

playing with himself: a conversation with matthew flores

At times silly, absurd, and dazzling, the work of Matthew Flores is rooted in strategies of misdirection and appropriation, and orbits around an interest in how the art viewing experience can be analogized with the format of jokes, performance, and the theatrical. The US-born artist works to make this transactional nature of both art and comedy apparent to the viewer in order to shift or interrogate their understanding of themselves as audience. A subtext of this is the aesthetic and implication of failure - jokes are inherently bound up with failing, or falling flat, or bombing, or even dying. We chat with Flores about embracing failure both in form and content, cartoons and clowns, and what it means to make work cloaked in comedy.



I wanted to begin by asking you about your relationship with Wile E. Coyote. The character seems to be quite the idée fixe for you, appearing both in some of your work but also in your conversations about your practice. What about this character is instructive in understanding your art?

I like to have the TV or radio or Youtube running in the background while I'm working in the studio - like all artists, I imagine. At some point the ambient noise ended up on Looney Tunes, and something immediately clicked between my research into failure as a form and content and Wile E. Coyote's shenanigans out in the desert. Without sounding too corny, I saw something of myself in him, scheming grand schemes and planning plots and falling on his face a lot. It's maybe the most obvious touchstone when you're an artist interested in humor and failing, but it was a very important revelation. In thinking and writing about Coyote, I stumbled on the rules Chuck Jones laid out when he was conceptualizing the universe of Coyote and Roadrunner. He of course broke each and every one of these rules over the decades, but the list made apparent that there was a careful, thoughtful logic to the never-ending, Sisyphean

absurdity of the cartoon. Hopefully, I'm cultivating the same attitude in my work.

Do you consider the Coyote an artist, then? Or are you more like the coyote than vice versa?

Both? More generally, the coyote pops up a lot in indigenous cultures as a trickster figure, one that creates conditions where chaos and uncertainty have room to take over. This feels very much like how I create, and dovetails nicely with a long trajectory of artists I admire, from Duchamp on down. My understanding of Coyote and tricksters evolved when I read Lewis Hyde's *Trickster Makes This World* (1998)¹, which nuances the figure and gives us a way to think about Coyote as much, much more than a flat... well, as a flat cartoon.

In the cartoons, it seems as if Coyote is the victim of the real trickster, not the other way around.

Exactly! This is where it gets really complex, because the Coyote is always the victim, but only ever because he lit the dynamite in the first place. Roadrunner antagonizes and annoys him to be sure, but Coyote is such a tragic trickster

1 Thanks, Courtney and Mark!

because he's always falling into traps of his own making. Roadrunner is always incidental, even if eating him is the Coyote's primary motivation. As Hyde tells it, the original precondition, the spark that sets a creature down the path of becoming a trickster, is appetite. He is hungry, and this puts him into action, eventually becoming somewhat of a master of a certain kind of creative deception. But this tension always exists between predator and prey, and satisfying appetite, and Coyote is a classic example of a trickster that exists oscillating between these poles. He is at once hero and fool, clever predator and stupid prey. His hunger forces him to devise clever stratagems to catch a meal, but it is also his hunger that sometimes forces him to lose his wits altogether. For Coyote, and probably all trickster figures, the tragedy is baked into the magic of cleverness.

If eating Roadrunner is Coyote's motivation, what's your motivation as a sort of tragic trickster artist yourself?

It varies from piece to piece, but suffice it to say that the Roadrunner is a tidy stand-in for the audience or viewer. Ultimately, what's interesting to me about Coyote beyond all of his tools, or his antics, or whatever he represents about

the trickster as artist and the artist as trickster, is how he represents the idea of intrinsic failure, and what that says about art and communication more broadly.

How so?

Well, to a certain degree it boils down to a kind of extended meditation on desire and suffering. The gap between these two - between what you want and the fact that you don't have it - is a supremely human thing, perhaps THE human thing. It's not just that you don't have it, but can't have it, because once it's within our grasp, that tension falls away and desire is extinguished. So, fulfilling desire is always melting through our fingers. Of course, this is something corporeal and tangible - it's about food, it's about sex, it's about everything - but I think it's also an incredibly eloquent and precise metaphor for not only what it's like to make art, but what it's like to exist as a being trying to create meaning. Once I'm about to grasp an idea, to write or speak or make it into existence, it gets away. Every time. The temporality of thinking, writing, speaking, making, living, whatever, necessitates meaning always getting away, just out of reach.

