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CONTEMPORARY PAINTING AS HUMOUR

Charles Williams and Matthew Askey discuss Seeing the Funny Side

“Can a painting have funny bones? Is paint funny?... I dunno, I guess paintings are a bit like people... they might be inadvertently funny or wilfully & even skilfully funny, or funny in their unfunniness, but either way there’s an interesting area pertaining to life’s trajectory, personal baggage & preconceptions & privilege.”
- David R. Newton

“I don’t set out to be funny in paintings, but if funny happens I’ll embrace it. For one thing it’s a good hook into the painting. For another paint lends itself to the kind of knockabout humour I enjoy, pratfalls, banana skins, that sort of thing, upending expectation, it can be unruly, subversive, antic. And ribald, being so much of the body, so bodily humour. But in the end for me it’s always about the way the painting is constructed, some of the funniest paintings I have seen are abstract. And of course I don’t see myself as a comedy painter, temperamentally I think of myself as a tragedian, the paintings just come out funny sometimes. How sad is that?”

- Ansel Krut

Matthew Askey: Facing up to the limits of what we know, and who we think we are, our ignorance really seems to be an important starting point for painters today, especially those who are serious enough to grapple with humour. Why do you think painting in particular is such a conducive media for tackling the conflicts and contradictions of human life with humour? Do you think it is?

Charles Williams: I think it probably is now. Painting seems such a stupid thing to do when you could be earning money making films, or in the gaming industry. So why do it? The answer is in the combination of the sensual nature of the process (I don’t mean *“I love the smell of turps”* although I probably do mean *“I love*

the way colour suddenly seems to open worlds of possibility at the end of my brush”) and the conversation with myself, my knowledge, the things I’ve seen and thought about. It’s very subjective.

I paint because I like painting. *“What shall I paint?”* is the next question, and the answer often makes me laugh. It’s the laughter of recognition.

MA: When I wrote to the painters Ansel Krut and David R. Newton about the problem of humour I was wondering if humour in painting might be of a special kind? It’s unlikely to be laugh-out-loud funny so often. I wonder if there is a useful way in for us here – in the link Ansel makes between humour and tragedy in painting: do they seem to go together more often than not? Serious humour? The built-in inevitable failure of the task in hand – especially in figurative painting – in which the painting can never match the depth of reality it is a commentary on.

When I asked David about his painting *Forlorn Sandwich* he responded in his exaggerated gonzo style: *“To be honest, it doesn’t make me howl with laughter or sorrow but its contextual dalliance with the idea of Romanticism misconstrued or reaffirmed & offered up as a dejected BLT, on its load-bearing crust & way past its sell-by date, feels funny & maybe somewhat prescient... read into that what ya will.”* And he referenced the famous painting of Chatterton, lounging and dejected, and of it being a sort of mug-shot: a portrait. I find the idea of a painting of a sandwich being a portrait exploring universal human themes to be satisfyingly amusing – does that get us any nearer to how painters can use humour? Could a photo of the same sandwich achieve the same thing? Is there an echo of the tragedy of painting falling short in the humour and triumph of what the imagination can do through painting? Or is the humour part always separate from the painting part?

CW: I think that humour is never separate from the activity and the



Opposite:

David R. Newton
Casualties of Art
2021
Acrylic on canvas board
60 x 50 cm

Courtesy of the artist



Ansel Krut
Napoleon on Elba
 2008
 Oil on canvas
 100 x 100 cm

Courtesy of the artist



Sue Williams
The Relatives in Yellow
 c.1997
 Oil on canvas
 38.1 x 43.8 cm

Photo by John Berens
 Courtesy of 303 Gallery, New York

material. When David writes to you that “*Painting is good friends with uncertainty & vagueness, atmospheric tone & associative triggering*” this reminds me of Michel Houellebecq calling painting, like poetry, an art of juxtaposition. Perhaps entanglement, too.

Entanglement means bringing in all sorts of things to the feast. Maybe that’s a way of looking at people like Frank Stella in terms of humour – like a laconic comedian, issuing one-liners with huge pauses between them, paring

back but still entangled with the material. And you’re right, there’s always failure built in. This might relate to Matthew Collings’s lovely statement “*I think the history of painting is full of something like a visual version of wit, because it’s all about visual intelligence – you see rhythms whether it’s Joan Mitchell or Brueghel, that are so felicitous and apparently unconscious and spontaneous, and it makes you smile. That’s something like humour, I guess. I don’t think actual jokes in painting have any more interest or value than jokes in any other context. Painting is a form in itself, even if*



Thomas Hess on Willem de Kooning's *Woman, I*: "she represents many things, but one of her aspects, surely, is that of the Black Goddess: the mother who betrays the son, gets rid of the father, destroys the home. Facing this image and getting beyond it, perhaps, was one of the reasons that it took so many months to finish *Woman, I*. ...de Kooning has made the same complaint about the reception of the *Women* series as Joyce did about critical attacks on *Ulysses*: nobody even noticed that it was funny. There is something comical about the evocation of a Black Goddess anyhow – like a fifty-year-old man complaining that when he was five his mother broke his bow and arrows. He still may feel the punishment, but he has to laugh at the same time. Hilarity is a balance to horror – and so is banality."

Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1969

Willem de Kooning
Two Women in a Landscape
 c.1976
 Oil and charcoal on paper
 mounted on canvas
 76.5 x 88.9 cm

Private collection

it's a very diverse form. There's no point in it also being a joke."

I think that last line means that it's already pretty funny. There are probably too many different ways of thinking of humour to be definitive about it, anyway; there's parody, satire, slapstick (David's keen on this), there's mocking gently, there's grotesquerie and caricature, there's (my personal favourites) irony, double entendre, and innuendo; there's broad humour, there's referential and self-referential, there's the humour of the unexpected, the expected, the expected-but-in-the-wrong-order, there's repetition, there's sexual comedy, edgy humour, repetition (it's cheap, but it's effective), there's wit in execution and there's simply playing the fool.

But these aren't it. Painting is full of humour because it is a flat thing that pretends to be a deep space with real forms in it. In Plato's description of the painting competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, Zeuxis' response to the trick that Parrhasius plays on him is to laugh, because it's a good trick. It's a laugh of recognition. Art is only artifice. Perhaps that's why Ansel feels so tragic. Lots of people want depth from it, but it is only a surface thing.

Returning to David's sandwich, which is only one small part of an incredibly fertile oeuvre that includes reference to cowboys and Top-Cat, the slave trade, pub-signs, muscle cars, and corned beef; bloody hell, it must be like Steptoe's yard in his mind. One of the reasons that it's so good is that it rattles so many cages of allusion. It could be a seventies abstraction whose painter is too po-faced to accept its resemblance to his lunch, or a painting of an Oldenburg *gargantuan*, its tongue lolling suggestively at us. It's a smorgasbord of reference: an open sandwich of suggestion.

MA: So painting's unique gift to us is that it can become many things all at the same time, even contradictory things. It defies logical thought and instead accesses



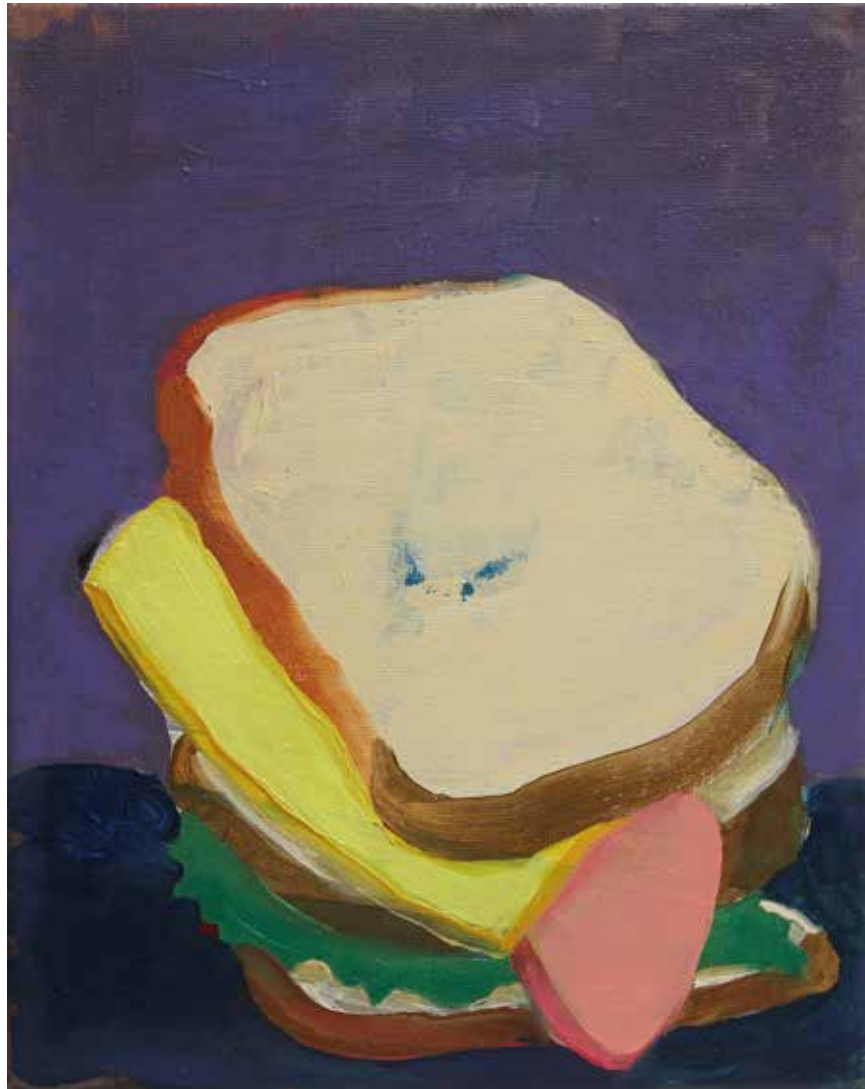
the deep mind through suggestion and unspeakable truth. Perhaps the intimate, bodily, reflective, interior, and personal nature of painting makes it also very conducive to story and symbol as a way of engaging with the difficult or unpalatable. I'm thinking of painting's ability to embrace horror and beauty at the same time – comedy and tragedy belonging together in this way.

