

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

<THE L MAGAZINE>

FIVE ART STARS YOU NEED TO KNOW:

**LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER, ARTIE VIERKANT, CHRISTOPHER CHIAPPA, SARAH BRAMAN,
VIRGINIA OVERTON**

PADDY JOHNSON AND WILL BRAND

MARCH 28, 2012

<http://www.thelmagazine.com/newyork/5-art-stars-you-need-to-know/Content?oid=2222011>



Portrait by Joe Hume

"If I had any balls," Christopher Chiappa tells us, "I would have been a comedian." He's giving himself short shrift: in works like "Volvo Exhaust" (2006), for which the artist sketched a ride behind a Volvo by lying on a longboard and holding onto the car's exhaust pipe with his mouth, Chiappa has shown he has both balls and comedy in spades.

That humor won Chiappa quick success in the late 90s, when his very first appearance at Jessica Fredericks Gallery was noticed by both Ken Johnson, the esteemed *New York Times* critic, and Jerry Saltz, the ubiquitous populist then at *Time Out*. What attracted such buzz was Chiappa's ability to fit meaningful artistic aims inside the format of a one-liner. "Humor, for me, is like a Trojan horse," he told us. "It enables you to sneak difficult and often disturbing ideas into peoples' heads when their defenses are down."

After lying low for much of the 2000s, Chiappa may be poised for another breakout. His recent solo show at Kate Werble, his new gallery, brought all-new work that boasted the same humor and attention to materials, and at Stadium Gallery's excellent inaugural show, *Performance Anxiety*, his perfect arch made of Speed Stick stood out amidst a strong field. As with much of Chiappa's art, the Speed Stick arch most immediately elicits an "I see what you did there," but resists such a cavalier response with flat-out formal beauty. Chiappa knows it: "I like when a magician shows you that he's doing a trick, but he still gets you anyway," he says. "That's what I like about art."

Is there an artist/exhibition/artwork that's had an especially significant impact on your development either recently or at the beginning of your career? By far the most influential show I've ever seen was the Bruce Nauman retrospective at MoMA in 1995, just as I was about to move to New York—it rattled my cage in a way that had never happened before or since, and

TEL 212-352-9700 FAX 212-352-9704

www.katewerblegallery.com EMAIL info@katewerblegallery.com

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

confirmed my desire to be an artist.

Is there a work or show that you have produced that you would consider a touchstone to your body of work? At Skowhegan, in the late 90s, I made a piece called "Firecracker". It was a photograph based on this iconic image from the Guinness Book of World Records of a guy in the 1970s who smoked 200 cigarettes at once; in my photo I put an equally ridiculous amount of firecrackers in my mouth. The photo was a performance—which my work often is—and the it was a self portrait—which, I think, all my work is—and it was about an arresting image or object from my childhood, which is an ongoing fascination of mine. It was the first piece I ever showed in New York, and it captured the balance of humor and existential dread that I often try to create in my work.

If you could tell your past self one thing, what would it be? Buy stock in Apple or get ready to be disappointed.

How do you describe your work to your parents? My artwork is very much like the way I am, and my parents have been dealing with my overt philosophical ambiguity since I was a little boy. When our first family dog, an insane Dalmatian named Pepper, died while I was in Kindergarten, my parents were afraid to explain her death to me. As we were burying her, though, my father was struggling to dig a hole wide enough to place her rigor-mortised body into, and I suggested that we cut off her legs because she was dead and wouldn't mind.

The arch shows up in your work a lot: the McDonalds arch, the Budweiser arch, the windshield wiper arch. In each case, the form simplifies a more complex object. Is there a specific objective behind this formal interest? It's because of my distinct lack of any belief in the supernatural. I think I am interested in things that are real, and follow all the laws of physics, but still give off a feeling of magic. There's nothing more amazing to me, in architecture, than the arch. The Saarinen arch, in St. Louis, is a major influence on me, and Judd and the Minimalists have a clarity I desire, but I like to play around with the materials, because there is something embarrassing to me about a truly grand formal gesture. It feels too egotistical and obvious to me. I need to make objects and images that are self-annihilating so I can sleep at night.

Your work has a humor similar to early Tom Friedman and Tim Hawkinson. What if any relationship do you see with those artists? I'm a fan of both artists. Tom Friedman and Tim Hawkinson are populist artists, more than anything, and I would put myself firmly in that group. Humor, for me, is like a trojan horse. It enables you to sneak difficult and often disturbing ideas into people's heads when their defenses are down. If I had any balls, I would have been a comedian; Mitch Hedberg, Steven Wright, and Richard Pryor are just as influential to me as Nauman.

Give us the story on the Volvo picture where you've got your mouth attached to an exhaust pipe. Humans have a desire to do death-defying things, tightrope walking between the World Trade Center buildings, or jumping with fly suits off of mountains and barely skimming over deadly rocks. Death is this tantalizing threshold that people play with and other people like to watch while it's happening. It's patently dramatic. I began thinking it would be more interesting if I rode a motorcycle off a huge jump and instead of landing safely, I would land in the spinning blade of a helicopter and be diced into a million pieces. I think the Jesus story would be way less popular if he had been saved at the last second while languishing on the cross. His death made him some much more interesting to humans. I then set out to create an image of me doing something impossible to survive—something stunning—and it's not a Photoshop trick either. I am actually being pulled behind the Volvo with my mouth on the exhaust pipe.

TEL 212-352-9700 FAX 212-352-9704

www.katewerblegallery.com EMAIL info@katewerblegallery.com