Communication - visual or

otherwise - is always groping toward what it "means" without ever really getting there. It's that same gap between desire and fulfillment. Lyotard conflates the unclosability of this gap with suffering. So, in that crazy desert, Coyote certainly suffered physically when he falls off a cliff or blows himself up or gets crushed by his boulder, but he also suffers when the roadrunner slips through his fingers each and every time. As Lyotard puts it pointedly, "an enjoyment of what we possessed is now lost."²

So we, like Coyote, are doomed to fail.

Perhaps. But it's an interesting question of whether he's actually failing, or because the game is rigged, if he's just...living? If the gap between Coyote's desire and the fulfillment of catching Roadrunner is inevitably and intentionally unclosable, is he still a failure?

I think this line of inquiry is what led me to thinking about Sisyphus, and specifically Albert Camus's re-framing of the myth away from a moralizing tale to one of embraced absurdity. Coyote is most definitely a Sisyphean figure, doomed to

*2 Jean-Francois Lyotard.
"Can Thought go without a Body" *The Inhuman*. Stanford University Press, 1988: 13.*

forever repeat his unsuccessful task. And yet - there is always something joyful about how he goes about it, always a smile while he's putting together his latest ACME contraption. The game is rigged, but by embracing this fact, Coyote finds some individual agency, and perhaps even a degree of freedom, just like Camus's Sisyphus. I like this view, because it injects purpose into making art about failure. For a while I wasn't sure if I was rigging the game in my own favor, and thereby cutting myself off at the knees. When failure is your form and your content, it is on some level impossible to fail, creating a wicked feedback loop. But finding these absurd gaps that open up the topic keeps it fresh; there's something very interesting about asking yourself the right questions and seeing what answers you come to.

*Why does he keep at it, then?
Why not take a wider look at the rigged situation and change your circumstance?*

Because we all do. It doesn't make for an interesting cartoon if Coyote realizes his larger problem and goes to work at Arby's or whatever. It's a crisis we as artists are forced to reckon with every time we step into the studio. I often think about how impotent being an artist can feel, how unsubstantial of a mark



Stills from "Soup or Sonic," 1980.

our gestures actually make on the world. Art in general exists in such a specific bubble, with specific parameters and specific audiences, that sometimes it would feel more productive to go be a lawyer or fix roofs or something. And yet we continue making art, because that's the rigged situation we've chosen to embrace.

For example, the instance where Coyote does catch the Roadrunner-

Wait, he does?

Oh, sure. Not until 1980.
[Laughs]

I had no idea.

It happens once, in a cartoon called "Soup or Sonic." There's a really great sight gag where Coyote chases Roadrunner through a pipe that's getting narrower and narrower, and when they run out the other side they've both been shrunk down to miniature. Coyote gets Roadrunner to run back into the pipe, with the idea that reversing

the process will return them to normal. It works - but just for Roadrunner.

Huh.

I know, right? So this ant-sized Coyote finally catches his eternal prey - he smiles and hugs the bird around the ankle and the orchestra gives us a little celebratory kick, but when Coyote puts on his bib and takes out the knife and fork, he realizes his now compounded dilemma. Roadrunner towers over him, is literally a giant looming problem.



His "meep meep" is horrifyingly deep. Coyote faces the sublime, and is completely powerless and impotent.

Jesus.

The best part is that after a beat, he turns to us, and holds up two signs: "Okay wise guys, You always wanted me to catch him," and "Now what do I do?" Not only are we *implicated* now, but we're rendered impotent too, not given resolution, because the episode just...ends! If we can understand the fourth

wall as a representation of the distance between ourselves and the object, then ending like this shatters that divide and *still* leaves us unsatiated.

That's perverse.

It's fucked up. We fulfill our deepest, most innate desire, and are left paralyzed. That's all, folks!

It was a big thing for me to realize that the gap between intent and realization and communication between myself and the viewer

will never be bridged. Instead of being very didactic and hyper specific in the meaning and interpretations of my work, I let all of my personal references and choices coexist with all of the accidental happy accidents I encourage in such a way that all of that information can exist for the viewer instinctually without getting in the way of their experience.

In a way you went from telling to showing.

Something like that. But that's

not to say it's not valuable to be specific. It's a great improv technique, in fact. Del Close, the sort of wizard/guru/grand poobah figure in the Chicago improv scene-

Second City Del Close?

Second City Del Close. He would teach that throwing in one or two very specific observations or details is much funnier than grasping for generalities. "Pass the Heinz" is funnier than "Pass the catsup." By being more specific, you're being more general, which means being more accessible.

It sounds like what you do when you want someone to buy a lie.

