

'California Biennial' Is on the Right Laugh Track

Art Review

By DAVID PAGEL
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Laughter comes in all shapes and sizes, and you don't need to be a rocket scientist to know the difference between nervous titters, polite ha-has and gleeful giggles. The same goes for the "2002 California Biennial" at the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach, where slapstick, parody and comic relief compete for your attention.

If this user-friendly exhibition, organized by curators Elizabeth Armstrong and Irene Hofmann, had a subtitle, it would be "Gags, Pranks and Jokes."

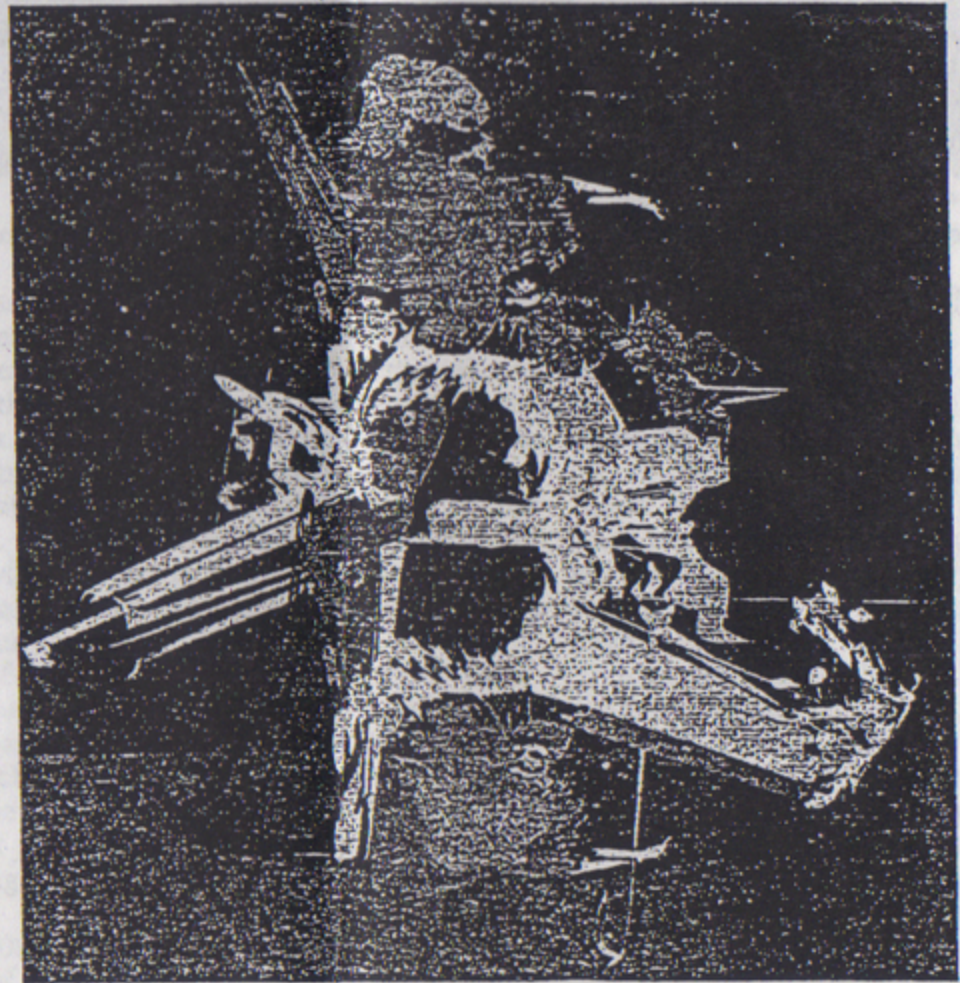
Its 12 artists use humor to make works whose first priority is to amuse you. A few paintings, sculp-

tures and photographs go further, transforming seemingly mindless entertainment into occasions for sustained contemplation.

Charlie White's big color photographs resemble stills from teen movies. In several, well-heeled suburbanites fondle grotesque lumps of flesh in the same way that children cling to ratty security blankets. In others, anxieties about adolescent sexuality and insecurities about fitting into one's peer group take the shape of a scrawny, potbellied alien with leathery skin and puppy-dog eyes. Experiencing more than his share of emotional misadventures, this sympathetic misfit makes normal suburban life look freakish and inhuman.

Joe Sola's three 90-second videos have the presence of previews for upcoming features made by a film

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Orange County Museum of Art

Chris Finley's "Goldfishcreature": making meltdowns look sexy.

