

MICHAEL PORTNOY

Michael Portnoy: *I'm Back Fore Ground!*
Ibid Projects, London
17 March – 5 May

Doctor to patient: “Deep breathing kills germs.”
Patient to doctor: “Yes, but how do you make them breathe deeply?”

No? Oh, OK...

The jokes in Michael Portnoy’s odd but endearing exhibition aren’t necessarily amusing, but they are pervasive, seeded throughout the three bodies of work here. There are sight gags and sound gags, one-liners and conceptual jokes, yet what humour they convey isn’t to be found in the formal setup but in the context of comedy and art rubbing together.

On the ground floor Portnoy exhibits three almost identical tall, slender canvases, oil depictions of a rabbi (identified in the press release as Israel Sarug, a sixteenth-century kabbalist) holding a door slightly ajar and peeping through. Each painting differs in only one detail: the rabbi is holding a different object in his cupped hand. It’s hard to tell what some of these are. Though one is definitely, and incongruously, a deflated American football (*Sarug. The Intransitive Spiral*, all works 2012), and another could be a turd. Their very inappropriateness raises a wry smile and eases the viewer into the cloud of bafflement the artist purposely wafts over the next two gallery spaces.

Upstairs are five of Portnoy’s ‘carrot joke’ works: hyperdetailed photographic images of five carrots on white backgrounds (there are also five pencil-on-paper studies of the carrots’ textured surfaces on the floor above). Each photo is presented in a white frame, on the bottom of which is a button that, when pressed, sets off an audio recording. An East Coast drawl, presumably the artist’s, starts with a tangential descriptive reference to the image it narrates, before introducing a characteristically surreal and convoluted joke, then dissecting its history and explaining why the wisecrack is so droll. The audio track for *The Market*, for example, a carrot which has naturally split along its length, starts by stating that “there are two competing versions of this carrot joke”, before going on to outline and comment on two impossible-to-follow alternative narratives about horses at market. The aforementioned doctor-to-patient joke,

which plays alongside a particularly skinny carrot, is introduced with the comment that “this carrot joke has very narrow focus”. It ends, after much tangential nonsense, with the assertion that “the patient asks the doctor to take his ‘fragment’, a funny way to say his constitutional fundament, or foot, out of her ‘vagrant’, which is an even funnier way to refer to the vagoona electra”.

Within the measured analysis, the humour of the original joke gets lost (if it ever actually existed, which seems doubtful), but the act of critically analysing the comedy is comic in itself. The laughter lies in the idea that the laugh is, as Freud would have it, a visceral reaction – an uncontrolled rupture in one’s conscious veneer, instigated by a linguistic double meaning – but to investigate the cause of that laugh eviscerates the rupture. Through this nicely plotted, punning interplay between the joke and the art object, the question Portnoy seems to be posing is whether the destructiveness of deconstruction also applies to art. Is this very act of critical interaction – the review whose punchline you’re about to reach – a joke too, as comically absurd a task as attempting to explain why the phrase “vagoona electra” is funny?

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