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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

Jay Heikes

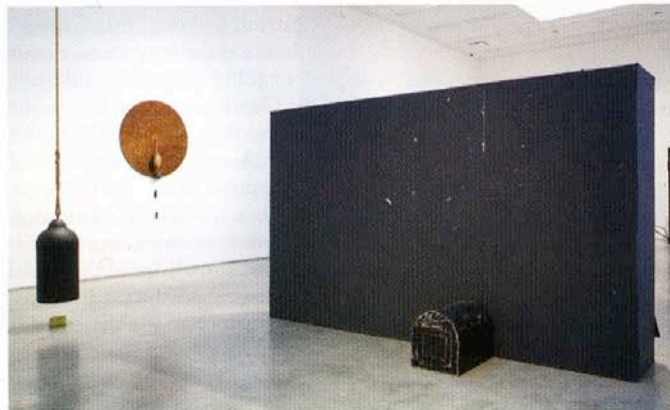
MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY

Richard Prince's "Joke" paintings remain the gold standard for the use of dark verbal humor in contemporary art, but in the last few years a younger set of artists has expanded on Prince's turn to the debased language and iconography of comedy. Its themes appear in Sarah Greenberger-Rafferty's sculptures of splattered pies, in Sanford Biggers's theatrical resuscitations of "Negro variety shows," in Kalup Linzy's tragicomic soap operas, and in Jay Heikes's bronze casts of canes—essential props for whisking foundering comedians from onstage misery.

At the 2006 Whitney Biennial, Heikes showed the first of a series of installations in which drawings and sculpture are sourced from the same joke—one without a punch line—that begins, "So there's this parrot. . . ." But jokes aren't funny without denouement, and with each recycling of the line, Heikes has increasingly suppressed even the possibility of a conclusion. Works with identifiably comedy-related connotations—the bronze hook, or drawings showing the artist animatedly delivering the goods—have arrived at referential limbo. The most apt metaphor for Heikes's project is a technique he uses in *VI: III II* (all works 2007), a row of ten photocopies of his own video stills. "Like a Broken Record," Heikes's recent ninth iteration of his parrot joke at Marianne Boesky Gallery (the eighth was on display concurrently at the Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia) is so unplugged from the original's points of identification that it functions as abstraction—in other words, as formalism.

The parrot joke has become the primary conduit through which Heikes's art is discussed, but the gradual dissolution and ultimate purging of referential sense is his real theme. Three steel panels from the series "Everything All at Once" are spray-painted to mimic the frenzied striations of television static. The interference on Heikes's steel plates, which casually rest on the floor and lean against walls, likewise resembles the runny innards of overripe tomatoes or the messy splay of pie guts hurled at failed stand-ups. Similarly heterogeneous patterns are made by bleach on cotton curtains that shield the interiors of four enclosures made of black-painted wood, vaguely resembling phone booths or changing rooms. The cane that Heikes cast in 2006 for the Whitney Biennial has morphed into three tree branches cast in bronze with distorted hooks near their ends.

The show's most memorable piece is notable partly because of its scale; *Rules of Attraction* is first glimpsed on entering the space as a coil of rope attached to a wall. The rope extends dramatically upward, out of the room, into the gallery's larger space, where an iron form roughly the size and shape of a punching bag hangs ominously proximate to



Jay Heikes, view of "Like a Broken Record," 2007.