

Art for Silliness's Sake

Schneider Hall Galleries | University of Louisville

Exhibition: June 2-August 4, 2023

Reception: Friday June 2, 5-7 PM

Art for Silliness's Sake defines and explores silly art through works created since 2016, featuring local artists like Elsa Oldham Hansen and EVPL. Silly art comes as a response to the social and political atmosphere of America from about 2016, in which time tragedy and trauma have been sandwiched between ridiculous, absurd, and over-the-top oddities. These moments, debated back-to-back in 24-hour news and on social media, produce an ever-mounting hopelessness and a sense of absurdity among viewers. Instead of giving into these feelings, however, some artists have responded with a defiantly anti-nihilistic attitude and an indulgence in the silly—or, in other words, with silly art.

This exhibition defines silly art as, in short, a humorous, anti-nihilistic descendent of twentieth century postmodernism. This art uses silliness, here defined as playful, lighthearted, or amusing, to elicit joy or a laugh from its viewer. Taking postmodernism as its antecedent, silly art often collapses “high” art into “low” by incorporating elements of everyday life or popular culture (particularly internet or “meme” culture) into institutionally accepted art mediums or practices. Additionally, silly art rejects the skepticism and nihilism of postmodernism. Instead, it asserts that meaninglessness is an invitation to create meaning within one’s own life that is not based in institution or higher power but in the individual. Its anti-nihilism, while still recognizing meaninglessness as a common condition of our contemporary moment, is ultimately hopeful.

Under this framework, *Art for Silliness's Sake* also explores the unique affective and critical power of silly art through the work of Sunday Nobody and Smac McCreanor, as well as the forementioned Elsa Oldham Hansen and EVPL. These artists’ works can be loosely divided into two categories: that which creates silly art for the sake of silliness itself, including the former, and that which uses silliness as a critical tool, including the latter.

Cheeto Sarcophagus (2022), by Sunday Nobody (the artist’s pseudonym and online persona), is a sincere, yet frivolous, attempt to preserve a bag of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos for future generations. The bag of Cheetos, encased in resin, is suspended inside a hand made and hermetically sealed 3000-pound concrete sarcophagus that was buried. This exhibition presents evidence of this artistic work. In this piece, Sunday Nobody holds in tension earnest artistic process and triviality. While we may ask, “why should this item represent our era of humanity?”, this work asks why not.

On the other hand, *I Didn't Say "Simon Says."* (2021), by multidisciplinary artist EVPL, uses silliness as a critical tool in order to reflect on the effects of the pandemic. The artist accomplishes through a pandemic-era "Twister" board. On this board, the solid-colored circles are replaced with the symbol used on the floor in the midst the COVID pandemic to show the appropriate distance that people should maintain from others when waiting in a line. By contrasting the image of play with one of precaution, EVPL demonstrates how the pandemic mediated our spaces and interactions with each other and, through the silliness evoked by this contrast, the absurdity of our collective situation.

Whether for its own sake or as a critical tool, silly art can be and is a complicated reflection on the present that is steeped in the symbols of popular and internet culture, and to analyze it is to look deeper at how people are reacting to these turbulent times. Silly art may just show us how to make joy and hope in the midst of it, too.

Art for Silliness's Sake, curated by Abby Howerton, is on view at the Schneider Hall Gallery from June 2nd until August 4th. An opening reception will be held on Friday, June 2nd from 5-7 pm.