It's exactly what you do when you want someone to buy a lie. There's a lot of overlap between making a joke and making art and, frankly, bullshitting.

So do you consider your work bullshit? Certainly, it works a lot with leading the viewer on and not necessarily giving them what you promised, much less what they want.

[Laughs] Probably! When I'm at my worst, artistically speaking, it's definitely bullshit. But I hope these moments, where I'm being more withholding, let the generous moments be that

much more fulfilling. Need some sour with the sweet, yanno?

What if someone only sees a sour piece?

I mean, it absolutely happens, and there's only so much you can do to control how a piece exists in a space. I love the moments where something rude or silly I made gets to live in a room and stick its tongue out at very serious, capital-a Artworks. There's something incredibly satisfying about those moments. But at the same time, I advocate as much as I can for my work to live in an ecosystem with itself - the gallery is very much a stage, or a stand-up set, and it's my job to guide the viewer through the space in a managed way, just as a comedian would do verbally on stage. The pieces are very much designed to hang together as a group and to bleed into one another and cross-pollinate in the viewer's eye and mind.

Put another way, it's helpful to build one-liners into a set to really make the longer, more thoughtful statements more apparent and sharper. Both are valid strategies, but they are made all the stronger by being in contrast with one another.

Do you want your work to be funny? Or make the viewer laugh? Is there a difference between the two?

I think it's great if someone sees my work and laughs, for sure. But that's a very different thing than making art that is intended to be funny. Humor is obviously a tremendously subjective thing, and by no means do I consider myself a comedian or even a humorist. Positioning my art within a wider conversation of both art and humor allows it to be accessed in ways that are more democratic, and ultimately more visceral and...lizard brain? It's not hip to go Freudian anymore, but of course he theorized that laughter was an expression of or a reaction to something taboo or otherwise unacceptable to relate with. So, laughing is very revealing!

Freud would also say that laughing is an expression of tension or anxiety.

Yeah, well, so would Steve Martin. [Laughs]

At the end of the day, the things I make are not always intentionally funny, but if someone laughs at it, or with it, or because of it, I consider that a successful experience. I mean, when was the last time a work of art provoked that strong of an experience for you? How often does that happen?

Do you know the story of the

ancient Greek painter Zeuxis?

He painted grapes but was out-illusioned by Parrhasius.

[Laughs] Very good! But he also laughed so hard that he died.

Goodness. What was the killer joke?

As the story goes, he painted a funny-looking old woman as Aphrodite, and he found his own painting so funny that it killed him.

I'd argue he found his own cleverness so funny that it killed him.

Yeah, I guess you kinda had to be there. [Laughs]

At any rate, I like this story a lot because it highlights not only how potent art can be in provoking laughter, but also how closely connected humor is with death. There's a reason that we talk about comedy as killing, or bombing, or dying on stage. "Cracking up" is as much about the fracturing of the subject, of losing your agency and being forced into something involuntary as it is about getting laughs. There's a very good reason comedy has always, always been paired with tragedy, and that laughing is so physically adjacent to crying.

So that by wrapping your art in the costume of joke-telling, it allows the viewer to relate to it in a different way than they otherwise would approach an art object?

Well, first I'm not wrapping my art in anything; I make with a very clear goal of constructing the viewer's experience of a piece to be the same as they would experience a joke. It's all about pacing, it's all about building and breaking tension, it's all about subverting their expectations. But that doesn't necessarily make it a joke, and to flip the equation, a joke built in this way doesn't necessarily become art.

How do you accomplish or manifest these joke mechanics in your art? Is it built into the work itself or does it involve its staging?

Both, certainly. The objects and images I create often refer to theatricality as a general theme, with curtains and microphones and other visual cues to key the audience into an established language of comedy. I like to expand this into how the pieces operate as well. For instance, something like *Self-Portrait as Delayed Recognition* is a still image, but because of the dazzling pattern,

and the emphasis and rupturing of flatness, it's designed to keep your eye moving around, almost in a narrative manner. I think this process and delay can be conflated with how a joke is structured, with a rise and fall and ultimate arrival.

I can expand this mechanism even further by adjusting the length of the fuse, so to speak, as you move from piece to piece in a room. So perhaps *Maximum Tension, Suspended Release* is a quick bit, something you can see and process quickly, but that experience juxtaposed with something like *No Punchline a Knife*, where you are forced to sit and spend time with the piece before you're allowed access to resolution, can be very fruitful in manipulating how the audience experiences the situation I've written for them.

What do you do when you don't know what to do?

