

ART

Straight Not

Artists Collaborate For Laffs

by Bret McCabe

Martin and Lewis | At the Whole Gallery through Aug. 17



An installation view of a Michael Dodge piece from Martin and Lewis

BALTIMORE'S NEBULOUS, DEFENSIVE, self-consciously provincial, and sometimes just plain bonkers "art community" needs more people like Sarada Conaway. The auburn-haired, pixieish 30-year-old is excited about her debut show as curator and doesn't appear to mind that its germinating seed wasn't culled from the normal curatorial paradigm. Yes, part of her idea was to get artists to collaborate in the offhand, maybe even churlish ways that often happen inside university studio spaces when they work in close quarters. Yes, the show itself did play out like a conceptual game, as Conaway really didn't know what the work looked like until the artists submitted it. But more than anything, the University of Maryland graduate student shaped this show out of her own personal sincere appreciation for the comedy routines of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis.

Martin and Lewis features works from eight collaborative teams working off the straight man/funny man model of its titular duo. The basic template could feature one artist playing straight to allow the other artist to bring the funny, but, really, how people choose to interpret the criteria was left pretty open to interpretation. As such, what the show may lack in a cohesive thematic edge it makes up for in whimsical ideas, opportune wit, and underdeveloped goofiness. (Jack Livingston provides an episodic essay that charts the anarchic glee of the Martin/Lewis comedy team.) Plus, in some cases the show is nothing but plain, old funny.

Meg Mitchell and Adam White aimed for nothing but comical and succeeded blithely. The pair describe themselves as "two Martins," and for their piece they shredded tissue paper into long strips and constructed an elaborate, intertwined parabolic arc out of them. This labor-intensive, meticulously installed, and extremely fragile piece was installed pretty much only for the opening, being too delicate and prone to deterioration via humidity. The corner this large installation occupied is empty now, but during the opening it looked like nothing short of a giant, wall-spanning white net and, in fact, was strewn with gummy worms that could be plucked from it--a flatfooted joke delivered flatfootedly. Say good night, Gracie.

Alexa Hoyer and Juliane Zelwies play on the straight/funny divide, too. These two German artists live in New York and commute to work via the Long Island Railroad. En route, though, they're constantly flummoxed by the various symbolic language used on warning signs and cautionary stickers affixed in the railway. Their *M and L* entry includes a poster of slightly altered warnings and stickers. They're realized in the manner of common public safety signage, such as a white rectangular sticker in which red letters offer for your own safety. Some include the universal public sign silhouettes for a man and a woman, or the circle with a diagonal line through warning of a potential danger or forbidding some practice. In one sticker, a simple hat-

-such as might be worn by a train ticket taker--sits in the center of the verboten circle, although it's uncertain whether the sign is warning people not to enter without tickets or if it's merely admonishing no silly hats.

The rest of the show falls someplace between Mitchell and White's staunchly conceptual and Hoyer and Zelwies' literal. Eric Johnston and Justin Varner traded nonsensical, narrative prose poems each wrote from which the other was to create a visual piece. Recent Maryland Institute College of Art graduates Jui Desai, Rachel Jeffers, and Jacquelyn Singer constantly shaped their one painting, each adding and riffing on the previous abstractions until what emerged is this brightly colored and coolly serene overhead view of an odd-shaped swimming pool, lined by two deck chairs and a red pair of flip-flops sitting poolside. Rebecca Lemos and Susannah Gust created an explosion of otherworldly landscapes inscribed in globes, the primarily vinyl installation itself looking like something left off the set of 1968's *Barbarella*. And Ruth Bowler and Barry Scott merely started works for the other to finish, and their wildly divergent styles and themes create two of the more eerily odd pieces in the entire show.

Best of all are the works of two pairs who work the straight man/funny man routine in their own playful ways. A painting by Kumasi Barnett was passed to his collaborator through an intermediary so that he didn't know who it was. It happened to be his friend Brian Sykes, who proceeded to slice up the painting and put pieces of it around a comma-shaped bale of hay wrapped in plastic. The entire piece is polka-dot skewered with cooking thermometers revealing the bale's interior temperature: baled hay has a tendency to become a fire hazard when it doesn't cool properly (plant cells continue to burn sugar and produce heat after cutting). The resulting piece is rather innocuous to look at, and then you get up close and read a temp above 100 degrees Fahrenheit and start stepping slowly away from the art.

Sara Dierck and Michael Dodge make the most out of the *Martin and Lewis* shtick. Each sent the other a photo of his or her problem and the other responded with some artistic solution. A photo of Dierck's cluttered kitchen countertops prompted Dodge to make a wall-mounted honeycomb that catalogs her spices like a periodic table. Dodge's sad photo of him on a tennis court alone prompted Dierck's piece of chain-link fence with canned tennis balls upon which she affixed the likeness of the various people who have stood Dodge up for his tennis dates. And a photo of Dodge at his desk constantly jacked into his iPod, computer, cell phone, etc., caused Dierck to create a sleepy-time kit complete with padding housing for his laptop and iPod as well as an inflatable pillow, sleeping mask, and homemade tape of Stuart Smalley-ish relaxing affirmations. Sure, it's but a cheeky affectation, but it--like the entire show--refreshingly sits on the wall unpretentiously claiming to be nothing but just what it is.

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