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‘Does This Taste Funny?’ brings absurdity, satire and humor to Lehman College

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Photo credit Gary Jean-Juste

Lehman College Art Gallery's walls are adorned with absurdity, part of a mixed-media exhibition called "Does This Taste Funny?" that examines humor in contemporary art.

The exhibit's Sept. 9 opening reception brought together dozens of featured artists, faculty and students, who strolled around the room, peering at a painting of a muscular green alien with fiery red hair and exposed breasts — Ana Benaroya's "Queen of the Night" — or a mixed-media piece made from cotton batting with a broom head sticking out from one side — "America Runs" by Brian Belott.

"Does This Taste Funny?" is a two-venue group exhibition by Lehman and Sarah

Lawrence College, featuring a total of 41 contemporary artists who work in a range of media, and are at various points in their careers, said Melissa Brown, Lehman curator and art professor.

Brown worked with John O'Connor, a visual and studio arts professor at Sarah Lawrence, to bring the exhibit to life. The two met 25 years ago during an artist residency, but the idea for "Does This Taste Funny" emerged a few years ago, after O'Connor curated an abstract exhibit in Manhattan called "The Apex is Nothing." Brown admired the process, and the two started brainstorming.

The exhibit was developed around several thematic groupings that artists could use to their advantages — the three featured at Lehman being the body, material absurdity and politics. The same way there are different strategies for writing a joke, such as stand-up, slapstick or puns, Brown said, there are different ways that humor plays out in art.

Part of the pair's motivation for the show was also to highlight humor in contemporary art as a serious form of expression, Brown said, as being funny as an artist should be an elevated trait.

Brown and O'Connor selected artists they felt could speak to this theme, with the hope that viewers would ask themselves, "Is this funny?"

Another one of the featured artists, Federico Solmi, also finds inspiration in political satire.

Solmi, born in Bologna, Italy, showcased a five-channel video installation called "The Bathhouse." The video shows world leaders — from Napoleon to George Washington to Julius Caesar — in a luxurious Roman-villa themed mansion, pompous and swaggering. As the video progresses, the leaders become drunk and unruly without interruption, demonstrating that "power always behaves the same way," Solmi said, while the viewer remains a mere spectator.

"The great thing about artists is that they have a voice," Solmi said. "That's my way to counterattack the sadness of the age we live in. I think irony is a great way to convey a message."