Eric Fertman
A Comic Turn

April 1 - June 30, 2014

Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art

Cover Image:
Eric Fertman
Vase
2010
Black Stained Oak, Steel, Fresh Flower

Eric Fertman
Grandma Dot in Eric Fertman's Studio
2010

Eric Fertman: A Comic Turn

Humor defies expectation. This exhibition, *Eric Fertman: A Comic Turn* seeks to uncover approaches to object-based humor. In Eric Fertman's conceptually motivated yet light-hearted sculpture, artistic gestures and motifs short-circuit our expectations of the familiar to comic effect. For this survey of his work from 2007-2014, I have also enlisted three artists working in the medium of video. They enlarge the sense of humor we find embedded in sculptural form to that which is acted out by performers with objects. The notion of a comic turn is of expectation unsettled—of turning a corner to find a moment of surprise as we experience ideas through our bodies and our eyeballs.

Eric Fertman
Inky Strut
2011
Black Stained Oak

Screwball Objects

Eric Fertman's sculpture offers many object lessons. It's a good study of essential principles of the medium: the description of a figure in various degrees of abstraction or anthropomorphic articulation; the valence of a sculpture's base to the floor; woodworking and its material qualities.

The work carries cultural significance. With its bodily associations, Fertman's sculpture challenges assumptions of gender typically assigned to the medium as masculine; his works are androgynous and have an erotic charge that is approachable and formally resolute. His works often condense pop culture references or commonplace objects with those of high culture and Modernism.

Fertman's work holds art historical weight, putting a contemporary practice in dialogue with a much longer tradition. Yet it also finds amusement in the conceits of an historical canon that plucks specific forms and artistic figures and elevates them to icon status. In his own way, Fertman elevates the value of formal eccentricity. He takes the cartoonish form of a clubfoot, for instance, with its brash and bulbous heels splayed out, and elevates it onto a pristine museum pedestal.

Indeed, the most-obsessed-over form in Fertman's typology of bodily and geometric shapes is the clubfoot. In his ongoing improvisatory series of "Boneys," Fertman elevates the status of the foot-like object to a near fetish, a love object. Observing a *Boney*, we see a clubfoot connecting to a

Eric Fertman
Bird In Space (Pigeon Toe)
2013
Oak

knobby joint that looks like a knee from which a lanky stem juts out, often curving and joining into another clubfoot. As accompaniments to these truncated bodies that suggest the whole, titles become significant spaces for us to fill in meaning: *Boney Adonis*, *Boney Thinker*, *Boney Loafer*. They suggest personalities. And these foot-body-agglomerations give way to attitudes and actions: *Inky Strut*, *Nude Drifter*, *Walking and Pissing*.

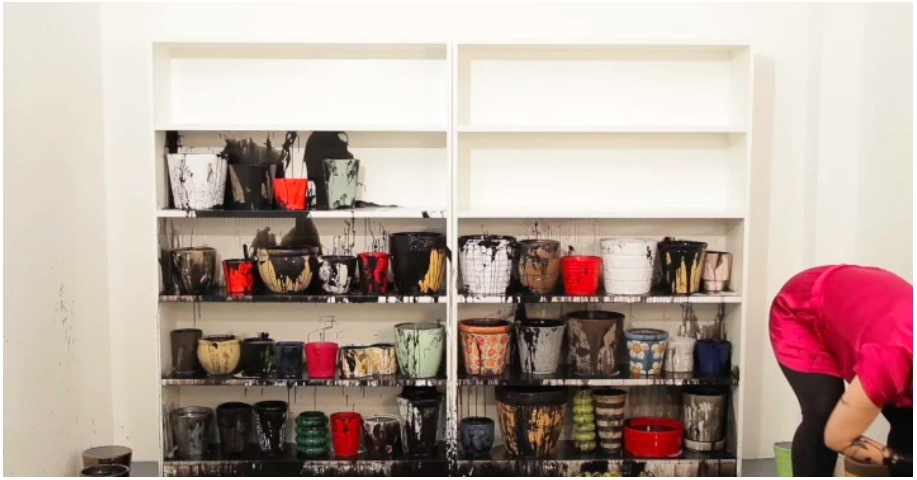
Fertman's clubfoot motif puts his work in direct dialogue with painter Philip Guston. Fertman quotes the earlier artist's use of the shoe as an obsessive motif and psychic device, but diverges sharply in mood and tone. Guston was originally an Abstract Expressionist and color field painter who made a radical break towards figuration. For him, the cartoonish shoe rendered the life of familiar objects claustrophobic and haunting. His description of the object, slathered on the canvas in oil, where it was piled in mounds, undersides upturned to reveal cobbler's nails, was both bizarre and terribly commonplace. By contrast, Fertman's sculpture takes its own path forward, finding the foot to be a lighter element that can tell different stories—even jokes.