When I run into a creative block or am having a hard time making anything or even thinking through specific issues, it's very easy for me to fall down a deep internet hole, and more often than not I run into something useful during the descent. YouTube is great and I spend a lot of time getting lost in Wikipedia. You'd be amazed at the connections that emerge



Self-Portrait as Delayed Recognition, 2017.

unintentionally. I think falling into these research periods is just another form of making or thinking, in that I sort of turn off my brain and allow myself to read off in wild directions. It can be very literally inspiring though; combing through low-count Youtube is how I ran into the video of Emmett Kelly sweeping the spotlight.

Which your piece “Sweeping up the Spotlight (For Emmett)” is a direct response to.

Yeah, absolutely. I think a professor of mine³ had mentioned him as someone to look into at some point but it really was serendipitous to come across this very tidy, very beautiful performance just hiding out in a dusty corner of the internet.

Tell me about the original video. What about it connected with you?

Kelly is the sort of arch-typical sad clown, with a touch of hobo around the edges, so from the beginning it's jarring to have this incredibly forlorn character layered with children laughing. But beyond that, I really felt the arc of this story communicates everything my work is trying to touch on with an incredibly economy of movement and detail

and gesture. I'd be annoyed if it weren't so beautiful.

A difference between you and Kelly is that the spotlight finds him, while you're the one seeking it out.

[Laughs] Is it that obvious?

You're the main character, literally or otherwise, in almost all of your work!

Not all of it...

And when you're not, your absence is the main character, so to speak.

I mean, sure. But one way I wanted to stretch away from Kelly, to complicate his story, is to keep myself, or the character of myself, at least, from ever finding the same resolution Emmett finds. In the piece, I never actually find a rug to sweep the spotlight under. I gave myself a doomed task. The loop here is important, because like a lot of my work, it allows me to subvert the timing of the joke. For as lovely and haunting as Kelly's original performance is, it is still a clown acting for laughs, or pathos, or whatever. It's still on some level a joke. So, if we think of jokes as narrative or linear - even if they wander or go off on tangents, they still rely on a setup and punchline,

a building and breaking of tension, a before and after - then if I loop this format, it really lays bare the mechanics of how a joke operates, and gives the viewer space to consider their role in the mechanism. We both end up entangled in the setup, looking for resolution beyond a punchline.

You become Sisyphus in the void.

With orange socks.

It's an interesting question or problem to pose to yourself, making jokes that are meant to never land.

They're always meant to land, but in ways outside of how we conventionally expect either comedy or art to function. But that being said, I do think the lines between both are really getting blurry in interesting ways. The term “post-comedy” is starting to get thrown around - it sounds super pretentious and art historical and probably is a little bit, but it is a tool to think through certain trends in humor that, for a lot of reasons, are bubbling up more and more.

So we're beyond comedy?

No, but it can feel that way sometimes.

It's hard to make a joke that's as



Stills from Sweeping the Spotlight (For Emmett), 2019.



³ Thanks, Ben!

absurd as anything happening today.

Which is exactly sort of the point, that things like *Baskets* or *Atlanta* or *Barry* or Drew Michael's stand up or Marc Maron's podcast are built on hyper specific mood and tone and pacing and character. Again, by being more specific, you become more general. And this allows room for the more conventional one-liners or moments of slapstick or non sequiturs to be meaningful and evocative and funny in their own right.

It sounds a bit like Dada.

I think a lot of the historical specificities and tensions that allowed for something like dada to emerge as a tool of resistance or at least, cultural processing are mirrored or repeated today. It's another, grander loop.

Who are some of your art idols or major influences?

Bruce Nauman is a huge touchstone, for sure. His assertion that anything he does as an artist counts as art was a major revelation for me, probably even more than all of the sly clever things Duchamp was up to. It really turned everything in on itself and opened up an entire world of possibilities, just with a slight

reframing of my perspective of being in the studio. More often than not, he is just a weird guy doing dumb stuff in a room. And, as a weird guy who often does dumb stuff in rooms, this was like discovering fire. His humor and bizarro playfulness keep me inspired to cultivate my own and use it to my advantage.

A lot of my favorite artists, or the ones that motivate me to make, are simply people who take a really stupid idea and take it to a completely logical yet outrageously absurd conclusion. Mel Brooks likes to say that if you're going to go up to the bell, you better ring it. Maurizio Cattelan's work is almost exclusively very silly ideas executed flawlessly and with supreme confidence. Ragnar Kjartansson does the same but infuses such an infectious joy and emotion into his work that it defuses any of the smugness of his character's persona. Nathaniel Mellors and Erkka Nissinen told a Finnish creation epic with dick puppets and cavemen costumes.

