; Wallace Galleries, Calgary, AB; Aura, Banff, AB.