I'm reminded of a scientific definition of laughter which suggests its purpose is to signal to the rest of the group that something potentially threatening or dangerous-looking is actually okay.

MA: David thinks that painting is more than simply catharsis, although it can be cathartic, but that in the end, many painters employ humour not for serious philosophical reasons, or even to be subversive, but as a tactic in appearing relevant and fashionable. Are we living in a stage of art history where to make a straight, serious, work is laughable but to take on serious ideas via humour and irreverence is applauded? That humour

Charles Williams
The Haribo Goldfish Eater
 2021
 Oil on linen
 55 x 75 cm

Courtesy of the artist



has now become an underlying signifier? [as when David writes] *“There’s almost a pressure now to appear as aloof & as distant from straight sincerity in the way humour might be deployed in painting.”*

CW: That’s such a difficult thing to answer, because we are wedged into our time and culture, aren’t we? Actually, that’s why I go to art that is outside its culture or somehow separated from the historical canon, like Highmore’s *Mr. Oldham and his Guests* (1745) or Carracci’s *Butchers’ Shop* (1585). The first is an absurd memento of an almost offensively everyday event, and the second represents a political position utterly specific to its time but lost to us now. Yet

they both seem to communicate, to me at least. What it is they communicate I can’t say fully, but they certainly embrace horror and beauty. And comedy.

The trouble with straight sincerity is that, like humour, we don’t really know what it means. Lots of artists act sincerely, and, as Manet says of *en plein air* painting *“it’s easy to do it in the studio.”* A bit of gurning, pretend to stumble over words. Go on about how everyone looks down on you because you’re common. Use paint rapidly, childishly, or thickly. Pretend you’re playing. David doesn’t do these things, of course, and perhaps the need he feels to claim sincerity comes from the need to have his work taken at

face value: it wouldn’t be any good if the viewer thought the sandwich stood for, or was meant to represent something else. It’s a painting of a sandwich, first of all. It’s funny, but not painted to be funny. We make sense of the world using stories. Images in painting make stories. The stories exist in all sorts of ways (Ansel Krut’s claim that the funniest paintings are abstract ones), and on all sorts of levels, and in painting, the stories emerge on a flat surface, one form moving against another, in front of viewer and artist alike. We all see paintings from the same physical point of view.

This discussion now reminds me of the argument in literary studies between ‘symptomatic’ and ‘surface’ reading. The symptomatic reader says there’s a deeper meaning while the surface reader says maybe they just mean what they say. Maybe we just mean what we paint. But painting is an art of juxtaposition, and other subjectivities than the artists are brought to bear on it. A painting is an intersubjective object and, as you say, it can mean many things at the same time. Perhaps, rather than ‘deeper meaning’ there is just ‘other meaning’. The way forms lay against each other and produce narratives is perhaps where humour lives in painting. Sue Williams is another good example of this. Her earlier work was pretty excoriating but her more recent paintings employ an abstract language that teeters on the brink of recognition, sort of teasing you. As she says *“I paint whatever hits me as amusing or attractive. It’s really about boys, isn’t it? There’s a giant kangaroo with an erection. There’s a bomb. There’s a lot of penises, a lot of chicken feet and birds, legs and toes. There’s a little anus on parade. There’s Truck Nuts. A couple of them have hairdos. And there’s a labia. I used to be all fussy, now I can scrape something off and I can leave it. I don’t have to be tidy; I can let things happen.”* That loops back to what I was suggesting earlier, in that she is engaging with an emergent quality that is perhaps exclusive to painting. But at the

same time, letting things happen in the painting process can also mean becoming entangled in lots of meanings. Which is funny.

MA: Perhaps the painting as an object, being a sort of impossible thing – the visual mind seen inside-out – is a source of its humour? Painting is so revealing of the inner life and (in)abilities of the painter that it reminds me of the stand-up comedians who insist on oversharing personal details about their lives – the more deadpan and seriously this is done, the funnier it is. Perhaps abstract art really is the funniest art?



Matthew Askey
Popped!
2021
Egg-tempera
30 cm in diameter

Courtesy of the artist