

Humor and Allegory

by

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*Orion with flowers*  
(fig. 1)



*In the wrong place...*  
(fig. 2)



*"Disco?"*  
(fig. 3)



*2016*  
(fig. 4)



*Untitled (cowboy)*  
(fig. 5)



*The Journalist*  
(fig. 6)

## Abstract

This series of works proposes the merging of aesthetic interests that undermine the self-seriousness of the artist and the idea of labor in painting. Painting's slowing of time can hopefully extinguish the peripheral noise of the outside world and provide space for thought. These paintings propose different ways to help the viewer understand visual depth, narrative, and formal decision-making. The optical depth of red, the spatial depth of glazed paint, and the spiritual depth of the figure can provide multiple meanings and possibilities. Another metaphor for the development of this series of paintings would be one comedian telling a joke to another comedian, that comedian telling the same joke to another comedian, and so on, until over time the joke loses its original punch line.

This work is in conversation with Lester Johnson, Peter Saul, Carol Dunham, Jim Nutt, Gladys Nielson, Francis Picabia, Medieval art, William Hogarth, Andy Kaufman, and Franz Kafka. These artists strategized to make work based on scholarship while also maintaining humor throughout their careers. Compositionally they meticulously built their narratives around geometry or set pieces that also served a satirical function. Others pushed the boundaries between figuration and abstraction by distorting the human form. These artists are figurative artists, but they have an affinity for inventing compositions that use the entire canvas, often bending the limits of space and form. Saul, Dunham, Nutt, and Nielson all engage with grotesque humor, emphasizing the middle class, banal existence of their characters. An airbrush, in particular, is primarily used for commercial use such as illustration, graffiti, tattoos, touch ups, etc. I find the disparity between the high expectations of stretched canvas and the faux-ness of an airbrush to be comical, but also disruptive. In opposition to the heavy art historical origins of painting, airbrush provides a levity and superficiality reflective of our contemporary sensibilities. It provides tactility as a substitute for the immersion of Netflix.

Painting's tactility, surface, physicality and color are real. To look, to scan, to observe, to locate the visual cues, are to dismantle painting's meaning and reopen the space to the humorous, debauched, wry, nonsensical inner language of the artist. These paintings propose a disruption of painting's banal space and flattened visual field.

## Humor and Allegory

Art history is often explained as a series of progressions from representation to abstraction, as the human figure transforms from dimensional to flat to fragmented. For centuries, narrative painting was visual art's pivot between pictorial forms. Byzantine icon painters imagined celestial beings in the form of crusading knights on horseback, carrying the morality of the Christian church to unconverted countries. In the 1950s, the Abstract Expressionists believed their actions were carried through the vessels of their paintings, and that the narrative was found in an artwork's making. My work proposes a dialogue with the formal progression of narrative art through an engagement with painting, satire, icons, abstraction, and portraiture. While my pictures are primarily driven by imagination and invention, they're indebted to specific art historical and contemporary sources. Just as the format of joke telling has become abbreviated with the acceleration of social media and the internet, picture making is no longer reliant on traditional materials and distribution. My work seeks to preserve long form storytelling and examine the tragedy of white masculinity through methods of appropriation, emulation, and invention. Famous figures such as Andy Kaufman, Franz Kafka, Francis Picabia, Clement Greenberg, and William Hogarth have a relationship with egotism and absurdity which relates to the subjects of my practice.



The irony, subversion, and nihilism in Andy Kaufman's deflated portrayals of American masculinity relate to the emotionally taxing nature of a studio practice and the endless cycle of failure and success. As a well-known comedian who appeared on television in the 1970s and 1980s, Andy Kaufman deconstructed American show business through his skits and performances—such as reading an entire novel on stage, eating ice cream, and wrestling women. As a provocateur who challenged comedy's conventions, Kaufman channeled camp and surrealism through characters such as Tony Clifton, Foreign Man, Conga Drummer and Elvis

Presley, instigating ridicule, boredom, and repulsion from his audiences. Kaufman's success represented an evolution in comedy and society's comfort with watching the kitsch icons it produced. Kaufman's character Tony Clifton, for example, is an untalented lounge singer who forgets the words to his music and behaves belligerently on stage. The audience, who goad him on throughout the performance, welcomes his profane outbursts and tacky appearance. Kaufman's idiosyncratic behavior, investigation of masculinity, and embrace of failure throughout his career are useful to the culture of the artist studio.

