Laughing at Our Inadequacies: Contemporary Cartoonish Painting, Internet Culture and the Tragicomic Character

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Abstract

This practice-based project examines 'cartoonish painting', an emerging trend of contemporary figurative painting which draws on links between cartoons, humour, narrative, character and bodily transformation. In my practice, cartoonish painting depicts and comments on the endless desire to transform body and self as promoted by Internet culture and social media.

This thesis argues that the social media driven desire for self-improvement—bodily alteration and transformations of the self—creates a tragicomic effect that unfolds through the devices of narrative and character. I examine the still influential, Romantic theory of character developed by William James. James articulated well-rounded characters evolve over time through a series of identifications with external others. This thesis proposes that James's formulations about character retain currency, as people identify with depictions of idealised bodies, high-performing and socially sanctioned selves disseminated through the Internet. This thesis argues, however, that this aspirational selfhood and identifying with idealised others creates feelings of inadequacy. The ideology of a striving, perfected self in search of the 'American Dream' will be analysed through Henri Bergson's theory of the comic. Bergson argued that the failure of machine-like pursuits uncontrolled by consciousness can be manifested through comic depictions of the human body. This thesis argues that the objectification of oneself in meme culture, in which people make themselves the butt of jokes, inverts the superiority theory of humour which contends that the person telling the joke dominates the person being laughed at.

This thesis analyses cartoonish characters presented in works of Philip Guston, Dana Schutz, Tala Madani and Maria Lassnig for their depiction of striving and often bumbling comic characters subject to both bodily and character transformations. My paintings involve two characters, whose painted narrative also exist as a network of social media feeds and posts on Instagram. The paintings explore the desire to display a curated persona online by appropriating models from Internet culture and the drive to constantly improve oneself as trends and fads endlessly change. The effect of this is described as simultaneously comic and tragic.