

# HESSE FLATOW

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Art

## Punchline: celebrating artists who use humor in their work

In opposition to the overly serious art world, a new group exhibition brings together artists who lean into the lighter side

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Garrett Gould - Wreath. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

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“**T**he people who are the funniest in my life are also the best artists,”

curator Yng-Ru Chen told me while discussing her newest show, *Punchline*, which is taking over Jane Lombard Gallery’s Tribeca space from 7 July to 12 August. Existing in the overlap between art and humor, *Punchline* showcases 11 artists who use a range of approaches to the comedic to imbue their work with memorable twists, personality, authenticity and something a little different.

Chen conceived of the show both as a way to lean into the lighter atmosphere of the summer months, as well as a much-needed departure from the trauma of the Covid years. Eager to create something fun and inclusive, she started with the Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous group of female artists who since 1985 have made a practice of upstaging the art scene with edgy, attention-grabbing feminist political art. Chen told me that, “They were really the originators of using humor to make a point artistically when the patriarchy and mainstream society did not see the importance of what they were trying to say.”

From there, the show grew organically, based on artists who had long been in Chen’s orbit via her work as a curator. Among the creators included is the south Asian American artist Divya Gadangi, whose work *Please Maintain Your Original Indian Beauty* is a video game poking fun at the increasingly desperate messages her mother texted her after learning about Gadangi’s intention to dye her hair. Featuring screens projecting seemingly random videos, strange organic-like objects and creeping ambient sound, the game offers a Cronenberg-esque vibe while also deeply embracing and exploring Gadangi’s culture and mother. Because it uses easily relatable humor that bears a tinge of gossip, the artwork effortlessly draws a viewer into its world, creating an immersive journey into Gadangi’s identity and experience.

Chen noted that, as engaging and thoughtful as pieces like *Please Maintain Your Original Indian Beauty* may be, they don’t always find space at New York galleries, which can be focused on self-consciously capital-S Serious artwork. Chen sees the market drive behind the art world as often filtering out experiences like humor, which she believes is seen as something that is inimical to the accumulation of money and sales. She has also found higher education to be an institution that promotes a “serious” outlook as the expense of a more fun appeal for art. “As an art history major, I had to unlearn how to write art history essays,” she said. “You can be very intelligent without having to go to the thesaurus and find the fanciest word.”

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While Chen maintains respect for the more serious, academic facets of the art world, she also wants things to be less sanctimonious, more accessible. "When I go through galleries and shows, I often wish there was more humor in it, especially in how things are presented. It can be really dry. People who are not art people feel like they have a hard time entering that space."



Madeline Donahue - Mirror. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

Part of the fun in putting together Punchline was in being able to bring together art that was anything but dry, and that would appeal to lots of different kinds of people. That includes children, whom Chen wants to feel at home in her show. She hopes that they will be compelled by the art in Punchline, and that they will be able to go home and talk about what they saw with the adults in their life, something that she believes all too few galleries cater to or consciously think about in their programming.

One of the artists in Punchline whose work transcends age to appeal to kids and adults alike is the painter and sculptor Madeline Donahue. Creating work that deals with the intimacy and physicality of motherhood, Donahue often finds humor in the overlap between the sublime and abject moments of being a mom. For instance, her piece *The Cage* shows a mother blissfully curled up asleep with two tiny children, the group apparently crowded into the confines of a baby's crib. *Lockdown* shows a probably overwhelmed mother in just her underwear handcuffed to a chair while her nearby

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toddler makes ready to swallow the key. Mirror is a beautiful, strange sculpture that captures the uncanny moment when a child is peeling open the eye of a sleeping mother, peering in to satisfy a desire for curiosity and connection.

Donahue told me that embracing the inherent humor in her work was a part of being more authentically herself as an artist. This involved moving away from the kinds of art and identities that she had been conditioned to believe were most important. "I was largely taught a male canon in art history and contemporary art history," she said, "and as an art student in undergrad, there was this expectation that people who identify as women or queer weren't talked to. My work is responding to a very serious, very patriarchal art world, and thinking that I'd never be accepted by it. And that actually gave me a lot of room to just experiment and be myself."

Käthe Kollwitz, a pseudonym used by one of the founding members of the Guerrilla Girls, struck a similar note in explaining how her collective began using humor as a way to add a compelling twist to outsider messages. When the group began creating in the 1980s, she found much feminist protest overly serious, and she believed the movement had plateaued because its messages had become stale. She and her collaborators wanted to use artistic humor to find new ways of attracting interest and opening up communication. "There was a lot of feminist protest, but it was very seriously scolding people, very typical political art," Kollwitz told me. "We wanted to do something different. We twist something around in a way that hasn't been seen before, and that kind of draws you in. It lets you think about things."

In the end, *Punchline* is about artists baring their souls in an authentic, humane and very funny way. It's also about having fun, being surprised and encountering art in a way that can produce a bodily reaction, all the way down to the chemicals in our brain. "I feel like that serotonin experience is so important in us accepting ourselves and carving out that space for a little more love for ourselves and each other," said Chen. "When you're in this space and you're laughing because something has brought you the element of surprise, it feels joyous."