Kaufman's act prefigured contemporary reality television, the work of Sacha Baron Cohen, internet trolling, and experimental comedy. Funniness has now become a social norm found in the short exchanges between people on buses and on phones. When someone exclaims that something is "funny" it's an affirmation, positive reinforcement, or exclamation at the oddness of a situation. With the decline of observational comedy in stand-up and cinema and the increase of short form humor in memes, gifs, and social media, people have less patience for stories with a punch line at the end.

Comedians such as Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy employed long set ups with background information allowing for nuance before their punchlines, while Kaufman relied on stage presence and the vulnerable, pathetic, overconfident characters he portrayed. In some ways, the artist's dilemma in the studio parallels this change in the cultural temperament and shares the challenge of competing with social technologies. At the end of his career, Kaufman was diagnosed with cancer and died in 1984 in West Hollywood. Some believe his final act was the staging of his own death and that his resurrection is scheduled to occur in the future<sup>1</sup>. How would a simulated death be received today?

Just as Kaufman embodied the "troll" in the pre-Facebook age, Francis Picabia's body of work prefigured the schizophrenic aspect of the internet and the jarring agency of technology through irreverent, humorous drawings and writing. The twentieth century avant-garde was a tendency that resisted the commodification of art and culture. Artists pushed for an intellectualized art that was apart from the bourgeoisie. Picabia, alongside Tristan Tzara and Marcel Duchamp, wrote manifestos that explained the views of Dada and its ambivalence toward the values of the middle class. Denouncing capitalism and praising nihilism, Picabia's prose articulated the temperament of his contemporaries. In his contribution to a collection of Dada manifestos, he wrote,

You are all accused; the defendants will rise. The speaker can only talk to you if you are standing.

Standing as if for the Marseillaise,  
standing as if for the Russian anthem,  
standing as if for God save the King  
standing as if before the flag

In short, standing before DADA, which represents life and which accuses you of loving everything through snobbery the moment it becomes expensive. You have all sat down again? Good, that way you'll listen to me more carefully.

What are you doing here, packed in like serious oysters because you are serious, aren't you?

Serious, serious, serious even unto death.

Death is a serious thing, eh?

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<sup>1</sup> Hecht, 1

One dies as a hero, or as an idiot, which is the same thing. The only non-ephemeral word is the word death. You like death for others  
Death, Death, death.  
Money's the only thing that doesn't die, it just goes off on a journey. It is God, it is what is respected, the serious individual – money respects families.  
Honor, honor to money,; the man who has money is an honorable man.  
Honor is bought and sold like a piece of ass. A piece of ass, a piece of ass represents life like French fries, and all of you serious people, you will smell worse than cow shit.  
DADA smells like nothing, it is nothing, nothing, nothing  
It is like your hopes: nothing  
Like your paradises: nothing  
Like your idols: nothing  
Like your politicians: nothing  
like your heroes: nothing  
like your artists: nothing  
like your religions: nothing  
Hiss, yell, smash my face in, and then, and then? I will tell you again that you are all suckers. In three months my friends and I will be selling you our paintings for several francs.<sup>2</sup>

Skepticism, negation, and humor are methods useful to the anarchist interested in undermining an ideological hierarchy and are also relevant to Picabia's studio work. This passage begins as a court proceeding accusing the convicted of materialism and immoral capitalistic impulses. Death and money, honor and "piece of ass", serious working individuals and "cow shit", are mentioned with vitriol and contribute to the weight of the bourgeoisie's sentencing. Idols become caricatures, icons are flattened underfoot and politicians are smothered by prose. Picabia prefaces this manifesto with a legal tone that announces the authority of Dada and its avant-garde methods of questioning the establishment.

A courtroom staffed by a wrong-headed judge, plaintiff, jury, defendant, and audience—this shares similarities with Franz Kafka's "The Trial." In the horrific but humorous questioning of Josef K who is wrongfully accused of an unknown crime by an unknown authority, Kafka uses winding staircases and heavy description to enhance the labyrinthine scale of the legal dilemma. Repetition and negation in both language and visual symbols are useful methods of communicating authority on legal documents and in government proceedings. They can also be used against an authority in the erosion of iconography, as in the case of Picabia's manifesto. The history of painting's relationship with its critics resembles a legal dispute between plaintiff and defendant over brushstrokes, scale, and content. By referencing and appropriating imagery that is at once judiciary and comical, the studio becomes a space for discourse and satire.