Your favorite artists seem to be men that are self-consciously making fun of the artist as character.

It's a lot of smirking European dudes in suits, I know.

What about in terms of comedy? Your work is so deeply involved in the intersections of comedy and art, and in thinking of the two as equivalents, so where do you pull inspiration from that side of the equation?

I think a lot about Andy Kaufman, which is a nice parallel to the artists I mentioned earlier because his whole act is a deep investigation of the comedian as character, and using those conventions and boundaries to completely subvert the audience's expectations of what they're supposed to see on a stage. His use of time and timing in particular has been very informative to how I think through the viewer's experience of my work. One of his infamous bits involved getting behind the microphone and starting to sing "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall," which garnered some chuckles because of the silliness of it. But as he worked his way through the bottles..."90 Bottles of Beer on the Wall, 75 Bottles of Beer on the Wall," the audience slowly realized that he fully intended to sing the entire goddamn song.

Oh no!

I know! So he had the handful of audience members who flatly got up and left, another handful that sort of sat there, befuddled, and slowly the crowd would get

more and more hostile, down to 50 bottles, down past 40 bottles, until at some point the performance started to land, and the audience would be hysterically cheering him down to the last bottle. Sometimes he would end the set there, but sometimes he would like, start telling jokes. Can you imagine!

What I appreciate most about the bit is the full out commitment to the performance and the conviction it would take to keep it going as the boos got louder and louder. This can be a very useful tactic in the gallery space.

What does a boo sound like in a gallery space?

Probably someone moving on without taking in the experience. I'd be over the moon if someone actually booed my work when they saw it, because that means it touched them in a way much deeper than their usual experience. That feels like a successful metric for art.

It's no surprise that people believe he faked his death, and why Kaufman as a character is still such a vital point of conversation decades after the fact.

There's a component of this kind of joking that for better or for worse really seems to

resonate on the internet today. I'm thinking of things like "Too Many Cooks," where a cheesy 80's sitcom theme song is repeated again and again and again and again and when the seams start to rip, it opens a space to get very dark, and to make a full circle return to the beginning. I suppose you could put the Lasagna Cat guys on this list too.

....Lasagna Cat?

Oh! You don't know Lasagna Cat?

I'm afraid not, but I'm also afraid for you to tell me more.

Okay, so these two artists found a very old, very gross, very upsetting Garfield costume in a thrift store or in the garbage or something, and started a web series where they recreated each installment of the comic in video form. I love it because it's an incredibly dumb idea, that on one level is possible but because Garfield has been around for decades and has thousands upon thousands of strips, is also a task doomed to failure. So, the first chunk of videos are fairly straightforward recreations, but as the scope of the project begins to become apparent, the videos increasingly slide into absurdist music videos and cinematic parody. At one point,

