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BURNAWAY

Seriously Funny: “Pratfall Tramps” at ACAC

By *Dan Weiskopf* on March 19, 2015



Mary Reid Kelley, *Sadie the Saddest Sadist*, 2009; SD video with sound, 7:23 minutes (continuous loop).

Life is a series of painful and humiliating failures, and pratfall comedy thrives on this fact. Charlie Chaplin’s struggles with a world of brutal machinery and Lucille Ball’s frantic workplace mishaps are exaggerated mirrors of our own. The challenge is to find the exact point where the audience’s wince veers into laughter. The four women artists that curator Rachel Reese features in “**Pratfall Tramps**” draw on comedic genres and practices including not just slapstick, but also vaudeville, prop comedy, magic shows, stand-up, and the late-night variety show. Despite the exhibition’s title, however, few of the works are filled with **zany** bodily spills. While borrowing the physical trappings of comedy, they trade instead in melancholy themes of absence, deferral, and death.

A spotlight pans endlessly back and forth across a red stage curtain in Tammy Rae Carland’s video *Live From Somewhere* (2013). The clip is a looped bit of footage from the introduction to a live standup set by Gilda

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Radner, though it cuts off before the comic herself ever appears. The distracted movement of the spotlight is a mirror of our own restless attention, always hungry for entertainment. This hurry-up-and-wait message is reinforced in Jamie Isenstein's *Intermission Sign* (2013), which silently proclaims the indefinite suspension of an unknown performance. The jokes in these works rely on an anti-theatrical consciousness familiar from the plays of Beckett and Stoppard. The audience's own frustrated impatience becomes the punchline—whenever you've arrived, it's always too early or too late.



Jamie Isenstein, two views of *Magic Lamp*, 2005; performance / installation, plaster, gold leaf finish, epoxy, velvet curtain, magic light bulb, “Will Return” sign or arm. Collection of Stefano Basilico, New York. (All photos except Reid: Jan Rattia)

Isenstein's “performance sculptures” also exploit these deferred expectations. For *Magic Lamp* (2005), the artist is concealed behind a wall with her arm sticking out through a hole and holding a lit light bulb in her upturned hand in imitation of the wall candles in Cocteau's *La Belle et La Bête*. The work exists in its embodied form as long as she is physically present, and the rest of the time, a WILL RETURN sign cheerfully promises its future reappearance. Other of her works, such as *Magic Fingers* (2003) and *Rug Rug Rug Rug Rug* (2009) use this same device. As Isenstein sharply observed during her **artist talk**, however, the sign's promise can only be made good as long as she is alive. After that, the piece becomes a memento mori, just another spotlight into which she will never step again.

This is dark stuff, but if comedy and death are twinned in this exhibition, that's because its guiding spirit is the ghost of Gilda Radner. Still, not all of its invocations of the still widely beloved comedian are successful. In Sara Greenberger Rafferty's photographic triptych, for example, Radner is depicted in a moment from one of her standup routines, but the images are blotchy, the colors distorted and shimmering like patches of oil. The shiny, murky photos don't do justice to the **wildly tap-dancing**, frizzy-haired Radner. Viewers hoping to commune with the spirit of Gilda would be better served by spending time in Alex Robins's marvelous *Gilda Radner Research and Translation Center*, a library and reading room that

accompanies the main exhibition, and which captures her vivacity far better than Rafferty's images.

The apex of wordplay and wit in the show is Mary Reid Kelley's **video** *Sadie, the Saddest Sadist* (2009). Kelley's tale of Sadie's seduction and abandonment by a cocky, gonorrheal sailor is told through punning, off-key songs and text that jitters, collides, and crawls across the screen. Modernist art loves its fallen women—think of T. S. Eliot's disaffected young typist in *The Waste Land*, who could easily be the prototype of Kelley's protagonist. Few of these women, however, are allowed such eloquent speech as Sadie, whose knotty, hyperconscious inner monologue and pointed insights into the erotic currents of capitalism are at odds with her real-world sexual naivety. Despite the oppressive squalor of their story, Kelley's characters have real hearts behind their clownish greasepaint and flat black button-eyes.

The show's heavier moments of loss, heartbreak, and death are leavened by the works that stay closest to the eccentric and lighthearted spirit of slapstick itself. Physical comics like Johnny Knoxville or the early Jim Carrey use their bodies as uncanny props. No matter how disastrous an accident they suffer, they get right back up again, never seeming to feel the pain of broken bones and ruptured organs. Thus it's appropriate that props and other objects serve as proxies for live bodies in many of Carland's photographs, such as *Balancing Act* (2013) and *Tipping Point* (2013). In these images, chairs are stacked like precarious acrobats, and ladders execute daring tumbles. Similarly, Isenstein's candle skittishly leans away from its own extinction in *Snuffer* (2008), enacting the same confusion of person and object that she toys with in *Magic Lamp*. Even when the human performers have left the stage, a parade of animate objects ensures that the show always goes on.



Sara Greenberger Rafferty, *BANANAS*, 2009; microphone stand, boom arm, plexiglas, wire, gaffer's tape, 64 by 70 by 36 inches. (All photos except Reid: Jan Rattia)

These whimsical anthropomorphisms aside, the exhibition also features a number of more straightforward comic props. Rafferty's *Testing* series (2009) combines the comedian's iconic tool—the mic stand—with kitchen implements such as basters, spoons, and whisks, in a clever visual evocation

of the gendered expectations facing women in standup. She also delivers one of the sharpest zingers in the show with *BANANAS* (2009), a partially filled-in hangman stick figure whose head and body hang from a boom arm. It's an uncomfortably apt metaphor. Dying in front of an audience can feel like being hanged slowly, the noose closing tighter as one wisecrack after another misses its mark. Comics, of course, are forever dying on stage, but the paradox of the craft is that they're most (or perhaps only) alive in front of an audience.

As should be obvious, the jokes in "Pratfall Tramps" are wry and cerebral, and more likely to deliver a smirk or a chuckle than a full-throated guffaw. This isn't a defect of the exhibition itself so much as an inherent problem of the form. Art about comedy is a slightly unsatisfying and secondhand substitute, much like art about sex. At best, both can only hint at the rush of the real thing. But this show is nevertheless richly deserving of attention. In its innovative premise and execution it displays the kind of sharp curatorial intelligence sorely lacking in too many local exhibitions. The best way to commend it is by borrowing the exuberant slogan of the Chaplin-inspired Russian absurdist theatrical movement known as **Eccentrism**: WEAR CLOWN'S PANTS AND BE SAVED.

"Pratfall Tramps" is on view at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center through April 11.

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Tammy Rae Carland, (l to r) *This is Not A Brick*, 2013, chromogenic print 37½ by 50 inches; and *Double Spot*, 2012, color photograph, 40 by 50 inches. (All photos except Reid: Jan Rattia)