An artist who routinely undermined recurring tropes in painting was Rene Daniels, one of the preeminent Dutch painters of his generation. His elusive abstractions are often linked to art history and literature. The painting titled *Painting on the Bullfight*, 1985 references a subject shared by Edouard Manet and Pablo Picasso. The sky, bullring, and dirt are reduced to

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<sup>2</sup> "manifeste cannibal Dada," in *Dadaphone*, no. 7 (Paris, March 1920), p. 3.



abstraction in the form of floating squares or ‘paintings’ on a gallery ‘wall’. Everything in the image is in question and objects are not what they seem.

## Icons

“Medieval art” or the objects, murals, and paintings created in Europe during the Middle Ages contains vast stylistic changes, grotesque imagery, and narrative structures that are useful for my studio practice. The geometric forms, decorative motifs, and figures act as a foil to the fluid, emotional content of oil paint and present images from a specific context. The tessellation on the armor of a saint or the striations of drapery cast down from an angel’s robe are controlled, slowly conceived patterns that were made under the steady hand of an artisan by order of the Christian church. Such images, while sources of propaganda, encouraged reflection and emotional engagement with Christ, Mary and the other biblical figures.

Abstract art operates in a similar way to the stained glass, or tempura paintings of the middle ages. It invites the long, slow gaze of the viewer to peer through color into an illusionistic space for meditation and reflection. While the medieval images work in opposition to the intuitive painterly aspect of my practice, they also parallel modernism’s formal preoccupation with flatness and the spirituality of sight.<sup>3</sup>

Medieval depictions of violence, Christian conquest, and spiritual divinity are flattened representations of fictional events created to educate members of the congregation. In Byzantine churches from the twelfth century, images of the Virgin Mary and Christ appear flattened in gold leaf as beings from the celestial realm. Their otherness is emphasized by their large eyes, brilliant colors, and refined features.

Iconography in art is malleable and its meaning changes with the new contexts it enters. In 2016<sup>4</sup>, space is organized into registers or patterns similar to the way heaven is portrayed as a pure and orderly realm in Medieval art. The figure is posing as a martial artist. His superfluous status is emphasized by the airbrush used to render him and the yin yang symbols hovering around the figure appear in mid-range contrast. Yin and yang are two contradictory forces held in balance by their opposition and interrelation. Yin yang symbols were popular icons in the nineties and became highly commodified in popular culture. As objects, they were appropriated from their eastern origins and permanently stripped of their philosophical meaning. This character is a dilettante with a minor interest in learning from eastern self-defense and will discard it as soon as he becomes bored.

## Critique I

During a critique, a professor commented on the variation within my work: “We have karate man, then eyeballs, and then disco over here...”. This led to the title “*disco?*”<sup>5</sup> which has endured and illuminated the meaning of the work. The drawing is made in primary colors layered with acrylic and airbrush, and features four figures in different poses. It could be a

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<sup>3</sup> Kessler, 167

<sup>4</sup> 2016 (fig. 4)

<sup>5</sup> “*Disco?*” (fig. 3)

physical brawl, scuffle, or dance party. The frontal figure's fingers point outward as one would do when listening to music, albeit in an unlearned, unattractive fashion. The bodies' central placement and classical rendering give them a mythological, spiritual presence, magnifying their optical power. Could it be the silly cultural phenomenon of disco music that energizes the figures in this drawing?

### Materials

The materials in my paintings are dictated by the contrasts they create when placed next to one another. Some of the paintings made with oil and airbrush are deliberately additive, allowing for little erasure or moving backwards. Drawing freehand with the airbrush allows for invention and luminescence. Then oil paint is applied to the surface in a color that contrasts the fluorescent color of the airbrush. Objects outlined with washes appear to float in the foreground of the painting, when in fact they were made in the ground stages. This visual tricking of the viewer complicates the relationship between object and field. Searching for the middle ground places the viewer in the wrong place at the wrong time. The paintings oscillate between opaque and transparent, legible and illegible, saturated and tonal. The more recent paintings made with paper stencils, tape and airbrush ignore brushes completely for compositional, graphic layouts. The absence of color is closer to the appearance of a drawing and proposes painting as print.

