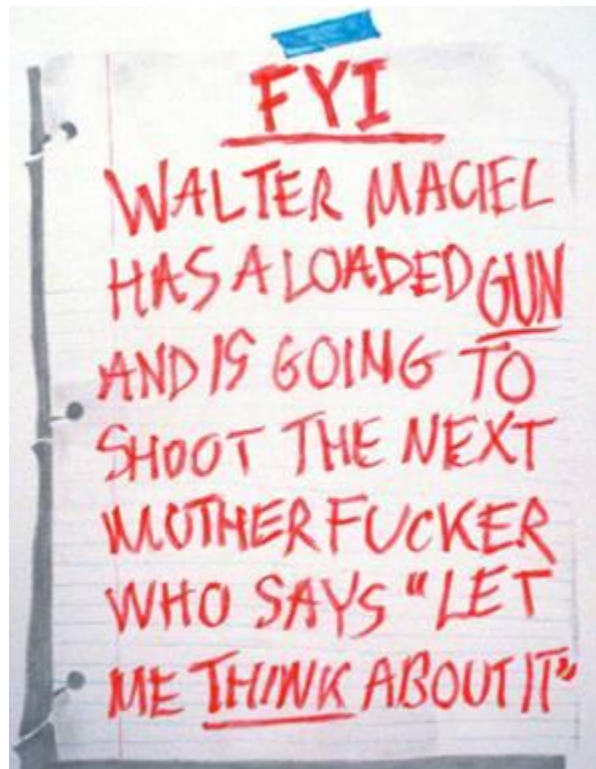


DAILY SERVING

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Laugh It Off at Walter Maciel Gallery

Walter Maciel has a loaded gun and is going to shoot the next motherfucker who says "Let me think about it." Or so says one of the darkly comical pieces in the summer group show at Walter Maciel Gallery in Los Angeles. The exhibition, entitled *Laugh It Off*--curated by Jane Scott, Girl Wonder, Inc.--attempts to bring a much needed respite of humor to the stiff and ever high brow art scene, which continues to confound audiences with work that further detaches the public from its understanding, shrinking the possibility of promoting the value of art to a wider set of collectors and appreciators. The show features the work of nine artists: Oscar Cueto, Archie Scott Gobber, James Gobel, Laurie Hogin, William Powhida, Robb Putnam, Kammy Roulner, Lezley Saar and Fletcher Smith. Each work on view in *Laugh It Off* pokes fun at the art world and at culture at large, and presents a motley take on what makes us smile--whether that smile arises from witty wordplay, from cleverly constructed objects, or from acerbic criticism of a culture that takes itself much too seriously for the summer heat to handle. While much of the work in the show lives up to its calling to be funny, a few pieces attract more thoughtful responses to their deeper themes, and some others seem almost a pinch desperate, a bit like the kid in junior high who gives himself the title of class clown. Continue reading below for a full review of *Laugh It Off* by DailyServing's Allison Gibson.



William Powhida's *Threat #1 (Walter)* depicts a lined sheet of paper that looks as if it were furiously torn from a notebook, the proposal of the gallery owner's violent behavior to those much loathed indecisive collectors scrawled in blood red across it in all caps, rendered to appear taped to the wall like a notice from the manager in a gas station bathroom. Powhida's other pieces in the show--*Unconscious Collaboration*; *Threat #2 (Koons)*, which states in the same red scrawl as *Threat #1*, "Bring me the head of Jeff Koons"; and *Market Crash*, a spoof edition of *The Art Newspaper* dated Friday December 5, 2007, which boasts the headline "Collectors abandon Miami," and goes on to describe in chilling detail that marked the artist as a bit of a prophet, a scenario in which the art bubble bursts in coincidence with the major Art Basel Miami fair--all lampoon the various torments of the art world, from dealer to critic to artist and ultimately to self.



