



Math Bass: clown alley

By Andrew McNeely

In circus parlance, a *clown alley* refers to the backstage area, specifically the space between big top tents, where clowns would hastily perform wardrobe or prop changes. Hence, the title of Math Bass's exhibition, *clown alley*, for Tanya Leighton, Berlin intimates that the artist's latest body of work may be understood as props for a performance that is about to begin.

However, the term *alley* is also suggestive of that other near-universal metonym for comedic entertainment—the brick wall of stand-up improv.

In a now infamous stand-up bit by Mitch Hedberg, the improv fairy tale, the late comedian poses a question to the audience, "Now let me ask you this. Why do you think there's a brick wall behind comedians?" Hedberg continues, "Maybe in the old days, there was a wolf that did comedy, and he wasn't that funny. All the old

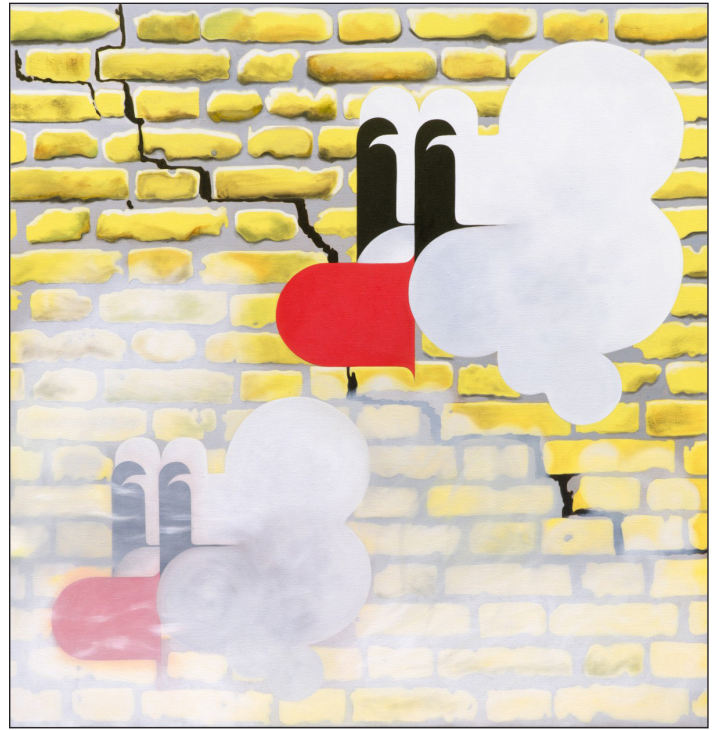
clubs had straw in the back. But the wolf would have a bad set, and he'd huff 'n' puff and fuck shit up. Then we went to sticks. And once again, he huffed 'n' puffed"¹ You get the idea. Mitch's bit highlights the strange cultural phenomenon that brick backdrops have become an enduring convention of comedy. And this connection seems to be of interest to Bass, indicated by the brick backdrops in two of their paintings, *Through the Fog* and *Clown Alley*. Both pieces make use of Bass's well-known clownish faces that they have configured and reconfigured throughout their career, as if like bricks themselves.

The themes of props and staging are further suggested by Bass's *Tabernacle Curtain*, which appropriates a 14th century rendition of the veil that concealed the Holy of Holies, the legendary Ark of the Covenant, which the Hebrew Bible describes was housed in the Tent of the Congregation. For the Israelites, the veil functioned to conceal the voice of Yahweh,

literally the Ten Commandments. But to the nonbeliever, the veil is not only a device that conceals a ceremonial prop but also is a kind of prop itself, drawing attention to the cultural practice of veiling and its power to endow things with an exalted status through concealment.

Echoing the themes of concealment and exaltation are Bass's *Fruit Chair* series that unambiguously parody the rotating showcase display. Such revolving devices hinge on the action of revealing and concealing the products they feature in order to imbue objects with a kind of aura. Running through all of the above works, then, is a consideration of how certain modes of presentation condition the manner in which people relate to objects. And, at first glance, this interest could be seen to follow in a long tradition of critiquing the institutional mechanisms that grant art its alchemic qualities. But against this historical backdrop, Bass's dry humor does not seem so caught up in pulling the curtain to expose bourgeois ideology. Indeed, missing from Bass's sensibility is a critical assertiveness that sucks the air out of the room.

Returning to a consideration of Mitch Hedberg's comedy might be instructive in reading *clown alley*. Key to Hedberg's brilliance was his deadpan delivery of rambling non sequiturs that indulged in endless wordplay and turns of phrase. Riddled with stage fright, Hedberg would conceal his face under tinted sunglasses and shoulder-length hair as he subjected audiences to a meandering inner-monologue that somehow created an endearing (not to mention hilarious) persona. If being funny is a sign of confidence, then Hedberg's comedy hinged on radiating its opposite. As an entertainer, Hedberg felt like he could have been just plucked from the crowd. And for this reason, it is not so much the comedian's performances that were in the spotlight but rather the entire situation of comedy itself.



There is something of an affinity present in Math Bass's *clown alley* for drawing attention to the humor of a situation without being overly prescriptive or moralizing. To be sure, Bass's comedy, like Hedberg's, pokes fun at the conventions of its own enterprise. But it also savors that enterprise's customs, captured by Bass's endless stream of formal permutations that make up the artist's visual vocabulary, hitting the viewer like a series of concise one-liners—jokes that demand no explication. The consequence of which is a disarming meditation that is both frivolous in its attitude toward Art and serious in respect to its passion for visual pleasure.

Like comedy's brick-wall backdrops, Bass's jokes are just the props of the show.

Endnotes

1 Mitch Hedberg, *Do You Believe in Gosh*, recorded January 2005, Comedy Central Records, 2008, compact disc.

Artist & Exhibition Information

Math Bass is a Los Angeles-based artist. The essay *clown alley* appeared at the exhibition *clown alley* (January 22 – March 5, 2022), a solo presentation that debuted at Tanya Leighton, Berlin, located at Kurfürstenstraße 24/25 Berlin 10785.

For further information on the exhibition, see <https://www.tanyaleighton.com/exhibitions/clown-alley>.

Andrew McNeely is a writer, editor, and curator based in Los Angeles. He recently served on the curatorial advisory team for the historical retrospective *Beatriz da Costa: (un)disciplinary tactics* (September 7, 2024 - January 5, 2025) at Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. He also curated *A NonHuman Horizon* (June 29 - September 1, 2019) at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions and *Restless Debris* (January 9 - February 6, 2016) at the University Art Gallery, UC Irvine.