

Laugh? You must be joking

There's a brilliant exhibition to be made about humour and art. Shame the Hayward's new show isn't it, says Adrian Searle

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The air is loud with bird calls and insects and the noise of the artist thrashing through the undergrowth. Dressed as a clown, including a pair of ridiculous shoes, Julian Rosefeldt makes his way through the Brazilian rainforest, but for all his efforts keeps returning to the same spot. It's a closed circuit, shown on three giant screens at the Hayward Gallery's new exhibition, *Laughing in a Foreign Language*. Near Rosefeldt's projection, another pair of clown boots hang by their laces from an oversized, cartoonish nail. This is by Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone. What a subtle and witty bit of installing. Clowns, curator Mami Kataoka tells us in the exhibition catalogue, are "symbols for duality, for laughter and melancholy". I would never have guessed.

The banalities have barely begun. The exhibition opens with a pile of oversized soft toy animals. The Korean artist, Gimhongsok, would have us believe that this is a group of illegal Mexican immigrants, lying doggo in their plush suits. He would also like us to think that his work is about political and social issues, while he has a jibe at other artists, such as Santiago Sierra. This is embarrassing, arch and not at all amusing. Neither is Stanya Khan, dressed as a bloody-nosed valkyrie and carrying a wedge of fake cheese, talking drivel to the camera as she wanders around LA. Nor is the man in a tuxedo who would like us to shake hands with him, though he's got a fist full of emulsion paint. People who fall for this performance piece are really sad.

Of course, a show about humour doesn't have to be funny. This exhibition is billed as exploring the role of laughter and humour in contemporary art; there is a great show to be made on the subject. This isn't it. Almost none of the best artists in the field are here - no Maurizio Cattelan, no Eric van Lieshout, no Elmgreen & Dragset, no Paul Noble, no Irwin Wurm, no Sarah Lucas. No Bill Viola, and he's always good for a laugh. I didn't laugh once, not even at David Shrigley's drawings. (I'd like a break from Shrigley.)

But let's not nitpick. The real problem here is the orange carpet, the sound leakage from one work to another, the fact that you have to get on your knees to read the lengthy texts accompanying Barthélemy Toguo's photographs. They are essential to the Cameroonian artist's stories about his misadventures at border controls with his solid wood suitcases, his cartridge belt stuffed with chocolate bars, his wooden hard-hat and his failure to carry the right visas. Toguo is one of the best things here.

First I felt disappointed, then glum, and finally depressed. While the Hayward seems to want us to think of this as a jolly and accessible show by a roster of wacky international artists, the curatorial intention appears to have been altogether darker. No one was laughing on the two visits I made - except on one occasion, when a gallery attendant stifled a guffaw at something another invigilator had whispered in her ear. Maybe he was asking her out. At the sound of her laughter, everyone in the gallery spun around, hoping their long search for one of the rib-tickling moments they felt they had been promised was at an end.

This could have been an exhibition about humour as transgression. It could have been about art as a witty reaction to linguistic and cultural misunderstanding, as a defence against difference and the terrors of otherness, as a comment on the flatness of a globalised multinational culture and against the fake profundities of the art market - but it's not that either, though at various points it tries to be.

Bulgarian Nedko Solakov's feeble graffiti, often making play of the wall's shadows and imperfections, are inane. Janne Lehtinen's arty photographs of his sidesplitting attempts to fly fail to be funny in any language.

Peter Land, we are told, "plays the clown, without the make-up or the funny clothes" - and, I might add, without the humour, or that clownish melancholy we've heard so much about. The artist stands on a New York corner, his suitcase bearing the words "I'm new around here, so please don't rob me, mug me or kill me" - a joke about Danish preconceptions of America. In the exhibition catalogue, Hayward director Ralph Rugoff tells us about how artists share doubts about our preconceptions of them. Those pesky preconception-challenging artists are at it again! I expect they'll be challenging us to laugh at their jokes next. Really, this won't do. And it's no good saying that all this is supposed to be painful or unfunny, that even humour here is being subverted.

One or two works, such as Marcus Coates's *Journey to the Lower World*, in which the artist conjures animal spirits in front of an audience of housewives in a Liverpool high-rise, and Makoto Aida's video of himself as a wasted Bin Laden hanging out in Japan have made me laugh before in other shows. But they don't work in the same way the second time round. Or perhaps it's the context - it's all so forced. Other works here left me with a different sense of *déjà vu*: Rosefeldt's clown movie operates on the same principle as Rodney Graham's well-known and vastly superior film *Vexation Island*, while Jake and Dinos Chapman's version of Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* etchings treat us to the same gag as their earlier reworkings of Goya, giving the characters disturbing new physiognomies reminiscent of Bill Nighy's squid-faced sailor in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies. The Chapmans have done better, nastier, crueller things. Only John Bock's new road movie *Palms* exudes the right madness, ultra-violence and nonsensical dialogue.

One artwork on display is a stool in the form of a human figure, crouching on the floor and facing the wall. A gallery attendant is supposed to use this as a seat, while a recording inside the stool reads out the names of London Underground stations in a Japanese accent. This is a wasted opportunity. If the recording were of obscene remarks or anonymous insults, they might provoke hilarious misunderstandings and even violent altercations. These could spread throughout the gallery, escalating into a mass orgy of slapstick fisticuffs, eye gouging, biting and kicking, up into the exhibition of Rodchenko's photographs and out along the South Bank. Who knows where it might end? Instead, it's just a muffled recitation of Tube stops.

This is marginally preferable to the witless gags that Doug Fishbone has recorded on electronic joke machines mounted on the gallery walls. There are jokes about Jews, nationality, sex and all sorts of 10th-hand tasteless ribaldry, all delivered in a mild voice. "You laugh even when you know you shouldn't," the catalogue says of Fishbone's work. No, you don't.

Fishbone's art is routinely dependent on overstepping the mark. So, too, is Olaf Breuning's film *Home 2*, in which a slack-jawed tourist, a sort of cut-price Alan Partridge-meets-Borat, finds himself adrift in various impoverished parts of the world, where he makes excruciating comments about the locals. Expressing horror at the sight of African kids scavenging on a rubbish dump, he starts throwing around \$20 bills. One discovers with some relief that the whole thing has been set up. But unlike Borat's victims, these people don't deserve any of this treatment - and nor do we.

- Laughing in a Foreign Language is at the Hayward Gallery, London SE1, until April 13. Details: www.southbankcentre.co.uk/laughing

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