

MUSEUMS

# The Work of Four Seriously Funny Women Artists

by Lilly Lampe on March 26, 2015



*Installation view of ‘Pratfall Tramps’ at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)*

ATLANTA — *Pratfall Tramps* at the [Atlanta Contemporary Art Center](#) is an exhibition that works by sleight of hand. The overt themes of an all-female show centered on comedy vanish — first you see them, now you don’t — leaving a treatise on absence that rests on the dark comic potential of visuals. In this exhibition, what you can’t see tickles the eye as much as what’s visible.

When writing about an exhibition that explores comedic tropes, why not throw in some writing clichés as well? The Oxford English Dictionary describes the word “pratfall” as dating back to the 1930s and deriving from the word “prat,” meaning “buttocks.” A “pratfall” is defined as “a fall onto one’s buttocks,” an act that can be humiliating or, in comedy, an intentional slip designed to evoke laughs from the audience. Let that be a sign to the viewer: the moves

Rachel Uffner Gallery  
170 Suffolk Street  
New York, NY 10002

+1 212 274 0064  
[info@racheluffnergallery.com](mailto:info@racheluffnergallery.com)  
[racheluffnergallery.com](http://racheluffnergallery.com)

these artworks make are deliberate. “Tramp” is older, dating to the late 18th century, and though it technically means “to walk heavily or noisily,” it can also refer to a bumbling vagrant like the Charlie Chaplin character. Today the word evinces a gendered reading, denoting a woman who sleeps around. The plurality of the term is emphasized here: this exhibition, curated by Rachel Reese of the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, reclaims the original usage with a knowing eye to its current, derogatory status.



*Jamie Isenstein, “Untitled (yellow, turquoise, red clown shoe)” (2013),  
watercolor and pencil on paper*

The female artists, or pratfall tramps, in this exhibition — [Mary Reid Kelley](#), [Sara Greenberger Rafferty](#), [Tammy Rae Carland](#), and [Jamie Isenstein](#) — do not tread lightly. Indeed, large footsteps are implied in Jamie Isenstein’s “Untitled (clown shoe)” drawings, three of which are in this show. A single sheet of paper contains a relatively normal-sized shoe, but in subsequent works additional sheets extend the toe to ridiculous lengths. No clown is to be found; we must guess at who might wear this shoe. An imaginary body is similarly hinted at in Tammy Rae Carland’s artworks. Her sculptures include a gramophone horn and a cheerleader’s megaphone, both are painted in vivid colors but, without voices, remain static objects.

In Carland’s photographs, stage props become ciphers for human actors. In the scenes featured here, stacks of chairs and precarious arrangements of ladders star on red curtained stages, their very

presence serving the act itself. Others hint at movement, like a mop working without a handler à la “*The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*,” or the spotlight itself that focuses on the drawn curtains of an empty stage in “Double Spot” (2012). In her video “Live From Somewhere” (2013), the spotlight moves across the curtain searching for a performer who never appears, a reference to comedian Gilda Radner’s 1979 one-woman show, *Live From New York*, in which the spotlight takes on a life of its own, but also the fact that Radner, who died of ovarian cancer in the 1980s, won’t be making an appearance tonight.

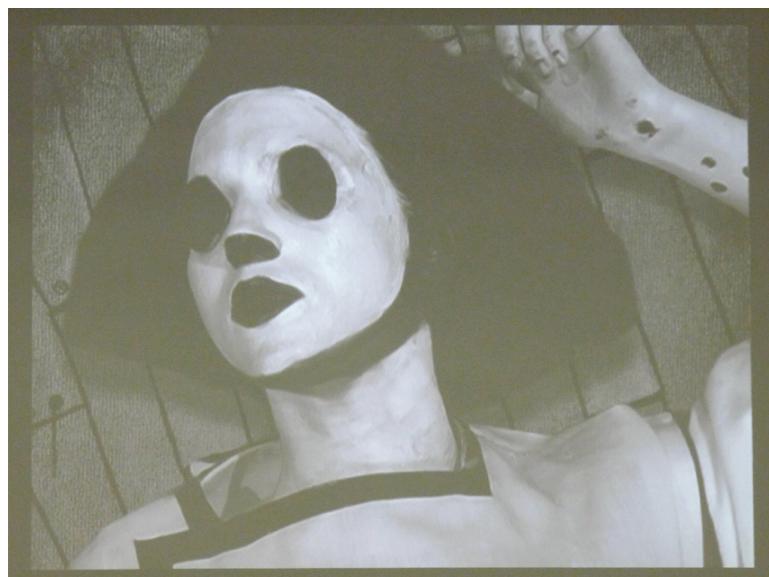


Jamie Isenstein, “Magic Lamp” (2005), plaster, gold leaf finish, epoxy, velvet curtain, magic light bulb, “Will Return” sign or arm (click to enlarge)

Presence and death are recurring themes in Isenstein’s works. Her video “Infinite Disco Soft-Shoe” (2002–04) inserts the artist in a danse macabre with a skeleton. The two are identically dressed and joined so that when Isenstein shifts, the skeleton matches her movements. The dance is thus dependent on the artist. In her performance-cum-installation work “Magic Lamp” (2005), there’s more flexibility. A small alcove is built into the gallery wall with a hole just large enough for Isenstein’s arm to extend through. On opening night, she sat hidden behind the gallery wall with only her right arm visible, wielding a trick light bulb like a surrealist light fixture or an amputated Lady Liberty. During the hour of her

performance, dozens walked by without realizing a person was there. Over the months of the exhibition, a mini “Will Return” sign replaces the artist’s arm, promising a reprisal that will not happen.

Sara Greenberger Rafferty’s photographs and sculptures feature substitutions rather than vacancies. Her *Testing* series inserts kitchen implements like whisks and spoons for into microphone stands, a Martha Rosler-flavored nod to a conflict between domesticity and speech. This relationship to food and its production is attenuated in her photographs where fried eggs and pancakes obscure women’s heads, rendering them faceless. Rafferty’s video “Mono” (2014) inverts the absence of Isenstein and Carland’s works. The video features an actress (Susie Sokol) in a suit, mimicking the gestures and speech of Johnny Carson, Joan Rivers, and David Letterman to an empty room. Without an audience, her performance becomes a strangely isolated act that underlines the co-dependent relationship between audience and performer.



*Mary Reid Kelley, “Sadie the Saddest Sadist” (2009), SD video with sound*  
The show’s fourth artist, Mary Reid Kelley, has only one work in the show, but her video “Sadie the Saddest Sadist” (2009) has a dominating presence. Two actors in clown-like makeup that obfuscates their eyes and obliterates individual features speak in punning rhymes. The protagonist is Sadie, a female British munitions worker living in 1915 who, filled with patriotic fervor, falls for a sailor, Jack, who gives her a venereal disease. The scenes are monochromatic mash-ups of cartoon-like lines and

heavily made-up actors, spliced with animated text that scrambles itself faster even than the spoken lines. Puns like calling stains on sheets “Marx on my Lenin!” add an explicit anachronistic political note to an otherwise subtle exhibition. But Kelley’s take on the sad clown trope injects an unflinchingly unfunny tone into an exhibition that shies away from easy laughs in search of darker, more complicated territory.



*Sara Greenberger Rafferty, “Performance Document: Self Portrait with Pancakes” (2003–06), c-print*

[Pratfall Tramps](#) continues at the [Atlanta Contemporary Art Center](#) (535 Means Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia) through April 11.