

# rachel uffner



## Sara Greenberger Rafferty



*Frog in the Pond*, 2008, C-print, 14" x 11", Edition of 5, 2 A.P.

I had the chance to catch up with Sara Greenberger Rafferty and do an interview...she has been doing some fantastically unique work over the past few years. I really enjoyed her show at the Kitchen and am looking forward to her new show. Tears opens at Rachel Uffner Gallery this Wednesday, the 9th and runs through October 25. Don't miss it!

**Jon Lutz:** How long have you made work focusing on many kinds of performers and/or entertainment?

**Sara Greenberger Rafferty:** My work has been about performers -- or more accurately performance -- since I was an undergrad working on a project dealing with social class. Early on, having made a pact with myself (which I sort of later broke) never to make an original image of a person's body or face, I depicted the performance of self exclusively through objects, props, and pre-existing images -- stand-ins, if you will. When I first moved to New York, I did a few performances as a retailer named Sophie Spar, where I sold artworks disguised as products for \$20 or less. I then began working on a project, which never fully materialized, about the cakewalk (a syncopated music and dance heavily associated with minstrelsy).

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Installation view of "BANANAS" at The Kitchen, 2009, Photograph by Adam Reich

**JL:** When did this begin as an interest for you?

**SGR:** I didn't take on magicians or comedians -- explicit entertainers -- as a subject until 2001 or 2002. Perhaps surprisingly, this came by way of my interest in the history and imagery of the cakewalk and the American fair (e.g. 1893 Worlds' Columbian Exposition in Chicago and more modest county fairs across the country). I started to become interested in the iconography and space of performance such as the fair, the stage, and the screen. At about the same time I began collecting comedy LPs and re-awakening my obsession with comedians, which began in my childhood. I read everything I could about Harry Houdini, Fatty Arbuckle, Buster Keaton, Phyllis Diller, Lenny Bruce, and Dick Gregory. In a sense, I have been sort of working my way through the history of performance or recorded performance, and now, with my new series of color photographs, I am focused more specifically on television.

While my work uses performers and entertainers as imagery, the theme my work is not really entertainment. I think things like stages, microphones, comedians, props, and backdrops may be constant threads in my work, though because I don't see my work as being about entertainment, I don't think it will be necessary to always use these forms.



*Cardboard Spar*, 2004

**JL:** Was there a particular work that opened things up for you?

**SGR:** One of the first works I made in this vein was a cardboard version of a comedy club in my studio. It wasn't particularly sophisticated but the handmade quality and the

fact that it was literally coming off a wall became very important to me because it wasn't full installation nor was it sculpture, but some sort of elaborate wall work, like a very deep relief. This work is very reminiscent of Rupert Pupkin's basement talk show studio in Martin Scorsese's *King of Comedy*. Scorsese's work was actually very influential to the works I was making at the time, specifically *The King of Comedy* and *Raging Bull*.



*Shavings*, 2007, C-print, 14" x 11", Edition of 6

**JL:** Do you find yourself attracted to entertainers of particular eras?

**SGR:** I definitely relate best to performers of previous eras. As I said, it seems I'm working my way from the Civil War to the Bicentennial. I am not aiming to be nostalgic at all: it's just easier for me to process the visual material of the past, and use references to a certain era of photography to speak about more contemporary issues. Also, the people -- or people as characters -- I am using as imagery represent the canon of comic personas and documentation (television, photography, film). If I were to venture a guess, I would say this tendency arises from the fact that with 'historical' material I can have a more detached relationship with the primary sources, I can view them and analyze them outside of their time and context. Whereas, if I made a work using images of say Mary Lynn Rajskub or Dave Chappelle or Zach Galafianakis it would be more difficult for me to make it my own through transformation, because of contemporary cultural context and associations. But this could be a cop out.



*Vicki*, 2009, C-print, 24" x 20", edition of 5

**JL:** One of the most interesting things about your work is what is not happening or playing out as you might expect. Microphones and spotlights have no subjects, pies hit a wall in (lieu of a face), an empty Houdini case, and 2D, abstracted narratives. Is there a portrait of a “lost art” going on here or any critique or acknowledgement of shifts in manners of performance?

**SGR:** Thank you. I think of a lot of my work as playing out as a performance of non-performance. This could be interpreted in a number of ways, among them the performance of the everyday character, the way we perform in our daily lives or that the non-performance is related more to a non-compliance, a refusal to do what one is supposed to do. In some cases, the 'wrong' object is performing and in a lot of cases the figure is totally absent. I think ideas about damage, repair, obfuscation, failure, injury, humiliation, abjection, pathos, and humor are fairly important to my work. I depict a lot of 'benign violence' which would be the pies, the punches, and my new series which could be called spills.

**JL:** You’ve done a lot of work specifically about stand-up comedy. Do you see a connection between being a stand-up comic and being an artist?

**SGR:** I'm sure I could make this connection, however, my use of stand-up has to do purely with aesthetics and ethos. I like the aesthetics of stand-up comedy as a model for my art-making: up against the wall, pared down, masculine, one-person scale, engaging and not obtuse, only alienating by design, etc. Ideally I would like to make work that operates as good stand-up comedy does, something that is engaging but has the ability to deal with real shit, something that is crafted but not too flashy, something human scale but could engage a whole room. I have always been struck also by the connection of body to content in stand-up and how the comic's body (gender, race, stature, age, etc.) comes to bear on the meaning of the jokes.



*Pies with Color Studies*, 2008, C-print, 16" x 20", Edition of 6

**JL:** I’m curious about the process used in your 2D work. Much of it is photo-based, but what are you actually photographing? Are you creating your own “originals” of different mediums?

**SGR:** All of my work is grounded in photography. Even sculptures I make generally have a definitive frontal view and I am always thinking about photographs. Most of my 2D work is in fact straight photography of "props" as I call them. I started by simply

making drawings of photographs and framing the drawings flush as photos are usually framed. These were a type of re-photography to me because they were mechanical reproductions of the most basic (and time consuming) variety.

Then I started making the punch photographs, which were gouache reproductions of photographs on gessoed paper. I originally thought I would frame these and exhibit them as drawings as well, because I thought it would be really funny to have a one-of-a-kind work that was ruined or negated. When I tested this out, I found that the punched drawings were generally too pathetic. (As an aside: my work really needs to evoke pathos without actually being pathetic. I am constantly trying to make sure the work looks provisional without actually being so.) I



studio shot



*Shuffle (Ace Five)*, 2006, C-print, 16" x 20", Edition of 6

decided to put the punched drawings on my copy stand, light them, and print them as photographs. This turned out to be the correct decision because the re-re-photo added a trompe l'oeil effect and also a shift in scale that turned out to be crucial. In more recent photographs, I have used a combination of found photography, Photoshopping, photography of props in my studio, and other straight photographs. In my newest photographs, all of the props were made in the studio with very modest supplies and then scanned and digitally manipulated. It's funny because I described my new work recently as "portraits of comedians," which ends up sounding like very different work than it is.