### William Hogarth

The appearance of the grotesque, compositional spirals, hand gestures, and other symbols in the drawings and prints by William Hogarth (1697-1764) greatly inform my paintings and drawings. As a celebration of the literary printmaker, *The Journalist* proposes the contemporary relevance of portraiture. Hogarth's, the *Journalist* is James Boswell, author of "The Life and Death of Samuel Johnson". In the drawing he wields a stack of newspapers like a sword and shield as his ego swells within his bulging stomach. It's an example of the artist's ambivalence toward Boswell's inflated reputation as a public figure and his admiration for his accomplishments. Hogarth was a master of visual satire and understood the politics and literary figures of sixteenth century England. His images are complex because they regard the perspectives of commoners, artists, writers, and politicians simultaneously reacting to contemporary events. His paintings and prints reveal a radical form of social satire and a fearless sense of humor in the face of a conservative aristocracy. In my painting I reproduced the *Journalist*<sup>6</sup> using oil paint and acrylic ink to confuse the painting and printmaking processes. It's an homage to Hogarth, Boswell, printmaking, and journalism.

### Pictorial Format

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<sup>6</sup> *The Journalist* (fig. 6)

In the third and fourth pieces, titled *In the wrong place...*<sup>7</sup> and *Untitled (cowboy)*<sup>8</sup>, the pictorial format recalls the flatness and decorative adornment of religious icon painting. “In the wrong place...” features floating eye balls, limbs, and hands embedded in ultramarine blue, symbols for the function of the body and their spiritual significance. The painting could also be the aftermath of a murder with the remains of the victim arranged as ephemera for display. In either case, the painting becomes one moment in a series of moments, but the viewer isn’t sure when in the timeline the event is happening. Just as in Byzantine depictions of parables and biblical events, time is occurring in an orderly, linear format. In *Untitled (cowboy)*, a figure with a ten-gallon hat occupies a red, ambiguous space with a horse below craning its head backwards, tape marks leave traces throughout the surface. Here the crime is never solved.

In both *Untitled (cowboy)* and *Orion and flowers*<sup>9</sup> there are allusions to picture making. These works are about the failure of an image’s power of illusion. Art making is plagued by failure, the false starts of a studio practice, and the scorn of critics. The process of recycling aesthetically displeasing or failed components of a work is a generative strategy. By applying color and form with standardized methods such as cutting, spraying, and taping, decisions become deliberate. This does not exclude the possibility of error, which can occur when the registration of the stencil is out of place or the airbrush malfunctions and spatters. Charcoal can leave smudges on the painting and acrylic paint can bleed through the stencil and distort the original outline. Failure means the omission of an action, but that doesn’t mean the outcome is always negative.

## Critique II

In my work, letting color, form, or space fail allows for the other elements to come forward. In a critique, whether a painting failed is decided collectively by a group of critics. In one critique, a professor commented on a painting’s thick application of burnt umber. “Look at that brown, it looks... constipated.” In another critique two professors shared an exchange,

“why is everything so... muddy. It looks like...”

“Like feces wiped on canvas?” answered the other professor.

The critiques allow for a space of freedom and external dialogue in contrast to solitary studio work. Humor, cruelty, anecdote, disagreement, etc. are allowed during critiques and if a work under scrutiny is deemed unsuccessful, solutions are pitched. Failure is an inextricable aspect of my work and scatological humor follows suit when paint is not mixed well.

To embrace commerciality in art making means using a credit card to purchase popular paint brands and seeing my work as part of a plastic continuum of art made by other artists. My work proposes to resuscitate the status of the icon and the significance of storytelling in contemporary humor. By employing antithetical compositional strategies that undermine the conventions of traditional oil painting, my work quotes the allegorical painters of art history while referencing symbols from contemporary culture. Anecdote, remark, and noise are humorous strategies deployed by comedians to elicit laughter from the audience. My paintings work in the same way, but are bolstered by modernism, Medieval art, and the irreverence of twentieth century avant-

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<sup>7</sup> *In the wrong place...* (fig. 2)

<sup>8</sup> *Untitled (cowboy)* (fig. 5)

<sup>9</sup> *Orion and flowers* (fig. 1)

garde prose. When does a conflict between two people get out of hand, when is it satirized in a meme, and when do accessorized iconographic symbols lose their meaning? Hopefully the invention of new allegories establishes a dialogue with the past that contemporary humans can understand visually.

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