Fertman's clubfeet are promiscuous. They multiply. They mix. In *Bird in Space* (Pigeon Toe), 2013, we are confronted with a portmanteau of high and low culture. Fertman invokes another artist precursor, Constantin Brancusi and his iconic Modernism sculpture, *Bird in Space* (1923). In this bastard iteration of *Bird in Space*, however, its spindle, ordinarily set on a modest cylindrical base and idealized as a pure form, is seamlessly sandwiched with a pair of clubfeet. The newly married parts are given a uniform

Eric Fertman
Endless Column
2012
Painted Plywood

material treatment of darkly stained wood. We can interpret the mixture of art historical source and cartoon as productively ambivalent—either admiring or irreverent, or both.

With the *Boneys* and clubfeet as entry points into Fertman's work, we are left with the most singular impact of his far-ranging menagerie of forms: their physical comedy—that is, comedy being given shape and objecthood. The experience of sculpture is similarly physical. When we encounter dimensional form, we test the boundaries of language and provide ourselves an autonomous index of meaning—not one that is suddenly separated from thinking but one that provides an alternative measure. Ideas, literalized in objects, words and actions become embodied concepts.

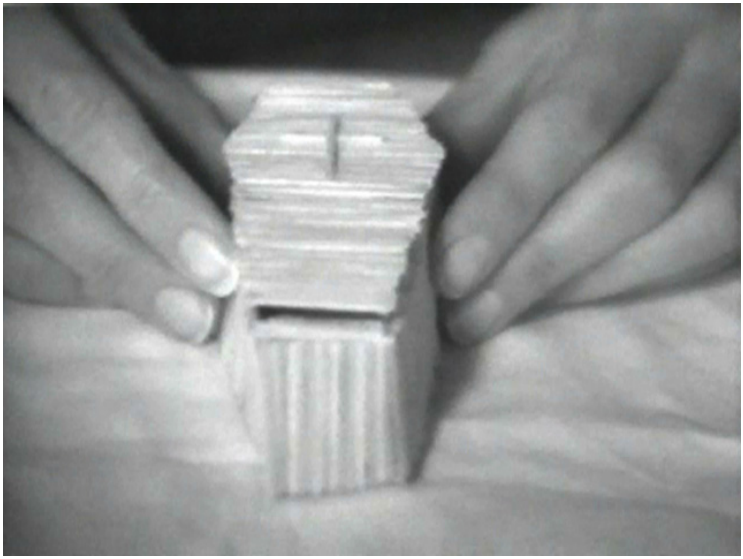


Kate GIlmore
Pot, Kettle, Black
2010
11:55 minute HD video loop
Courtesy the Artist and David Castillo Gallery

Humor With Objects

The conversation around object-based humor in Fertman's sculpture is enlarged in this exhibition by the inclusion of specific early conceptual and performance art directed at the video camera. The embodiment of an idea through interaction with an object is a defining parameter of instruction-based conceptual art of the Seventies and beyond, for which video was a primary transmitting tool. As the three video works included the exhibition propose, the simplicity and direct transcription of ideas through the artist's interaction with objects further blurs the lines between high and low art, as does Fertman's sculpture. In this exhibition, short, situational sketches by Kate Gilmore ("Pot, Kettle, Black" 2011), Cynthia Maughan ("Coffin from Toothpicks"1970), and Ger van Elk ("The Well Shaven Cactus" 1969) confound the status of non-art and art object and confuse the difference between task-oriented action and absurdist gesture.

