Jennifer Mills: Art to laugh with (not at)

Gallery shows where laughter is encouraged

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The art world takes itself very seriously. Make that very, very seriously.

What little laughter can be heard between the white walls of the museum typically comes at the expense of art by people who don't understand it. Far rarer are chuckles that erupt with art rather than at it, not least because most gallery-goers either fail to recognize the humor embedded in works by artists as famed as Marcel Duchamp, John Cage or Gordon Matta-Clark, or else they're too apprehensive to acknowledge it when something artistic tickles them. When's the last time someone chortled appreciatively rather than derisively in front of Giovanni Anselmo's untitled granite pedestal of 1968, complete with a head of wilting lettuce lashed to its side?

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Too long, no doubt. And yet, against the odds, five exhibitions on display in West Loop galleries might leave visitors in stitches. (Might, because the subjectivity of humor is both its pleasure and its problem. What cracks me up might make the next person gag or, worse, simply move on. If I had a good sense of humor,
which, unfortunately, I don't, I would make a joke about the parallel between this equivocality and the one that exists in art. For what could be more individualistic than a person's preference for Matisse over Picasso, Jeff Koons over Damien Hirst? And that's just to list artists whose subtle differences make them natural rivals. The likelihood of the same person willingly entering an exhibition of Thomas Kinkade's work and one of Cindy Sherman's is about as likely as a person laughing heartily at both Chevy Chase and Sarah Silverman.)

So, where to go for a good titter?

Western Exhibitions has new work by Deb Sokolow, Chicago’s resident conspiracy theorist, whose dark sense of humor is matched by her bottomless distrust of every given history and institution she has ever encountered. In her trademark style of block letters written on hand-lined paper, complete with scratchy deletions and marginal notes, plus sketched and collaged evidentiary illustrations, Sokolow records her factual and increasingly insane conclusions about everything.

Most recently this has included the Philly cheesesteak sandwich and an international art thievery ring called the Association, which Sokolow believes recruits its accomplices via an isolated artist residency program in Norway, where the artist herself recently completed a two-month stay. Since bomb jokes made in airports are likely to get you arrested, and most conspiracy theory is too scary to really laugh at except in the most uncomfortable way, Deb Sokolow's drawings are probably as close as it is safe to get these days to yukking it up in the face of the rampant and generally unacknowledged corruption, deceit, greed and inhumanity that surround us daily.

ThreeWalls hosts not one but two funny, or at least partly funny, shows. In the project space, Andrew Norman Wilson coordinates regularly replenished hot dogs from Target, "borrowed" (read: purchased but returnable) canaries and North Face jackets, plus cat trees and other sundry objects. His humor appeals minimally to me, but the existence of fresh hot dogs with mustard and ketchup in a gallery seems farcical enough to warrant mention.

In the ThreeWalls main space, Jessica Hyatt presents a profound meditation on the multiple ways that identity is understood and represented today, from handwriting analysis and Facebook profile pictures to functional magnetic resonance imaging scans and handmade works of pottery and painting. There's nothing inherently comical about Hyatt’s investigation, except that she achieves it by endlessly copying out her own signature with the wrong hand, searching for dozens of other Jessica Hyatts via the Internet so as to pixelate their images into monochromatic, modernist compositions and building an ad hoc contraption for popping corn kernels individually marked with her initials. Visitors can pocket one or eat it. I ate mine. Visitors will also be surprised to find Hyatt’s exhibition replaced in its entirety by seven dreamy oil paintings of Conquer the Magic, a quarter horse bred in upstate New York by yet another Jessica Hyatt.

Meanwhile, Aspect/Ratio screens the work of Guy Ben-Ner, the Israeli artist rightly celebrated for making...
smart, irreverent narratives starring his own children. "Soundtrack," his latest video, borrows 11 minutes of frantic, explosive noise from Steven Spielberg's "War of the Worlds," then films 11 minutes of footage in and around Ben-Ner's Tel Aviv apartment to match it. He and his three kids are like foley artists in reverse, finding in Spielberg's high-tech auditory pandemonium the visuals of a blender mixing a veggie drink, a fly being swatted, dishes and flour crashing out of a cabinet, an egg frying, a vodka bottle breaking, candy falling, tin foil unrolling and other domestic commonplaces.

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