'Biennial': Slapstick, Parody and Comic Relief Compete in Art Show

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librarian with a short attention span and a love of order for its own sake. The first two consist of snippets of scenes from popular movies in which characters recite the same line: "Come on, come on" or "Go, go, go." The third, "Climaxes," shows 36 explosions, each from a movie made in the 36 years since 1966, when Sola was born.

Tom LaDuke's sculptures evoke the painstaking detail of model-size sets and the obsessive perfectionism of animatronic props. In one, hundreds of doll-size clay figures portray the artist as if he were the sole occupant of a mass grave. In another, two compact dioramas

support tiny electrical towers with microscopically thin wires that extend across the gallery. LaDuke's nearly monochrome paintings depict similar structures at their bottom edges. Fascinating at first, his labor-intensive works are the artistic equivalent of special effects: Their mind-blowing illusions provide welcome diversions that fade from memory as soon as one leaves the museum.

Three artists from San Francisco play games whose amusements wear thin even more quickly. Yoram Wolberger has enlarged cheap toys so that they stand face to face with adults. His plastic soldier, farm girl with four chickens and

bride and groom from a wedding cake are too silly to convey much more than misguided ambitions.

Rebecca Bollinger's 90-minute dual video projection and related prints juxtapose hundreds of thumb-size images. Although both strive to make a virtue of channel surfing, or to turn information downloaded from the Internet into a compositional device, their randomness has more to do with filling up space and killing time than pursuing a compelling inquiry.

Stephanie Syjuco's fake surveillance system, made of cardboard, contact paper and blinking LED lights, also mimics the real thing. Reminding visitors to be on guard against a false sense of security, it is redundant and condescending.

Los Angeles artist Kristin Calabrese wears her mistrust of viewers—and images—on her sleeve. Her painting of a water-damaged kitchen and three drip-enhanced silk-screens of generic street scenes include so many "secret" messages written on their slapdash surfaces that there's no room for mystery or for imagination.

More playful self-referential mirroring seems to be the point of Roman de Salvo's inflatable sculpture, which is meant to be tethered to the stack of rocks it resembles in the museum's sculpture garden. But technical difficulties have temporarily grounded his giant balloon, which the San Diego-based artist calls a sculpture that's also an advertisement for itself.

Yoshua Okon uses humor to terrifically subversive ends. The best of his four works is "Parking Lotus," a mockumentary project that records his founding of the Los Angeles Security Guard Meditation Movement.



"Parking Lotus" records Yoshua Okon's founding of the Los Angeles Security Guard Meditation Movement.

An unbelievably sincere mission statement accompanies eight photographs of security guards meditating outside the institutions where they work for low wages. Together, the text and images make sidesplitting fun of the idea that art provides substitute social services.

At the same time, Okon playfully ridicules yoga yuppies. Never making fun of the guards, he turns them into temporary works of art, formally composed figures at once inscrutable, irresistible and loaded with meaning, much of which is contradictory. It's impossible to dismiss his project because it just might be serious. Not knowing for sure is part of the pointed fun.

Like Okon, the remaining three artists use humor as a point of departure. Their works are funny only because they begin with such dumb ideas that you can't help but snicker—at first. The longer you look, the more your snide, self-satisfied smirks give way to delight.

In four photographs that depict a dancer behind a semitranslucent wood screen, Kelly Nipper discovers high-tech effects in simple, mid-century designs. Her partially blocked views of a graceful woman in an elaborately patterned blouse transform the look of digital imagery in an astonishingly sensuous series in which time seems to circle back on itself.

Similarly, Chris Finley's paintings and Evan Holloway's sculptures rearrange familiar objects to form fascinating conundrums you can't get enough of. Designed with readily available software, the images in Finley's billboard-scale paintings make computer (and emotional) meltdowns look sexy.

Holloway specializes in turning the world upside-down, over and over again. The ghost of surrealism—or of a magician's stage tricks—haunts his "Upsidedown White Rauschenberg," a boxy sculpture that resembles a voting

booth with a gravity-defying chicken walking on its ceiling. In a black-and-white work, a life-size Styrofoam version of Kurt Cobain stares into an architectural rendering of the void. A third, titled "Black to Purple," consists of a small tree's limb that Holloway has cut apart and glued back together so that every branch forms a 90-degree angle.

Sparks fly between Finley's garish paintings and Holloway's subdued structures, making this gallery the highlight of the show and one of the most intelligently installed museum spaces in recent memory. The pleasures of levity may be fleeting, but sometimes they're also unforgettable.

"2002 California Biennial," Orange County Museum of Art, 850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach, (949) 759-4848, through Sept. 8. Closed Mondays. \$5 adults, children free.