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The Oregonian

Sara Greenberger Rafferty draws parallels between comedy and art with visual puns at Fourteen30 Contemporary (review)

By [John Motley | Special to The Oregonian](#)
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An installation view of Brooklyn artist Sara Greenberger Rafferty's exhibition at Fourteen30 Contemporary. Image courtesy of Fourteen30 Contemporary. (*Evan La Londe*)

For nearly a decade, Brooklyn artist [Sara Greenberger Rafferty](#)'s art, which ranges from sculptural installations to performance, has drawn its imagery from the world of comedy. Splattered whipped cream pies, Groucho Marx glasses, a stand-up's mic and stool, along with images of famous funny men and women, from Bill Cosby to Phyllis Diller, have found their way into Rafferty's practice.

Given the art world's humorless reputation, where a lost-in-thought chin-stroke is higher praise than a laugh, her choice might seem like a subversive prank. Not so: she draws strong ties between the role of the comedian and the artist, from the risk of self-exposure (that is, bombing) to translating personal experience into universal expression.

At Fourteen30 Contemporary, Rafferty, a participant in this year's Whitney Biennial, presents new work concerning language and the body, a connection bridged through the concept of "figure drawing," which applies both to the classical practice of artists observing and representing a model as well as using the

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innate elasticity of words to suggest multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings. Of course, "figures of speech" are the grist of the best punch-lines, upending our expectations while outing the limits of language.

This fracture in the word "figure," then, wreaks havoc on the bodies in Rafferty's show, which are frequently bisected, compartmentalized, and turned inside-out.

"Window Legs," 2014, casts the bottom half of a female mannequin in cloudy yellow fiberglass. At the waist, a magenta surface suggests the interior of a real body, festooned with digitally printed flies — like you'd find planted in a gag ice cube or crawling on an actual corpse.

For "Spread," 2014, the artist enlarges a scan from a book containing a reproduction of Hans Holbein's "The Body of the Dead Christ on the Tomb," with all other text redacted. As the reproduction spans two pages, the book's spine seems to saw Christ's body in halves, like a magician's assistant (to say nothing of Christians' claim that the resurrection was a "joke" played on the devil).

And in the rear gallery, "Study for a Frame II," 2014, pictures original "Saturday Night Live" cast member Laraine Newman holding a pair of plastic breasts over her black sweater, collapsing distinctions between the private and public body.

All of the visual punning that transpires in Rafferty's work functions in the same way as the carefully chosen language that animates a joke and frames a payoff. Take "Fig (Make a Fig)," 2014, in which an appropriated photograph of a woman's body is presented upside-down, seemingly balancing on the truncated phrase, "How to Draw a Fig." Across the room, that common abbreviation of "figure" becomes a willful mix-up, as a line drawing of a human form, now right-side up, is covered in various fruit (but oddly enough, no figs) and more flies. Together, this pair of prints parses the multiple meanings of "fig" in real space, like a body sawed in half.

--John Motley, *Special to The Oregonian*