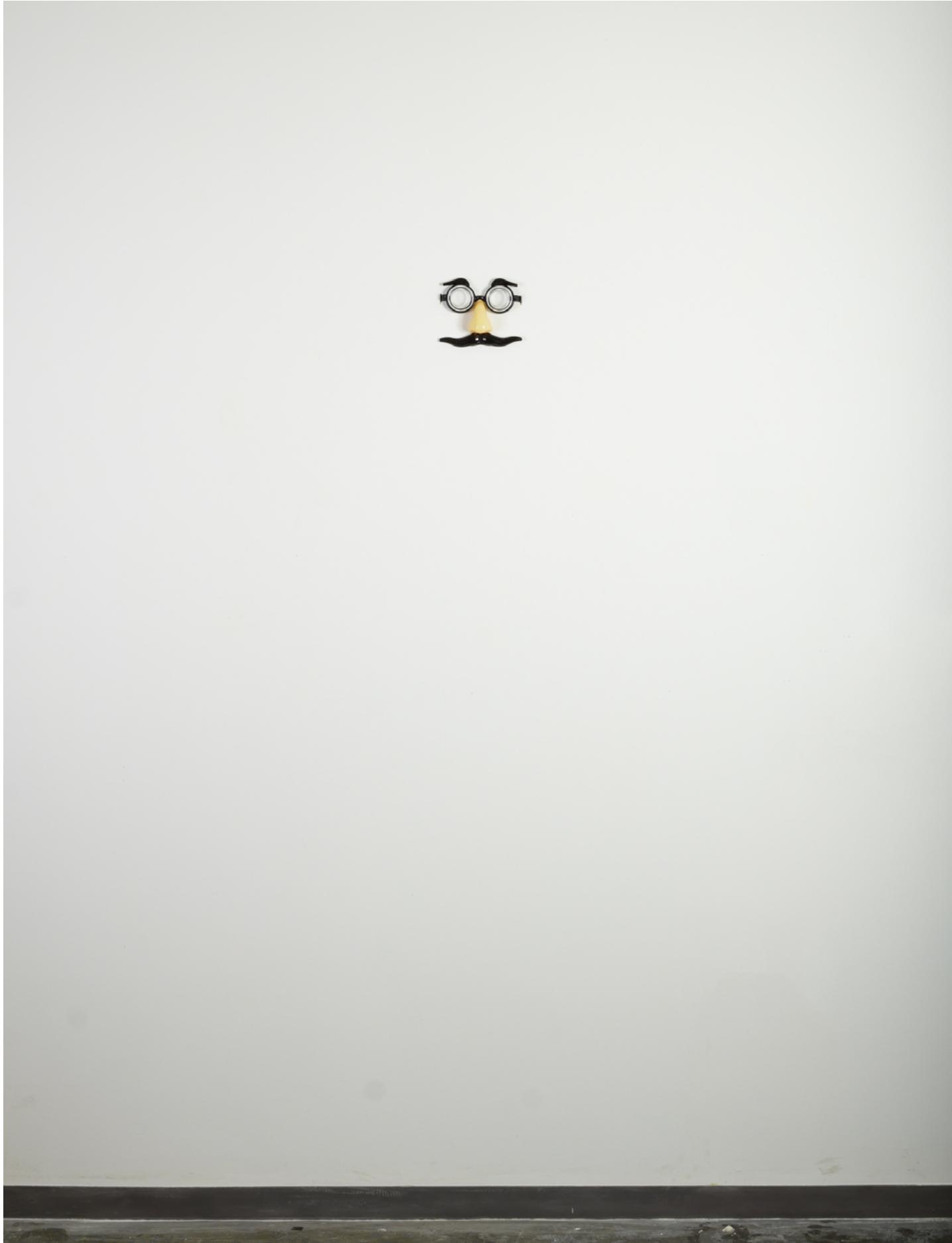
they take a nine-year hiatus, and out of nowhere return with a toll-free number asking people to call in and report their name and sexual histories.

Um.

No, wait, I promise this circles back. They tally the results and make a five hour long video, faithfully and painstakingly shooting and editing the responses. It's sort of breathtaking when you imagine the amount of work that went into this completely ridiculous project. The internet can allow for this gesture of taking a joke way too far in a way that is at once easier and more difficult. You have unlimited time and space, but what's keeping your viewer from being distracted and clicking away? On the other hand, performances that exist in a real space are limited in some respects, but have the benefit of a physical audience.

How do you resolve this question of a physical audience when you yourself are never performing in a gallery? Watching a person on stage is a very different experience than looking at a sculpture, or a print on a white wall.

I like to think of my pieces both individually and as a whole as a very literal performer in the



Maximum Tension, Suspended Release, 2018.



No Punchline a Knife, 2018.

space. Either through looping one thing, or by very carefully crafting how you as a viewer and a body move through and experience an installation or space, I'm able to create a moment of suspension, and leave the viewer to orient themselves on the terms of this visual and temporal situation. Really, what this boils down to is withholding easy resolution from the audience.

Making them Coyote, or Sisyphus.

Exactly! Ultimately, this is the sensation I'm attempting to evoke in much of my work, to force the viewer to re-evaluate their position as viewer. Are they Coyote or Roadrunner? Sisyphus or the boulder? Trickster or tricked?

Now, Thinking about art objects as performative is certainly not a new idea - Michael Fried's conception of a piece being theatrical, for example, takes seriously the idea that a work is self-consciously aware of and concerned with the actual circumstances of how the viewer encounters the work, both physically and psychically, if not so much taking this idea literally in the terms of theatre. What my work strives to do, in the tradition of many artists that embraced what Fried meant as a

critique, is to take the idea of the theatricality of an art object both seriously and literally. In this calculus, a piece on a wall or in a space is as much a performer as is a stand-up comedian behind a microphone.

I'd like to talk more about your presence in your work, though. We mentioned that you appear in many of the pieces, but often only as an image or representation of yourself. Pushing it further, usually your hand is mediated through some process or even totally removed from the piece.

