LONG & FOSTER®

THE BALTIMORE SUN

84° PARTLY CLOUDY
More Weather

SECTIONS

Top News | Baltimore Breaking News | Sports | Orioles Insider > More Sports Blogs | Entertainment | Business | Maryland News | Maryland Politics > More News Blogs | Z on TV > More Entertainment/Life Blogs | Nation/World | Opinion | Health | Obituaries | Baltimore Sun Mobile | **All Sections**

Looking for LOL at the Contemporary Museum

By Tim Smith , The Baltimore Sun
Thu Jun 9 2011 5:49 PM

When Sue Spaid started her job as the Contemporary Museum's executive director in November, she said she wouldn't be offering "an easy art experience." But she didn't say it couldn't be fun, or even funny.

And that's the point of her first show at the museum: "LOL: A Decade of Antic Art."

It's hard to predict if people will actually laugh at loud (let alone ROFL), but Spaid has assembled an exhibit that is bound to prompt plenty of discussion.

"The idea has been brewing in my head for a long time," the director said this week, in between answering phones and lending a hand with assistants who were getting the works onto the walls. Spaid lights up when talking about what she dubs "antic art" — artists causing mischief, usually outside of traditional gallery or museum environs, turning up at news events or invading public spaces.

One example from the late 1990s — video of the event is included in the Contemporary exhibit — took place in California, where 3,000 cars were parked on a surface lot according to vehicle color.

Social commentary or satire (or both) can be the goal of such antic art. Sometimes, it's simply for fun. Getting passers-by involved, or at least reacting, is typically a part of the activity as well.

Spaid participated in some antics of her own in 1999, working with Alysse Stepanian and Philip Mantione on a project aboard a Staten Island ferry. Unsuspecting passengers were asked to "do something interesting" in front of a camera, and get a beer for their trouble. Video of the results, including a guy with a finger puppet and a Robin Hood hat, will be shown for the first time as part of the LOL show.

Artistic humor is, coincidentally, a big topic in Baltimore this season; the American Visionary Art Museum opened an extensive exhibit last fall called "What Makes Us Smile?"

"Before I started here," Spaid said, "I was told that some people didn't think AVAM was different from the Contemporary Museum. If thought, if that's the case, then I didn't want to do a show about humor, too. But then I thought, no, wait, that's a better reason to do it."

As it turns out, it's also a case of getting the last laugh. The antic exhibit, featuring the work of about two dozen artists, is the last show that will be held at the Contemporary Museum's current space on W. Centre St. A relocation to a spot a few blocks away is expected in the fall.

"Funny public stunts have been around since 1917," the director said, referring to the (in)famous urinal March Duchamp submitted to a New York exhibition as a piece of sculpture. "I think antic art really blossomed in the past decade. I have no answer for why that is. It could be the economy. Or people feeling freer, or just getting sillier."

That free, silly feeling will be spread through the museum, grouped under four headings: Everyday hoaxes, activist antics, art world pranks and theatrical antics.

Included among the everyday hoaxes is a fishing pole that was carried around by Baltimore-based Katie Kehoe for a month this winter. She was never going fishing, but was making note of people's reactions.

Jonathan Horowitz's sculpture, "Hilary Clinton is a Person Too," is a kind of giant souvenir doll. It represents the New York artist's response to the wildly divergent views expressed about Clinton during the 2008 presidential campaign.

A giant mural-like work by Cincinnati-based Ryan Mulligan contains images of things needed for survival: Spam, a crutch, a gas mask. "He became obsessed with keeping his son safe," Spaid said. Despite the seriousness of the inspiration, there's something whimsical about the result.

The activist room of the show includes photos of Italian artist Patrizia Giambi leading her merry band of nocturnal "zebra-crossings" painters — creating new pedestrian crosswalks on the streets of Bologna, Milan and Nice.

A particularly eye-catching selection among the art world pranks is the life-size "Bunny Sofa" by Korean-born Gimhongsok. It looks like a real person in a bunny suit lying on a divan. "The idea is that inside the bunny suit is an illegal immigrant from North Korea," Spaid said. "It's a commentary on how a lot of artists exploit labor."

Eyes are likely to be drawn, too, to a wall covered with photos of bosoms, taken by Los Angeles-based Larry Hammerness during celebrity fashion shoots.

Zeroing in most tartly on the art scene are drawings by Brooklyn-based William Powhida that skewer "all the evil things the players in the art world do," Spaid said, "the people who only care about money, partying and glorifying the art world." Powida's "Why Should You Buy Art" targets the consumer, too. One of the reasons listed on that drawing: "Someday you *might* understand what it means."

Even the front window of the museum is in on the LOL act. California-born artist David Schafer has created a giant sign announcing the "Signature Series" of famed sculptor Richard Serra, complete with a signature lit up by yellow neon.

"It's as if Richard Serra was having a show at the museum," Schafer said. "The window is a public prank."

For Spaid, the topic of prankster art "needs to be more out in the air. Hopefully," she added, "this show will inspire more antics."

tim.smith@baltsun.com

If you go

"LOL: A Decade of Antic Art" opens Friday and runs through Sept. 4 at the Contemporary Museum, 100 W. Centre St. Call 410-783-5720 or go to contemporary.org.

Text NIGHTLIFE to 70701 to sign up for Baltimore Sun nightlife and music text alerts

Share this Story

EMAIL	SMS	f	t

«Prev | Next»

Home

Return to Entertainment

View Full Site