In "Pot, Kettle, Black" (2010), performance artist Kate Gilmore stages a scenario in which her insistent compulsion to complete an action and order a taxonomy of objects—pots brimming with black ink—results in an unexpected clash of conflicting drives. Gilmore's works often involve entrapment, endurance, and play on expectations of how femininity is to be performed. In "Pot, Kettle, Black," as the ink spills over the pristine white shelves, Gilmore orders chaos—or vice versa: she disrupts order— in a way that makes good sense and also a complete mess. This performance work is situated alongside a wall of Fertman's Boney sculptures. In this arrangement, verbal and visual symmetries emerge between each artist's



Cynthia Maughan
Coffin From Toothpicks
1975
1:54 min, video
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

use of multiples, urging us to consider the value of repetition as a humorous device.

In another area of *A Comic Turn*, Fertman's brightly colored installation *Room* (2010) and surrounding sculptures look as though they were torn from a cartoon animation, having suffered the aftermath of a Wiley Coyote explosion. Ragged-edged tables and standing remnants of a wall, as well as a decimated skeleton mounted on a geometric base within *Room* exude morbidity and chromatic punch.

The morbid humor of this installation finds its complement in Los Angeles-based conceptual artist Cynthia Maughan's wry two-minute sketch, "Coffin From Toothpicks" (1970). As the story goes, the pictured woman (Maughan, of whose figure only hands are visible), presents the work of art that she has fashioned during a long hospital stay. Maughan's deadpan recitation is deadly serious while her demonstration of the miniature sculpture is as didactic as grade school show-and-tell. The effect of these two elements together disorients our sense of time and scale, make-believe and reality. Through her performance with her pithy yet obsessive sculpture, "Coffin From Toothpicks" satirizes traditional expectations around the artistic masterpiece. Maughan's cool, Lo-Fi aesthetic is characteristic of 1970s video art and its tone is kindred to other Los Angeles-based conceptual artists of the era, such as John Baldessari and William Wegman, yet they possess a camp flair. Here, as in many other early video works of the time, the camera becomes a mirror and a self-broadcast medium. The vignette is part of a larger series Maughan made throughout

Ger van Elk
The Well Shaven Cactus
1969.
1:31.16 mm film transferred to DVD
Image Courtesy the Artist and Grimm Gallery, Amsterdam

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the seventies in a confessional yet detached style. "The Way Underpants Really Are" (1975) is another of her tragicomic in-camera performances that walks the edge between sketch comedy and confession as she slowly reveals tattered 'granny panties' beneath a white skirt. Like Fertman's mixtures of high and low, strange and familiar, optimistic and vaguely sinister, Maughan's work strikes a unique comic tone that resonates with his work.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, in Ger van Elk's video, "Well Shaven Cactus" (1969), we encounter a mixture of overpowering control and fetishistic love directed towards a cactus. As the artist runs an electric razor across it, Van Elk disarms the plant's most characteristic feature. The plant is clearly being stripped of its defenses in a scenario that springs with tension. His comic gesture anthropomorphizes the houseplant and amounts to a co-production of meaning between the object and the performer.

