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Art-world humor comes to the fore in 'Paraprosdokians and Rubber Chickens' at the Art Gym (review)

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Sara Greenberger Rafferty, "Chicken," 2009, C-print, edition 2 of 5. (Courtesy of Mary Cahill, the artist, and Rachel Uffner Gallery)

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The visual arts have a rep for lacking a funny bone — and deservedly so. It's only been for about half a century that artists, likely taking license from the conceptual pranks of Marcel Duchamp, have injected absurdity, awkward tension and antagonistic ridicule into contemporary discourse.

Perhaps this trend can be linked to the emergence of practices, which like jokes themselves, derive their power from upturned expectations and subversive play. Most notably, the rise of performance art, which undermines the market, and institutional critique, which swipes at problematic models of presentation, has opened up the possibilities for comic play in the contemporary art world.

In October, Marylhurst University's Art Gym opened "Paraprosdokians and Rubber Chickens," a survey of artists using humor in their work. The show, named for a comedy technique and a famous prop, is the first curated by new director Blake Shell. It highlights the diverse ways in which artists incorporate comedy into their work and the equally eclectic range of effects they produce.

For instance, Sara Greenberger Rafferty's print of a rubber chicken and Ben Sanders' loopy illustrations of clown shoes both commemorate sight gags of a bygone era, but neither commands a chuckle. On the other hand, Jamie Isenstein's sculpture "Ear Plug Ear Ring," in which a pair of delicate gold chains concluding in foam ear plugs dangle from a conventional jewelry display, lands a solid punch line.

The key distinction is that Rafferty and Sanders look to the signifiers of the comedy world as analogs for the folly of art-making, while Isenstein has digested the mechanics of joke-telling and animates her work with the same kinds of bait-and-switch reversals. Rafferty's print leads viewers to consider the connections between that limp rubber chicken, which is funny for badly representing the real thing, and art itself, which is, by definition, a kind of distant mimicry of the world. But the effect of Isenstein's earrings, which made me laugh, expires the moment you get the joke.

Of course, nothing kills a joke like dissecting it, and "Paraprosdokians" contains several works that delight with the same directness as Isenstein's sculpture. Ralph Pugay's bonkers canvases can be read like single-panel comics, which happen to be painted, rather than drawn with a pen. "Cattle Rave," 2013, shows dozens of corralled cows at night, decked out with so many glowing necklaces and nose rings that you can practically hear the thumping house music.

Patrick Rock replicates a kitschy lawn ornament of a squatting dog, the kind intended to politely direct dog owners to pick up after their pets. But his version is enormous — 13 feet tall — and looms over the gallery with the sly implication that you should keep an eye out or risk stepping into something foul. Which is to say: It's pretty funny.