

Art

Funny as Hell

Cheekwood video exhibit features works that tackle disturbing subjects in humorous ways



Ryan Trecartin, *I-Be Area*

Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Dee, New York

Soaps, Flukes & Follies
Through Sept. 12 at Cheekwood

BY LAURA HUTSON

Just as a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down, comedy can make the unpleasant palatable. In art, humor has the ability to disguise dark sentiment for long enough to attract attention. The works in the current Cheekwood video exhibit *Soaps, Flukes & Follies* — particularly those by Kara Walker, Paul McCarthy and Ryan Trecartin — use humor to subvert, sweeten and transcend.

The setting — Cheekwood’s video installation gallery, a series of seven small rooms that were once the mansion’s horse stalls — seems oddly fitting for Walker’s video, *Messing Around With the Ebony Hillbillies* (2007), whose themes include racism and Southern stereotypes. Walker became famous for being the youngest recipient of the prestigious MacArthur “genius” grant in 1997, when she was 27. In this video, Victorian-inspired paper cutouts move like shadow puppets engaged in a heartbreaking, infuriating story of sexual abuse and child murder. The climactic scene involves a baby being cut in half with a handsaw. Like much of Walker’s art, *Messing Around* takes on sex, violence and race while staying playful — a useful tactic when you don’t want your audience to look away. But rather than lessening the story’s horror, the sweetness of Walker’s presentation makes it even more unsettling.

In *Family Tyranny/Culture Soup* (1987), McCarthy confronts the beast of inappropriate familial relations. An adult man on a television set with wooden-paneled walls plays with dolls. The oblique reference to *Mister Roger’s Neighborhood*, a sacred cow for those raised on PBS, lends the piece an innocent

backdrop that makes its sinister elements, at first, easy to shrug off. It brings out its audience’s darkest voyeuristic impulses, with just-out-of-view camera angles that make you want to crane your neck to get a better view. Because of the ambiguity of the artist’s treatment of child abuse, viewers are forced to make their own uncomfortable associations between bathing a child and abusing it. But when McCarthy squishes mayonnaise over a doll while chanting, “The daddy begets the daddy and the son begets the son,” or, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” his gravelly, Tom Waits-y sing-song betrays the concealed violence behind the piece. (Mike Kelley — a renowned underground artist whose work is featured on the cover of Sonic Youth’s album *Dirty* — contributed to McCarthy’s video.)

The standout piece of the series is Ryan Trecartin’s *I-Be Area*, a 108-minute celebration of teenaged hormonal weirdness. Themes of adoption, childhood and friendship are told in DIY design with over-saturated color, MTV quick cuts and chatroom syllogisms. Trecartin himself appears in several scenes, most memorably as Pasta, a painted-up hybrid of clown and drag queen, complete with blond bob wig, mom jeans and zombie contact lenses. There is a scariness that comes from the characters’ uneven over-exuberance, a controlled mania that Trecartin plays with in most of his video work. The lines are nonsensical but scripted; the players seem crazed but rehearsed. That conflict between madness and banality creates a kind of repressed terror that is far more discon-

certing than an outright creep show, the way that clowns are often scarier than Bigfoot.

Brooklyn-based art critic Kevin McGarry is one of the characters in *I-Be Area*. Coincidentally, McGarry was in Nashville recent to give a talk on art. We spoke about his experience on Trecartin’s set, and I was assured that, despite appearances, no illicit drugs were imbibed during shooting — just massive amounts of Red Bull. The characters all do their own makeup, and the script is doled out in tidbits as the shoot progresses — a line is given, quickly memorized and shot, then the next line is given and shot immediately afterward. This accounts for much of the disjointed action in the piece.

The remaining videos are just as engaging. Kalup Linzy’s *Conversations wit de Churen II: All My Churen* (2003) uses the aesthetic and language of soap operas, Eleanor Antin’s *Adventures of a Nurse* (1976) uses paper dolls to enact gender stereotypes, and Guy Ben-Ner’s *Stealing Beauty* (2007) stages a family sitcom in the middle of an IKEA, so that scripted dialogue is interrupted by the occasional real-life shopper wandering across the screen.

Curator Claire Schneider writes that “Generationally, nationally and culturally diverse, the artists in *Soaps, Flukes & Follies* all use humor as a means of teasing out life.” Schneider has chosen incredibly accessible pieces that complement each other in unexpected ways. (For example, the paper dolls of Antin’s early feminist work and Walker’s 19th century figurative cutouts bring up entirely new associations when paired with McCarthy’s and Ben-Gar’s fake children’s television. The feminine becomes the childlike, and sexualization becomes molestation.)

Art that tries too hard to be sinister is corny. When dealing with weighty issues, artists have to find a way to communicate with an audience without taking themselves too seriously — otherwise their art may be dismissed as trite or ponderous. There’s more than enough humor to keep viewers engaged here, but there’s no danger the more serious messages will get lost. Especially when seen in antique horse stalls with no air conditioning, the disturbing elements of *Soaps, Flukes & Follies* are uniquely uncomfortable.

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Paul McCarthy with Mike Kelley, *Family Tyranny* (Modeling and Molding)

Courtesy of Electronic Arts and Intermix (EAI), New York

