

# 'JUSIDMAN': Going Beyond the Face Value of Clowns

ART REVIEW

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TIMES ART CRITIC

The imagery of clowns is so debased as an artistic subject as to be mostly the stuff of velvet painting and five-and-dime art. That doesn't mean it's unavailable for resuscitation—its cheesiness might even make the subject irresistible to some—and, sure enough, in recent years a variety of first-rate artists, including John Baldessari, Jonathan Borofsky and Bruce Nauman, have used the clown motif to

make important art.

Clowns are also in abundance in "Yishai Jusidman: Pictorial Investigations," featured in 10 of the show's 22 paintings. They're key to the young artist's developing aesthetic.

The exhibition inaugurates the Otis Gallery in its new home in Westchester, near Los Angeles International Airport. The Otis College of Art and Design has recently moved into a former IBM office building (the computer punch card-style windows of the building are an amusingly optimistic, period motif), taking its gallery with it. The sleek, handsome ground-floor space appears to be only slightly smaller than the old, pleasantly rumbled Otis Gallery at MacArthur Park.

But back to the clowns. Six are in an eccentric format: paintings on two-foot wooden spheres suspended from the ceiling, the clowns' faces stretched and distorted by the curvature of the orbs, as if in a fun-house mirror. Four others are large, emphatically traditional oil paintings on canvas, in which the looming faces register anguish, bemusement, raucous laughter and surprise.

Jusidman, a 33-year-old Mexican painter who studied in Los Angeles and New York and lives in Mexico City, invokes their legacy for a specific purpose. For centuries clowns have been used to ruefully represent the role of the artist in society: a tragicomic court jester, engaged to amuse the passing fancies of a ruling elite and, almost as a consolation prize, given license to publicly ridicule the very institutions that support him.

Jusidman's clowns do just that, portraying with carefully wrought, even Old Masterish skill a broad range of deeply expressive emo-



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tions, which are typically demanded from convincing art. The tight, dramatic cropping of his images, however, strategically limits the picture to each clown's colorfully articulated face. It underscores the wide-eyed smile and narrow frown as merely painted surfaces.

Who knows what really lies behind the painted grin or grimace? The faces—and the deep

emotions they ostensibly portray—are slyly likened to the painted surface of an artist's canvas, a field of perceptual trickery and guile.

Clowns may appear to be jolly or poignant, escapist or crazed. But, even as we are mesmerized by their engaging antics, they're also always slightly creepy—and certainly not to be trusted with equanimity. (Ask the Joker of Batman fame, or any number of other murderous literary jesters.) Jusidman's clowns draw a pointed parallel to artists today, almost as a multidimensional corrective for an era that blithely casts them in black-and-white terms as either sinners or saints.

A socially astute analysis of the role of art and artists in the contemporary world is merged with an almost conservative regard for the formal properties of painting as a perceptual experience. It's a peculiar, even somewhat awkward marriage; but it's one whose quirky development the exhibition surveys step-by-step in work made since 1989.

Jusidman comes across as a highly methodical painter. Five distinct bodies of work, each made during a period of about 18 to 24 months, are laid out in the gallery.

First are landscapes painted on wooden spheres perched atop metal poles. With imagery recall-



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ing Monet and Constable, artists associated with a Modern painterly concern with perceptual experience, these eccentrically formed landscapes wryly address the conundrum of painting a curved universe on a two-dimensional surface.

Next come the clown spheres (1990-1991) and clown canvases (1991-1992), which, alongside the traditional perceptual concerns evidenced by the landscape spheres, introduce the contemporary social subject of the condition of art and artists. The twin focus continues in what comes next: a group of large yet nearly invisible images of Japanese geishas (1993-1994), sparsely painted in white on white, followed by recent small paintings of enormous sumo wrestlers (1995-1997).

Geishas, like clowns, comprise a highly ritualized order of servants to the powerful. Their painted faces have also taken shape as idealized social masks.

Using oil and egg tempera, Jusidman makes paintings that must be stared at for quite some time to be seen as something other than all-white abstractions. As your eyes begin to adjust to the nuances, the graceful features of elaborately

dressed and coiffed geishas float into view: In one, the fragile beauty is shown to be wielding an imposing dagger.

The sumo wrestlers, either in pairs or as single figures tussling with shadows, are painted within abstract geometric shapes that create visual weight and pressure across the paintings' surfaces. A ritualized dance of power relations unfolds, as cultural and pictorial forces of great authority and strength vie with each other to disrupt precariously maintained balance.

It's difficult to say whether Jusidman's sumo paintings simply describe a constant struggle (social and artistic), or whether they actively mean to undergird its perpetuation. Either way, the final picture in the exhibition, also of sumo wrestlers, seems to mark a new direction for the artist.

His somber palette, which has been hitherto dominated by browns, grays, whites and blacks, is suddenly joined by a jangling array of hot pink, lime green, orange and sky blue. Jusidman's clowns, geishas and wrestlers comprise a legacy of entertainers as subjects; the festive new painting seems poised to press the issue in regard to artists, too.