I think my presence or absence can be a handy metaphor for the gap in communication we touched on earlier. I can show you me, but it is always only ever going to be the re-presentation of me, never the real thing. So, there's an automatic distance built in to Matthew Flores as a sign. And an honesty therefore too; this is all that's available and even if I were here, I'd just be a moving image on which to project.

But isn't there a certain degree of connection this excludes? Looking at your work, I find it difficult to pin you down exactly, your figure and character remain slippery and elusive.

Absolutely. I look for ways to be Coyote and Roadrunner, you

could say.

That's the thing, though - when the viewer is put into that position and trying to catch you, doesn't that turn quickly into an unsatisfying game of cat and mouse?

One thing I try to keep in mind are the different tiers or levels of jokes. It's easy, tempting even, especially when your medium of communication is art, to go straight for the brain instead of the gut, to make intellectual comments that have a very narrow band of customer. And sometimes there's a place for those gestures. But art, like comedy, is often at its best when it's emotionally available and relatable. So ideally, even if my face and figure become flat and slippery, there is still something visceral in the work that allows the viewer to make a connection and unlock it in their own particular way, according to their own particular experience.

I do think your work does this, especially when I'm given a one-liner like "Maximum Tension, Suspended Release" that complicates a more nuanced piece, and vice versa. But I find it interesting that this idea of hiding yourself is manifest formally as well - you camouflage yourself, or obscure your face, or let objects stand in for your

body.

When using yourself as subject and object, you're always going to bump into the limits of that choice. I'm curious in how this ultimately very revealing mix of media can obscure as well. How do you tell the joke you won't tell, or show the thing you won't reveal? Joke-telling is a survival technique, a defense mechanism, as much as camouflage. This nexus is the inspiration for *Special Boy (All Natural)* There's a compelling confluence between art making and joke telling and between those things and boxers and an octopus, too. A boxer needs to be an expert in misdirection in order to survive, because as soon as he gets figured out, he gets knocked out. An octopus does the same with its color changing and by spraying ink.

You often talk about the degree to which you seek to remove your hand as maker from your work. Is this another form of camouflage, a way for you to insulate yourself from any vulnerability inherent in the things you make?

I think it goes back to thinking through gaps in communication that both humor and art inherently highlight. I'm of course not breaking any new ground by taking my hand out of things - Duchamp shattered that

fiction pretty conclusively a long time ago. But using appropriative or readymade techniques to pry these gaps even wider produces a way to think about joke-telling and art making as ultimately a very intimate form of interaction that often hinges on really shaky verbal ground.

For *No Punchline a Knife*, for instance, the core of the performance is a set of actual performances, from everyone from George Carlin to Mitch Hedberg to Sarah Silverman to Maria Bamford, a pretty wide range of comedians I connect with for different reasons. But those performances are translated into a text, which even being a word-for-word document is a very different experience. This text is fed into an algorithmic text prediction program, which translates it again, and produces a

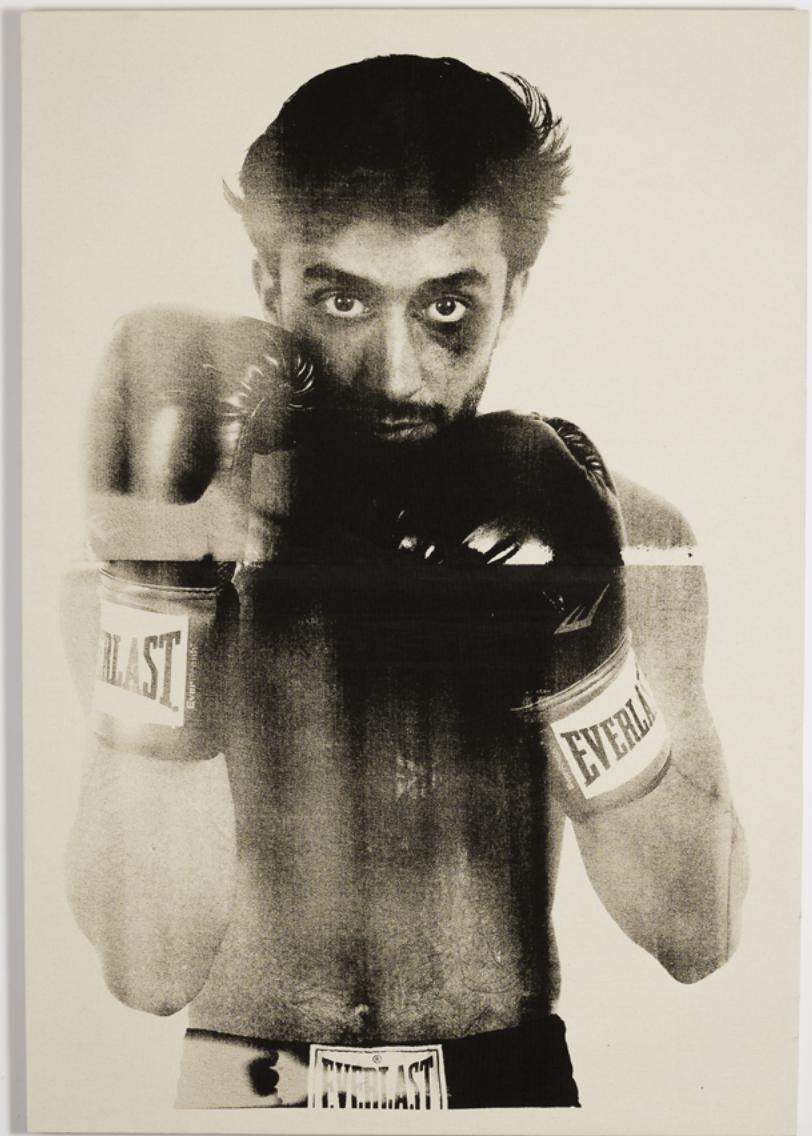
Frankenstein-ed script of digital comedy that is then recorded by Fred, a voice actor I hired for the part. Of course, then Fred is translated into this weird yelling box in the gallery. Through these steps, we get further and further from the actual, embodied performances in the original, and toward something that features the rhythms and conventions of stand-up, but becomes less and less human in the execution.

