

Talking Heads:

Comedian Tara Ochs Assesses “Pratfall Tramps” at the ACAC

by *Matthew Terrell* / April 8, 2015



Comedian Tara Ochs, left, and “Pratfall Tramps” curator Rachel Reese.

“Pratfall Tramps,” a group show about women, comedy, and performance, closes at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center on Saturday, April 11. Matthew Terrell asked his improv instructor, local comedic actress Tara Ochs, to weigh in on the exhibition. They visited the show with curator Rachel Reese; their conversation delves into the finer points of comedy from the perspective of a female professional in the industry. On April 14, Tara Ochs and three other improv artists from Dad’s Garage Theatre Company will present “Women in Improv” at the Contemporary.

Rachel Reese: This show is called “Pratfall Tramps” and features four women artists thinking about humor, comedy, and failure. There is a sub-current about gender and the history of females in comedy and art. It is at times self-deprecating, but they all want to make you laugh. The problem with critical theory and art is that it gets unfunny fast, so I like to tell people it’s okay to laugh. Some of the artists are hopeful that their work can operate as a joke rather than be *about* humor.



Jamie Isenstein, *Inside Outside Backstage*
Vase, 2011; natural and artificial flowers, vase.

This vase of flowers by Jamie Isenstein addresses more nuanced topics like death by bringing humor to the subject. Half of the flowers are artificial and half are real. Every two weeks we replace them with fresh flowers, but over time what is real and what is artificial becomes apparent or revealed. Here is a yellow silk rose next to a real yellow rose, and they are placed next to each other so you can notice the difference over time.

Tara Ochs: There’s always this sense when you walk into a museum that you are already in over your head. You walk into this show and you see that banana peel logo, and it’s as if you feel defiant towards the art: “Hey art, I dare you to make me laugh.” My first response to this vase of flowers was “womp womp” ... you expect something big, but the first piece you see is a let down. Comedy happens so many times unintentionally.

There's a great quote on the wall behind this piece that says "In comedy, the performer can rewire failure into success." This piece is an awkward failure, and that makes me laugh.

RR: Sara Greenberger Rafferty made these mic stands with kitchen implements as microphones. When you think about kitchen implements, female domesticity, and the role women have played in the history of comedy to gain traction, you see what's on her mind in these works. Her hope was to make work that perhaps operate like stand-up comedians themselves.

TO: Laughter always sits in the present. It's that confrontation with something new. These stand-up microphones have their own life. I love anthropomorphizing things. In my career I've often run up against people resistant to talking about how women in comedy are different—because we'd like to be simply equal. We want to be just as funny as the boys. We don't want to talk about how we could possibly be different. These mic stands shove in the face of the comedian a specifically female, yet kind of phallic, object. The object of our oppression: a kitchen utensil.

RR: Tammy Rae Carland references comedic antecedents in this series of photos [depicting empty stages with props standing in for the performers]. There's a nod to Carol Burnett in this photo of a mop propped up, or perhaps floating. Another work references the spotlight searching for Gilda Radner as we anticipate her arrival on stage.

TO: Great success with the Carol Burnett mop piece. Anybody over the age of ... a certain number ... will have the same “aha” moment with this piece. Here’s the thing about comedy: we love to have these experiences where we know we aren’t the only person having a human experience. My joy comes when somebody else is able to verbalize or visualize something else that I’ve experienced. Put words to it or put photos to it and now I know I’m not alone. We laugh because we are released from that feeling. “Oh, good, I’m not the only one experiencing this.” The hope is to find the simplest way to express an ideal so the most people will be able to connect.



Jamie Isenstein, *Sand Lamp*.

RR: This work is called *Sand Lamp*, by Jamie Isenstein. It’s a mound of sand that started off wet, and there’s a lamp nestled inside it. It’s kind of absurd—we have gallery staff spray this with water three times a day. It’s a futile effort, though. It’s going to fall and fail.

TO: We like things changing and evolving. I'm not allowed to touch it, which makes me mad. I imagine some kid getting to touch it and I'm jealous. It's amusing. It doesn't shock and surprise me; it doesn't jolt me into that recognition moment of laughter. But I intellectually know it's funny. But this photograph next to it did make me laugh out loud.

RR: The candle! It's called *Snuffer*. It's a candle avoiding its own extinction, which a candle's not supposed to do. In this show I thought about how comedy could break norms—logical norms, in this case.

TO: I laughed because the candle knows it has to do something, but it doesn't want to. The way it's bent is exactly that feeling of "I don't want to do this." It's a perfect representation of that human experience.



Sara Greenberger Rafferty, *BANANAS*, 2009; microphone stand, boom arm, Plexiglas, wire, gaffer's tape, 64 by 70 by 36 inches.

(Photo: Jan Rattia)

[The two women approach a sculpture depicting a game of hangman.]

TO: Yay! Hangman! I love that. Then I had that moment where I thought: "Wait, is this racist?" because the context of my life over the last year has been civil rights. First, I thought "I love to play hangman!" Then I thought "Oh no, where did hangman come from?" I literally had that experience. Also, this is adorable, but this person has made three guesses and has been wrong each time.

RR: The word is BANANAS.

TO: Interesting.

RR: To me it's a joke on something that is seemingly high stakes but ultimately still a game. Does it ever feel that way when you are performing? Super high-stakes performance anxiety? You are totally panicked because nothing is working out. What does it feel like to "die" on stage?

TO: Interesting. Now I like the work again. That's absolutely an experience we comedians have when we're just not hitting any of our marks. Even though you are playing by the rules. It's really hard to get to that place where you're truly not afraid of failure as a comedian. You'd have to be the ultimate comedian, maybe like Andy Kaufman. He would be more excited about losing at hangman. You're out there trying to do well, but you can only do that if you put yourself at risk for failure.

Tara Ochs is a regular improviser at Dad's Garage Theatre Company in Atlanta. She was a company member at ComedySportz LA, ACME Comedy Theater (LA), and has also improvised for London Theatresports, and Baulhaus Ost, Berlin, and at sea with The Second City. Film and TV credits include: Selma, Life As We Know It, Too Many Cooks, Your Pretty Face, Crossing Jordan, CSI: Miami, One Tree Hill, Army Wives, Close to Home, Samantha Who? She was a regular on the World Comedy Cup and Damon Wayans's sketch show The Underground.

Rachel Reese is a curator, arts writer, and the communications manager at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center.



From left, Karen Ceasay, Tara Ochs, Cassidy Russell and Sara Gaare in the WABE studio to talk about being women in comedy.

Matthew Terrell writes, photographs, and creates videos in the fine city of Atlanta. His work can be found regularly on the [Huffington Post](#), where he covers such subjects as the queer history of the South, drag culture, and gay men's health issues.