Another artist who has held a mirror up to the establishment is Kammy Roulner, whose series of fifteen ink on paper drawings satirize commonly overheard, cringe-inducing art world conversations and parody the bleak realities of taking up the practice of art as a professional endeavor. Roulner depicts, in simple line drawings, a female artist facing a bulletin board, hands on hips, marveling at an announcement for a new grant for 43-year-old Uzbeki lesbians, or a turtle neck and black framed glasses donning artist confirming that the burly handler will pack cat food into the crate as well when he ships off the avant-garde, and presumably genius, balloon-tied-to-cat-on-tire piece.

Atop a pedestal under glass like a Natural History Museum diorama of Aztec warriors, sits Oscar Cueto's *4 Artists and a Critic*. The scene of miniature artist figurines sprawled on the ground, decapitated and spurting blood while a critic stands over them tauntingly, is perhaps a bit too literal to be considered "tongue-in-cheek," as the gallery calls his work, but is generally entertaining nonetheless, mostly because of its self-deprecating nature. A better example of this slightly indulgent sense of humor would be the work of Fletcher Smith in the show; his two pieces having been curated into an exhibition deliberately meant to be funny somehow takes the humor out of them.



What Ails Us: The 100 Most Prescribed Pharmaceuticals in the Nation, Laurie Hogin's twenty 3" x 4" beautifully rendered oil on canvas paintings of guinea pigs, references the startling truth about America's pill addiction visually, by having each of the guinea pigs represent a particular medication. Each creature is rendered to reflect the color and pattern of the pill it embodies, with a matching grimace or gasp as it presumably acts out the common side affects associated with the medicine.

In one of his three pieces on view in the show, Archie Scott Gobber tackles the ubiquitous topic of mortgage defaults and home foreclosures. *Pay My Mortgage* layers the responsible and proud proclamation of better times, "I pay my mortgage," under the brow-wiping and for now relieving, "I paid my mortgage." This new declaration of the homeowner illustrates the insecure-security of having paid the mortgage on the first of the month while the next due date looms only four weeks away.

While much of the work in *Laugh It Off* offers a snickering look at the cast of contemporary art characters or of consumer culture, other pieces create moments of more quiet delight in reaction to their tact, such as Lezley Saar's *They're here, get used to it!* Saar's monochromatic maze of black roots winding across the panel, bulging at times into crystal balls of photographs of ornate mausoleums and cemetery paths, references the unique journey of the mind of Saar's autistic

teenage daughter, according to the gallery. The intricate chains of plant life encircle the photographs Saar collaged into the piece as if sucking water from their existence, sustaining life through the acknowledgment of their looming presence and all that they represent. The limbs sprout otherworldly creatures--bulging eyes and dripping thick black drops, demons of the mind, perhaps.

From the Depths I Called You, one of James Gobel's campy felt paintings that embarrass stereotypes of gay men, presents a brawny, bearded Good ol' boy depicted in a generally unlikely posture for a John Deere logo and suspenders wearing man to be found in--leaning suggestively onto a pink tablecloth, delicate fingers perched near wanton blue eyes, candles ready in hand, eyebrows raised.



Robb Putnam's *Pariah*, a nine foot tall dog made of fabric, leather, plastic and glue, probably elicits the darkest response to any piece of the show, though it's seemingly as playful a concept as can be seen in the gallery. The giant dog is constructed from scraps of blanket and other found objects and I suppose should draw a chuckle from me, the viewer, because of its reference to a child's stuffed animal-turned-giant-creepy-monstrosity, but I really just find it to be quite sad. The title alludes to the outcast, the displaced, and although it stands taller than any person who would walk past it, it still has the existence of an outsider in the gallery because, let's face it, sometimes something is just so big and scraggly that wouldn't you rather avoid it altogether and go look at witty drawings or surreal collages (both found in gallery 2 next to *Pariah*). It's sort of heartbreaking the way it stands there, monolithic but with its chin tilted downward, its eyes shut as if there's nothing worth seeing in this world.

Laugh It Off is on view at Walter Maciel Gallery through August 22, 2009.