I'd venture to say that as much as your work is about comedy, or uses a mask of comedy, it really is an extended meditation on how failure and miscommunication can be productive tools, both conceptually and physically.

Oh, absolutely. Where frustration and roadblocks become productive both in process and concept is through realizing and embracing that this valley between what I mean and what you understand is inescapable - like the Coyote looking down and plummeting into the desert canyon below, failure is not the end of the studio process, but rather the beginning. Looked at in this way, failure becomes a tool to take us beyond assumptions of what we think we know and feel and allows us to reconsider how we understand our place in the world.

Failure as tool - say more! You have said a lot about failure, but the utility of failure seems new.

Failure, by definition, takes us beyond assumptions and what we think we know. What failure does, especially in the repetitive, again and again and again flavor I like to focus on, is reject climax, or at least defer it to a future that is never reached. It's a performance of irresolution, *ad infinitum*. What this does is bring attention to the



Special Boy (All Natural), 2018.

nuances of difference between the attempts, allowing each failure to become its own. This is a little double edged, in that the gap between one iteration and the next produces a little pause for experience, a tiny crack in the boulder to ponder the situation.

An important thing to note here is where I try to house the act of failing: on myself as maker, and often on the character of the artist I play in the studio and gallery. This is for two reasons. First, as they say in comedy, always punch up - the moment I start forcing the viewer into failing, the joke turns sour. Instead of mocking the audience, I find it much more fruitful to fail for them, and in doing so, invite them to jump into the canyon after me and find some degree of meaning in the experience, to focus in on the nuances of the situation

Second, exploring my failure as artist, who in my view an extremely performative character, allows me to better understand my experience as person. Robert Smithson put it well when he wrote: "by isolating one's failures, one can investigate one's incapacities as well as one's capabilities, opening up possibilities for questioning how structures and limits shape the world."

⁴So, going back to your point about me doing a lot to obscure myself in the work, I think I'm very present, but usually in ways that are fruitful for me to think through my own shortcomings, miscommunications, and failures, and hopefully these gestures inherent in the work allow the viewer to do the same about themselves and in doing so, rethink structures of failure writ large.

Yes, but in ways that are quite veiled...whatever your shortcomings are, they are kept private, even as the idea of failure comes to the surface.

[Laughs] The game is rigged in my favor, remember.

But, in your rethinking of failure, implicit is the idea of rethinking success, right? The idea that success might not reside in landing the joke, or catching the Roadrunner.

Absolutely, you can't have one without the other. Remember, hunger is the thing that feeds both Coyote's genius and his incompetence. So the way to find fulfillment in the face of its

⁴ Robert Smithson, from 'Interviews with Dennis Wheeler' (1969-70), section II in Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) 208-9.

impossibility is to embrace that fact and find reward in failure. Maybe this is through laughter, or bombing, or as Camus prescribed to Sisyphus, a "lucid invitation to live and create, in the very midst of the desert."⁵

⁵ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and other Essays*, (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 192.

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