Gerard Schum, a German cameraman, filmmaker and video producer shot the original 16mm film for a series entitled *Identifications* (*Fernsehprojekt*), underscoring the task-oriented and instructional quality of conceptual art mediated through time-based media (in this case film which was then transferred to video and broadcast on tv). The series documented instruction-based works by leading male European conceptual artists from the 1960s in one uninterrupted segment. Among them were Joseph Beuys, Ulrich Rückriem, Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, and Gilbert and George. In several of the works of *Identifications*, such as Van Elk's the, role of the camera is confined to that of a recording instrument. According to Schum, the title of the series is to be taken at its name, as *Identifica-*

Eric Fertman
Fluorescent Fluorescent
2010
Stained oak, steel, stainless steel

tions captures the evidentiary nature of the art. It underscores the unity between the artist performing the action and the resulting work: "We no longer perceive the work of art as a painting or sculpture not connected with the artist," Schum said. "On television, the artist can reduce his work to an attitude, a simple gesture, referring to his concept." Here, as in the great tradition of physical comedy, there is virtually no distance between action and meaning.

Literalism (which relates to language games and the association of meaning between things and their names) is a key strategy, ironically, of physical humor. Humor is representational divergence measured in precise degrees of closeness to its referent. We find something funny because it says or does something its not, and in this diminishment or exaggeration emerges the contour of the comic object—a shape, a thing robbed of its nuance.

The game between what a thing says and does offers a gap in which expectation can be dismantled, even when the title and the object seem redundant or want to express the same concept. The means of arriving at a meaning is nonetheless different. For example, Fertman's "Fluorescent Fluorescent" is a replica of a double row of fluorescent light bulbs—the kind you might find in a corporate office or an artist's workshop. Carved in wood, and painted fluorescent red, the work exists as a visual pun and no less as a real physical object pulsating the retina. Here, the conceptual and comic, physical form and idea are close cousins.

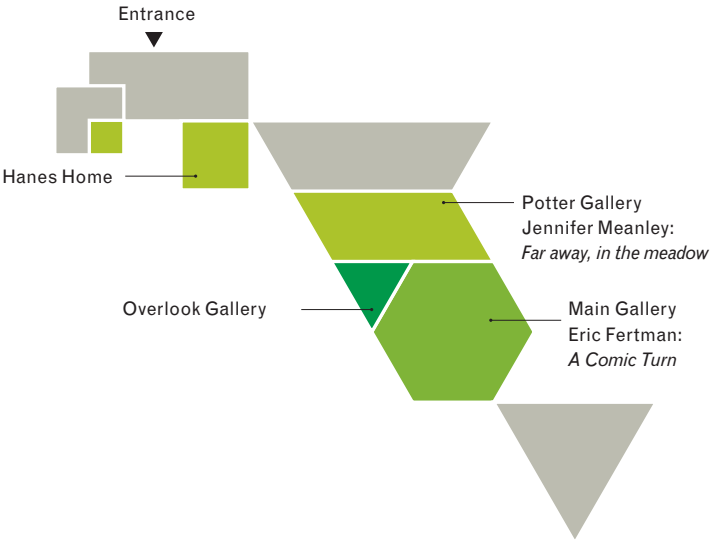
Eric Fertman
Head 3
2010
Japanese woodblock print on paper

Eric Fertman
Head 6
2010
Japanese woodblock print on paper

Taken together, these works show us how comedy takes shape, embodies ideas through visual form, and pitches its delivery. The three video works discussed here are meant to instigate and provoke quickly legible moments of object-oriented humor in conversation with Fertman's slower burn. In his work, we get the joke and then we linger on the object. Meanwhile, video holds a mirror up to sculpture and reflects back to us. Fertman's sculpture, with it's cleverness and comic sleights, amounts to a singular kind of physical comedy, mobilized by our bodily apprehension and the associations we draw from what we see. The particular comic gestures of Eric Fertman's art are—I believe—their most spirited quality, and a source of rewarding interplay.

–Cora Fisher

Eric Fertman (1974) was born in Boston, Massachusetts. He earned his BFA in 1997 from Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. He lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.



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